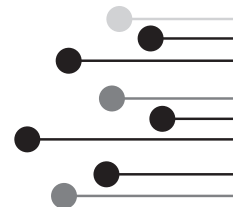


Feature Storytelling in the Digital Age



Diving In: Who Needs Journalists?

Who is a journalist? Until recently, that was a simple question. A journalist was someone who worked for a news outlet gathering information, organizing it into a story and disseminating it to a mass audience. The widespread, immediate availability of free news online has not only changed the journalism industry but also called into question what it means to be a “journalist.” Although many in the field still regard “professional journalists” largely by traditional standards, some of the farthest-reaching and most influential journalism these days is produced by average citizens who have the instinct to point their smartphone cameras at news events unfolding around them. Newsrooms are shrinking at an alarming rate as more consumers turn to free information online that is selected and distributed by their friends on social media.

You may be asking yourself now: Why bother training to be a journalist? Why not just leave news to the masses to produce and spread? The answer to that actually *is* simple—we need you!

The accessibility of information has led to some great things. Younger Americans are exposed to news constantly online. The widespread availability of news on social media has resulted in greater news consumption among Americans ages 18 to 29.¹ Those social media sites, like Facebook and Twitter, have also acted as platforms for exchanging ideas, organizing social movements and fostering connections that might otherwise have been impossible.

The news is not all good, though. Easy access to information has also led to the spreading of *misinformation*—both accidentally and intentionally, as we will learn in this chapter. Online news consumers have been able to avoid news and information that challenges their existing beliefs. This is largely due to the searchability of the internet and social media platforms’ advanced calculations, or algorithms, designed to show viewers primarily what they want to see.² And while we are exposed to more news online, many consumers are not actually clicking beyond the initial headline or tweet to get the full meaning of the story. A recent study by researchers at Columbia University and the French National Institute found that 59% of links shared on Twitter were never clicked on, meaning that the person distributing the article never read it before sharing it.³

Journalists are needed—now more than ever—to add context to news events, to practice dogged reporting techniques and to act ethically to provide responsible journalism designed to help consumers understand issues and make informed decisions. Journalists work tirelessly to find stories that matter to the communities they serve and to tell those stories in ways that engage readers and demonstrate their own trustworthiness and proficiency. Producing journalism that makes an impact is important and rewarding. It is your job to sort through the clutter and get people the news they need to navigate in this brilliant and overwhelming Digital Age.

Changing Journalism in the Digital Age

Although the “Digital Age” technically began in the 1970s with the advent of the personal computer, most references to the era point to the early to mid-2000s as the beginning of the modern digital revolution. The creation of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989 and subsequent expansion of the internet accelerated Americans’ interest in computers. By 2000, more than half of all U.S. households owned a personal computer, up from just 8.2% in 1984.⁴ The Digital Age really took off in the late 2000s as mobile phones expanded to offer internet access, making it possible for users to get information anytime, anywhere. By 2018, the Pew Research Center reported that 77% of Americans owned smartphones, up from just 35% in 2011.⁵ The Digital Age is in full swing.

The Digital Age has had a vast impact on the field of journalism, changing:

- How reporters work
- The delivery of news
- Expectations of news and reporters
- The way information is shared

How Reporters Work

Up through the first decade of the 2000s, it was common for newsrooms to be divided into **silos**, or small groups that concentrated their efforts on specific beats or different types of reporting. Newsrooms were typically divided into hard-news reporters (covering breaking news beats like crime, government and courts), sports reporters, opinion writers (including editorial writers and columnists) and feature writers. Features once suggested a concentration on soft news items considered less essential for audiences to read. It included beats such as travel, lifestyle, entertainment, food and a variety of others, depending on the size of the publication.

Words With Pros

Changes to Feature Storytelling in the Digital Age

Interview with Michael Kilian, Executive Editor, Democrat and Chronicle, Rochester, New York

Michael Kilian has seen some changes during his 40 years working in newspapers and magazines, but none quite as impactful as the mobile device.

“It was a much more disruptive force than desktop computers were. We know what readers consume online, and we know that we’re not only competing with other media. Now we’re competing with our daughter’s texts, YouTube videos, Twitter, Instagram—everything your phone can do.”

After working as a reporter and copy editor, Kilian transitioned into newsroom management roles in 1990. Through stints as executive editor for the Daily Times in Salisbury, Maryland; news director for the Cincinnati Enquirer; executive editor of the Burlington Free Press in Vermont; and now executive editor of the Democrat and Chronicle in Upstate New York, Kilian has guided reporters toward new storytelling strategies for engaging audiences.

“You have to think about what has value for the audience. What interests do they have? What needs do they have? We need to find ways to fill those readers’ needs. *Why* and *how* are key questions we have to answer in the stories we choose to pursue.”

Kilian says news organizations cannot compete internationally or even nationally the way they used to. Readers often get breaking news stories of worldwide importance from social media rather than their local newspaper. That’s why, he says, listening to the needs of the people in the community and crafting stories around them is the best way to make an impact.

“We usually learn about the *what* in a tweet, but the *why* and *how* keep us visiting stories for days and weeks and months after that. What do people really want to talk about? That’s the type of thing that breaks through the digital din on our phones.”



| Courtesy of Michael Kilian

Under his direction, Kilian’s newsrooms have experimented with deep dives into immersive storytelling. In Cincinnati, sports reporters followed a minor league baseball player on his journey toward the major leagues, chronicling his story for six months through podcasts. Kilian’s Cincinnati team also spent a year in the city’s poorest schools, producing gripping news features from inside their walls.

In Maryland, Kilian encouraged his reporters to immerse themselves in their stories, sending them into the community to eat muskrat, a local “favorite”; to learn to surf in both sunny and snowy conditions; and to tag birds on the Chesapeake Bay with research experts.

“We can no longer be the detached voice of God where we’re observing the community rather than living in it. Stories like these had orders of magnitude higher than anything we did that year, and they made an impact because they gripped you.”

In the Digital Age, Kilian says, building loyalty to one publication is more challenging. Using

(Continued)

Words With Pros (*Continued*)

innovative storytelling techniques to tell good stories on a daily basis can prompt subscribers to download and view a news organization's app regularly, but creating that relationship is a longer process.

"We're really living and dying one story at a time. To somebody on a phone, there isn't a package of news that they make an appointment with every day. Whoever has the best story of the day will get read. Good storytelling is a wonderful way to be memorable."

For aspiring journalists, Kilian encourages them to simply be human and answer the big, meaningful questions without getting bogged down in details.

"Readers don't follow the process of government. They don't need 37 stories on the process of a trash facility approval. You need to think: Can I do one larger story on what the plan for this trash facility tells us about our way of life? Whatever that story is, that's the winner."

Today, those divisions have changed, largely due to the availability of online **metrics**—statistics that tell us what stories people are reading online, how long they are viewing them and whether they are sharing them. These metrics tell us people want more from their stories. It's not enough for crime reporters to write breaking news updates on robberies—they also need to provide news features examining why robberies in a particular neighborhood have increased in recent years and what people can do to protect themselves from potential attackers. The same is true for reporters who once produced only soft news. Readers can find out about the latest Hollywood divorce from anywhere, so feature writers need to dive deeper, perhaps looking into why young people are waiting longer to get married than previous generations, if they marry at all. In the Digital Age, demands for feature reporting and writing permeate every beat in the newsroom, and every reporter must be equipped with skills for telling those kinds of stories.

Delivering the News

Before the Digital Age, the ways news organizations delivered information were not always efficient. Newspaper deadlines for stories were often early in the evening for the next day's print edition and a week or more in advance for a longer feature story. For magazines, deadlines could range from weeks to a month in advance for editing, layout and printing. Even media with more instantaneous modes of delivery, such as television and radio, had routine deadlines in order to make their broadcast schedules work.

The widespread use of the internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s changed these work cycles only slightly. Even within the same newsroom, reporters treated their own online product as competition and were afraid to publish anything online before printing the publication for fear of getting scooped, or beaten, by other news outlets. Reporters would first ready their work for print, then reconfigure the story slightly for publication online.

The news cycle changed forever when audiences began turning to mobile devices as their primary medium for getting information, replacing **legacy products**—the older, more traditional media platforms such as newspapers, magazines and TV and radio news programs. Publications had to recognize that people were no longer waiting for the deadline product to get timely news. They could easily find up-to-date information from a variety of sources using social media and search engines. Now journalists have to think about their mobile audience early on in the reporting process, posting updates and information online as they investigate the story to get readers' attention. They also have to add value to the story, helping it rise above the mass of information online.

It is not just breaking news reporters who have to consider mobile audiences. Feature journalists need to engage their audiences during every step of the reporting process, whetting their appetites for the story and even getting them involved as the story is developing. Feature writing and reporting depend on engagement with people affected by issues and events, and social media platforms offer journalists unique ways to find and connect with a diverse array of sources. We will explore both in-person and online strategies feature reporters can use to engage with audiences before, during and after the reporting process throughout this book.

Expectations of News and Reporters

Accessibility to reporters was once restricted to a determined few. If readers wanted to complain about an article or make suggestions for future stories, they were limited to either writing letters to the editor or calling the newsroom—both methods that could easily be disregarded by reporters. In the early days of online publishing, readers could post comments online beneath articles, but again, reporters often neglected the discussion threads.

Thanks to social media, readers will no longer be ignored. Readers can keep reporters accountable for their facts, posting about any errors or misconceptions in a story publicly on the reporter's or news organization's social media page for everyone to see. In the past, if someone wrote a letter to a reporter and the reporter ignored it, no one would really know about it or care. Now reporters must be responsive to social media postings in order to maintain their credibility.

When social media are used throughout the development of a story, reporters can use online platforms to their advantage, asking for information from followers and clarifying any false or misguided information before the final article is published through a process called crowdsourcing, which will be covered in more depth in Chapter 4 on interviewing.

Before the internet, finding news on specific topics was also difficult. If readers wanted to learn more about something, they would likely need to buy or subscribe to a **niche publication**, a news product that is tightly focused on a particular issue or hobby, targeting a specific audience uniquely interested in that topic. Otherwise, readers had to sift through the general news to get to information that

interested them—and if they missed an edition, it was gone for good by the time the next publication came out.

The internet changed how readers get their news. A 2016 study revealed that 59% of American adults who prefer reading news opt to get their news online, compared with just 26% who prefer print.⁶ Loyalty to a particular publication became less necessary, as readers can now search online for news that interests them directly. News articles are also cataloged online, making them available indefinitely. If readers miss a story, it's no big deal—they can probably find it using a simple Google search. The googleability of archived articles has enhanced the value of feature journalism for news organizations, as stories that have a long-term impact may receive more visitors over time rather than just on the day of publication.

Sharing the News

In the age of social media, it seems hard to believe that information sharing was much more limited just 10 years ago. Before Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and numerous similar platforms, sharing news and information happened primarily in two ways: Readers shared the news they read informally through conversations with friends, family and co-workers, either in person or over the phone. But if the news was significant, more formal sharing methods were used, including town hall and community meetings scheduled to address issues.

News is still shared both formally and informally, but both approaches are much easier online. If readers want to share a story with a particular person, they can send it via email, text message or social media messenger. If they want to share the story with a whole community, they can post it publicly to social media, create a blog post referencing the story or communicate with others who are interested in the topic using online forums such as Reddit and Quora.

For reporters, the ease of sharing information brings good and bad news. It is easier to distribute news to larger audiences, but it can be harder to make an impact. Online competition comes not just from other media outlets but from friends, family and millions of strangers posting their own versions of events every day. Again, this is where feature writing and reporting has an edge. In-depth and interesting storytelling used in feature reporting can help journalists distinguish their work and make a lasting impression on audiences.

Shifting Gears: Why We Need to Tell Stories in New Ways

Newsrooms have traditionally fallen behind in terms of innovating. Journalists were slow to publish their articles online, and when they did, they simply sent in the print version of the story with no consideration for the different needs of online audiences. This process of taking content created for a nondigital medium and

Helpful Hints

Fighting Fake News



Fake news comes in many forms. Stories can be biased and opinionated but made to look objective. They can be poorly sourced and riddled with errors or false assumptions. They can also be outright lies, created and circulated with the intention of deceiving readers. Here are some tips for telling fact from fake:

Consider the source: Is it a reputable publication? Can you find other articles from that author?

Fact or opinion: Does the article reflect reported facts or the author's opinion?

Says who? Did the author interview sources for the story? How reputable are those sources?

Balancing act: Are all sides of the issue represented in the article? Challenge your own beliefs with unbiased reporting.

Look for a trail: Check the "About Us" section of the publication. Consider its connections

to people or organizations that might influence content. Avoid "sponsored content."

Unhappy endings: Watch for strange addresses, such as .com.co or .lo.

Too good to be true? If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Look to see if other news outlets are reporting anything similar.

Keep reading: Read beyond the headline or the tweet. Reading the whole article will help you distinguish fact from fiction.

Use new tools: Emerging tools make detecting fake and unbalanced news easier. Try browser extensions, such as Google Chrome's Media Bias/Fact Check tool and B.S. Detector.

Reverse it: Do a reverse Google search of images by uploading a picture to <https://images.google.com>. Click on the camera icon and upload the image to see where it came from.

"shoveling" (copying and pasting) it online without making changes produced what is called **shovelware**. News organizations also worried about publishing content on social media sites in their early days, concerned about giving content away for free.

We now know that at least two-thirds of Americans of all ages get their news on social media, and that number is likely to increase. Looking at younger Americans, ages 18 to 49, we find that 78% get their news from social media.⁷ Journalists are changing their old ways of thinking and trying new strategies to thrive in the Digital Age.

Broken "Breaking News"

News organizations compete fiercely to be the first to "break" a story. When a significant news event occurs, reporters race to the scene, making calls and reporting details, all while trying not to alert their competitors to the story. But reporters are



Twitter/@caitlingiddings

no longer the ones who break the news, usually—it is often a citizen on the scene with a mobile phone and a social media account who posts it first. When bombers set off explosions at the finish line of the Boston Marathon in 2013, Twitter was flooded with immediate eyewitness accounts, while major news networks followed with the news about 20 minutes later.⁸

When news organizations focus only on the timely news of the day, they can wind up **parroting** each other, telling the same story in a similar way across multiple publications. This is especially common when publications or television stations are all owned by one corporation whose managers write scripts or articles to be shared in multiple markets. Before the internet, this convergence of resources could go unnoticed. How would someone in Seattle know that the story they just read or watched had also been broadcast in St. Louis, Baltimore and Las Vegas?

In the Digital Age, viewers are quicker to notice parroting. The Sinclair Broadcast Group got into trouble with audiences in 2018 when corporation heads forced anchors at nearly 200 television news stations across the country to read identical scripts echoing President Donald Trump’s accusations of other media outlets for producing so-called “fake news.” Viewers attacked Sinclair, producing both parody videos of the anchors for entertainment and compilations of the anchors reading the script as a warning to social media viewers against stations owned by the company. Media experts deemed the script “right-wing propaganda” and called reporters who were forced to read it “soldiers in Trump’s war on the media.”⁹

This is a series of news shots of dozens of television news anchors working for the Sinclair media corporation, who were all required to deliver identical messages from a prepared script calling other media outlets “fake news” in March 2018.¹⁰

Beyond Breaking: Adding Value



Twitter/@shananaomi

When it comes to breaking news, the internet has already won. Journalists need to go beyond the basic details—who, what, when and where—to focus on the impact of the event and its effect on the community. That is where feature writing and reporting skills are required to engage audiences and convey impact. Reporters can add depth using feature techniques, including:



Anchors at Sinclair TV stations across the country read the same scripted speech to their audiences, as shown in this compiled picture from the Poynter Institute.

Poynter.org

- Focusing less on *what* and more on *why* and *how*.
- Seeking to add context to the news event: Has something like this happened before? How did this issue begin?
- Not relying solely on official sources but finding out who is impacted and telling their stories.
- Asking probing questions and checking the facts: Does everyone agree with the account of what happened and how?
- Thinking about long-term effects: How will this impact people in the future?

We will explore in-depth methods for writing and reporting these types of news features in the chapters to come.

Tearing Down the Gate

Media scholars have traditionally identified journalists as **gatekeepers** who make decisions about what information reaches the public and how it is presented and distributed. As gatekeepers, journalists generally decide what events are news-worthy based on one of three factors:

1. **Timeliness of the news event.** Is something of impact happening now in the news organization's coverage area?
2. **Goals of policymakers.** What topics are important to official sources who pass along information to journalists?
3. **Opinions of news producers.** What topics are resonating with reporters, editors and managers at the news organization?

Journalists exercise control over the news their audiences get and have often believed they know what is best when it comes to what readers should know. When reading a newspaper or magazine, it is relatively easy to control the flow of information, as audiences have to content themselves with only the news that is right in front of them. Journalists indicate what they believe is most important, putting it on the front pages of each newspaper section or magazine and ordering the sections according to what they believe to be most newsworthy, and print readers tend to follow along, reading linearly, from top to bottom, left to right and front to back.

Consuming news online is a more nonlinear process. Readers not only have the ability to click around randomly within a news website; they can go to any one of thousands of sources of information to seek the news they want. If readers want news about the latest celebrity coupling, they don't have to sift through the front pages of a newspaper or more in-depth stories in a magazine—they can simply visit niche websites geared toward celebrity gossip or use a search engine to find news about a particular couple.

News organizations have to fight harder for readers' attention online, causing them to rethink how news is defined. Now journalists must pay closer attention to a fourth factor in determining what to write about:

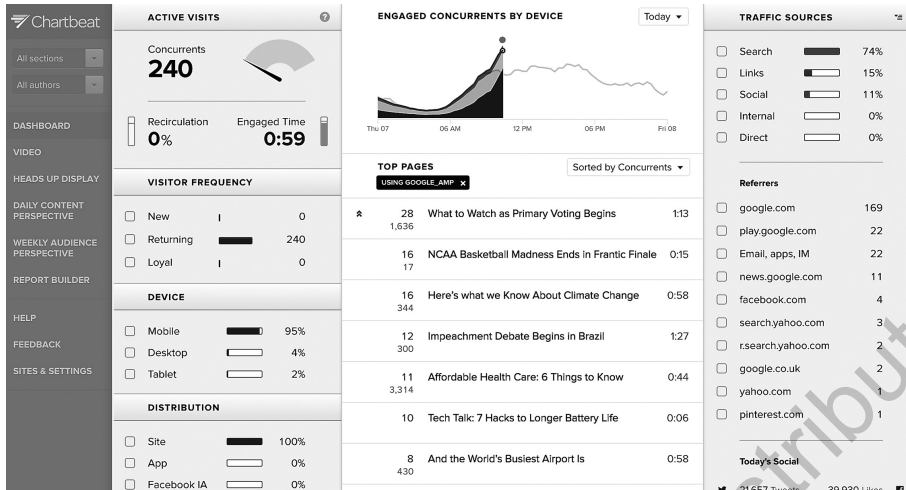
4. **Public opinion.** What topics are trending with audiences right now?

Taking trending topics into account when writing and reporting features can push journalists to produce stories that truly impact readers. For example, stories about product recalls or health warnings circulate fast online, alerting large audiences to potential danger. Reporters know what stories are trending thanks to online tracking metrics. Many social media sites and search engines have lists of trending topics reporters can pull from. Reporters can also tell what stories are trending in their own publications using software such as Chartbeat.

Trending topics grant reporters insight into readers' interests, but they must be careful not to get distracted from significant news. In 2014, news organizations across the U.S. published articles clarifying that actress Betty White was *not* dead after satirical news site Empire News wrote a misleading headline titled "Betty White Dyes Peacefully in Her Los Angeles Home." The story revealed that the actress colors, or "dyes," her hair, but fans circulated the article widely on social media, believing the actress to be dead. As a result, news organizations published brief clarifications stating that White was alive in hopes of cashing in on the trending topic. For example, The Washington Post followed up the next day with the headline "Betty White Is Not Dead."¹¹

Walking the Line: Avoiding Pandering

Organizations once had the luxury of providing a balanced diet of news for audiences, hoping they would read through stories about town council decisions and school improvements on their way to checking the sports scores or getting recipes. Now readers access the information they want directly online, often



Chartbeat is a tool allowing media organizations to track and better understand audience trends, helping them see which stories, headlines, photos and other multimedia features engage users most.

Chartbeat.com

bypassing the local hard news. Journalists are made aware of what stories readers are talking about and sharing by looking at social media sites like Twitter and Reddit. Knowing what topics are trending with readers, journalists can pursue stories that will drive up traffic on their organizations' sites.

But journalists are called to serve the public, giving readers information they need to make informed decisions about their lives and prompting them to think beyond fast and simple tidbits. Journalists have to strike a balance between giving online audiences news they want to read and avoiding pandering to their less impactful interests, which they can do by producing engaging news features. Some suggestions for writing meaningful feature stories that interest readers are:

- **Select topics with relevance to readers.** Think about what actually affects readers' lives, and write stories examining that impact.
- **Report public-affairs stories in different ways.** Explore new avenues for reporting the story by getting involved and having community members share their experiences.
- **Look for the human-interest angle.** Don't get lost in the minutes of a meeting; explore how the decisions impact average citizens and tell their stories.
- **Use new tools and technologies to engage audiences.** Technology has advanced beyond the printed word. Think of multiple ways to bring your stories to life.

- **Put yourself out there.** If audiences see that you are a human with real emotions, they might be more willing to connect with you and hear what you have to say.

Throughout this book, we will explore strategies for telling meaningful stories and connecting with audiences in engaging and informative ways through feature storytelling.

Objectivity Obsolete?

The gatekeeping process does not end with story selection. Reporters choose sources for their stories, choose what quotes and information from those sources to include (and exclude) and order the information based on their own judgments of what is most important for readers to know. As a result, reporters are often accused of compromising their **objectivity**—the practice of portraying news in a completely neutral, unbiased way.

Media scholars have declared the idea of objectivity to be flawed for decades. Researchers Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese¹² argued that reporters' individual influences—their gender, race, upbringing and a number of other factors—make it impossible for them not to have an opinion. They have a point. Consider this: Would a female journalist write and report a story on equal pay for women in sports differently than a man? Would a black journalist approach a story on racial discrimination in standardized testing differently than a white reporter? They almost certainly would, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. Journalists with backgrounds similar to their sources might be able to provide unique insight into issues that others could not. But their experience could also result in bias. Other influences, such as the pressure to work under deadlines or cover certain areas, the priorities of the news organization and its owners and even the state of the nation and ideologies of its citizens, are factors that make true objectivity nearly impossible to achieve.

Many journalists are abandoning objectivity as their ideal because they feel it inhibits their ability to tell the truth. Revisions to the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics in 2014 included the addition of **transparency**, a method of reporting in which journalists are up-front with audiences and volunteer information about their reporting process, revealing how and why they chose the sources they did, acknowledging issues they feel are important and disclosing any potential conflicts of interest in their reporting. Transparency is not an excuse for including opinion and bias; it simply means reporters need to evaluate stories on a more human level, acting critically and looking for misinformation or gaps in information that might exist. For example, if a source tells a lie, reporters should not be afraid to call attention to the lie and correct it with the truth.

Abandoning objectivity has its risks, which we will explore in greater depth in Chapter 5 on ethics. But journalists can use new feature storytelling methods that we will explore throughout this book to challenge sources, seek truth and tell relatable stories for their audiences.

Trust Me: I'm a Journalist

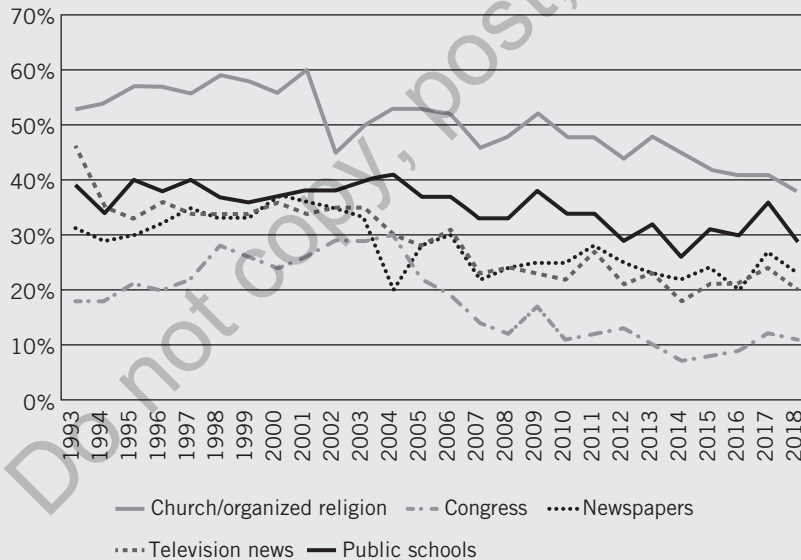
Trust in American Institutions 1993–2018

Americans' trust in institutions tends to reflect the general mood of the country. Following the Watergate scandal in 1972, trust in government declined significantly as people became suspicious of their elected leaders. Fears after 9/11 lifted trust in religious organizations to an all-time high in 2001. And news organizations tend to experience dips in trust during presidential election years, which was especially true in 2004 and 2016, as

demonstrated by a Gallup poll gauging media trust over the past three decades.¹³

Trust in most major U.S. institutions has fallen steadily during the past four decades, with many experiencing record lows in recent years. Communication and marketing researcher Richard Edelman believes trust is eroding because Americans are having trouble distinguishing among objective facts, opinions and outright lies.¹⁴

Figure 1.1 Confidence in American Institutions 1993–2018



Source: Adapted from Gallup. (2019). "Confidence in Institutions." Accessed at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

The need for journalists to be transparent and receptive to audience needs is more important now than ever before. Journalists are called to serve the public by reporting the information citizens need to make decisions about their lives, but their jobs become more difficult when the public does not trust them. Media credibility has declined steadily in the U.S., and it reached an all-time low during the 2016 presidential election between Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton. Errors by media outlets, attacks on the press and the changing nature of news online are contributing to historic declines in trust. The contentious election brought to light issues that severely damaged media credibility, including:

- **Fake news.** Fabricated news stories circulating online via social media create confusion among news consumers. During the election, falsified stories were aimed mostly at Clinton, including reports that she was suffering from a serious illness and that she had approved weapons sales to Islamic jihadists. It was later revealed that Russian hackers attempting to sway election results in Trump's favor were responsible for planting many of the false stories. The tactic appears to have worked, as studies have shown that fake news likely did play a role in Trump's election.¹⁵ Media trust has also suffered in the wake of Trump's election, with the president accusing mainstream news outlets, such as CNN and The New York Times, of producing "fake news" and calling the press "the enemy of the American people."¹⁶
- **Infotainment and commentaries.** Many Americans are not able to distinguish between news produced by journalists and "news" delivered by entertainers and advocates. Entertainers like John Oliver, Samantha Bee and Trevor Noah host late-night shows delivering information reported by journalists with their own humorous slants. Similarly, political commentators, including Fox News's Sean Hannity and MSNBC's Rachel Maddow, deliver commentaries on-air, and viewers are unable to separate the facts from their opinions. The same is true with newspapers and online-only publications, as many readers do not understand how editorial and column writers giving their views differ from news reporters conveying unbiased information.
- **Journalists forgetting to be humans.** In the pursuit of objectivity, journalists have been known to forget how to relate to human beings. Leading up to the 2016 election, journalists relied on polling and statistics confirming what they already believed to be true: Trump could not possibly win. But reporters and their audiences were stunned when Trump defied forecasts to clinch the presidency. Noting these miscalculations, audiences continued to lose trust in the media, arguing that reporters could have done more to connect with voters and capture their anger toward the government, which would have helped them make more accurate predictions.

From the Field

The Future of Journalism

Interview with Burt Herman, Director of Innovation Projects, The Lenfest Institute for Journalism

Being a journalist in the Digital Age has its challenges. Our competition has expanded beyond other media to include everyone with a phone and a social media account. Newsrooms are shrinking as organizations lose ad revenues and subscribers. Trust in the media has decreased as a result of public attacks on our credibility.

Still, Burt Herman is optimistic. As the director of innovation projects at the Lenfest Institute for Journalism, it is his job to seek unique and impactful solutions to help preserve journalism onward through the Digital Age.

“How do we transition from print to online? How do we build digital audiences? What do products for digital audiences look like? What should new start-ups look like? We work with both larger and smaller newsrooms across the country to find out.”

The Lenfest Institute was founded in 2016 by television mogul Gerry Lenfest after he became the sole owner of *The (Philadelphia) Inquirer*. Lenfest, who died in 2018, donated \$20 million to create the Institute, which funds projects geared toward “innovative news initiatives, new technology and new models for sustainable journalism.”¹⁷

Although the Lenfest Institute’s mission is big, Herman believes the answers could actually be quite small. Many of the Institute’s projects focus on ways to target community news to the people who need it.

“To me, it just seems like there’s interesting innovation you could do in communities that Facebook or Google can’t do. They’re thinking about large, broad audiences, but if you’re



| Courtesy of Burt Herman

thinking about a niche or a local audience, that’s how you can attract local or paying audiences.

“There are many ways you can get information from around the world on the internet. We need to think about how can we add value.”

Herman wants newsrooms to be at the forefront of technological innovations, creating their own social media platforms and news-friendly devices, starting with tools to personalize information for individual community members.

“What would a local news organization look like if it actually knew your location, if we could tell you there was a health inspection at a restaurant down the street or that real estate prices in your neighborhood are going up? We need to personalize information and make it more actionable for our audiences.”

In changing the industry, Herman says he also wants to change what it means to be a journalist.

(Continued)

(Continued)

“I think there are many new roles to think about that don’t look traditional, and there’s a lot of opportunity there. If you’re an amazing writer and amazing at getting sources, we need people like that. But there are a lot of other roles—excellence in video, audio and thinking about news as a product manager who can lead and develop new things to reach audiences. These are really transferable skills both in journalism and beyond.”

Herman is excited about what the future holds for journalists and their audiences.

“I feel like we have barely begun to embrace the true possibilities of the medium as news organizations. You look at Facebook, Google, Snapchat and see the potential of what you could do, and journalism needs to think of itself as a digital product too. We shouldn’t just use third-party platforms; we need to control our own fate.”

Bringing Back the Trust

Bringing back citizens’ trust in reporters is not going to be easy, but we can start by using new feature storytelling methods to seek truth and connect with audiences in meaningful ways. Poynter—a journalism education and media watchdog organization—found that while trust in the media may be low, people *do* have more confidence in their local news organizations, which are more accessible to the community and better address citizens’ needs. A survey conducted by the organization found that 76% of Americans have “a great deal” or a “fair amount” of confidence in local television news and 73% have confidence in their local newspapers.¹⁸ Margaret Sullivan, a media columnist for The Washington Post, spent time talking with average citizens in a small town in Upstate New York and found that people did trust the media but were frustrated because they did not feel represented or failed to see their concerns being addressed in news stories.

In the Digital Age, the audience holds the fate of journalism in its hands. What stories will they click on and share in their social media feeds? How can journalists communicate effectively with people online who can publicly monitor their commitment to truth and thorough reporting? How can journalists see new storytelling tools as opportunities for connecting with audiences rather than as hindrances to their work? In this text, we will explore these questions by learning feature techniques that encourage innovative reporting and writing. Throughout the book, you will learn to:

- Tell engaging feature stories that resonate with audiences and prompt readers to share your work.
- Immerse yourself in the reporting experience to learn more about the story and the sources you are relying on, as well as the issues they face.
- Find ways to become a member of your community by shifting your focus from identifying problems to seeking solutions to difficult problems.

- Connect with community members to find out what is important to them and include them in the reporting process.
- Use photos, videos, audio, social media and an array of new tools to tell stories in different ways that appeal to your audience.

Times are changing, and the ways we practice journalism are changing too. It is time to open ourselves up to new ways of telling feature stories in the Digital Age.

TAKEAWAYS

After reading this chapter, you should understand that:

1. **Traditional journalism has problems.** Technology has evolved rapidly in recent years, and news organizations are struggling to keep up with audience needs and the impact of new platforms on the industry. Journalists need to find new ways to tell stories that resonate with audiences.
2. **Audiences will not be ignored.** Online metrics and trending topics tell us what stories readers view and share. They also want to keep reporters accountable for their information. We have to incorporate their preferences into our news decisions and be transparent in our reporting processes.
3. **Journalists have a responsibility to inform.** Just because we know readers like soft news stories with low impact does not mean journalists should pander to those interests. Reporters must find ways to tell meaningful stories that better resonate with readers without dumbing them down.
4. **We need to use new tools and methods to engage audiences and enhance trust.** The accessibility of information online has made it difficult for readers to differentiate journalists' work from that of others who are not constrained by journalism principles. Journalists need to combat misinformation online and find ways to gain audience loyalty and trust using new storytelling methods and multimedia tools.

NOTES

- 1 Pew Research Center. (2018, December 10). "Social Media Outpaces Print Newspapers in the U.S. as a News Source." Accessed at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/10/social-media-outpaces-print-newspapers-in-the-u-s-as-a-news-source/>.
- 2 AJ Agrawal. (2016, April 20). "What Do Social Media Algorithms Mean for You?" Forbes. Accessed at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ajagrwal/2016/04/20/what-do-social-media-algorithms-mean-for-you/#3267e97ba515>.

- 3 Maksym Gabielkov, Arthi Ramachandran, Augustin Chaintreau, and Arnaud Legout. (2016). "Social Clicks: What and Who Gets Read on Twitter?" ACM Sigmetrics. Accessed at: <https://hal.inria.fr/hal-01281190/document>.
- 4 U.S. Census Bureau. (2000, August). "Home Computers and Internet Use in the United States: August 2000." Accessed at: <https://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/p23-207.pdf>.
- 5 Pew Research Center. (2018, February 5). "Mobile Fact Sheet." Accessed at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/mobile/>.
- 6 Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Michael Barthel, and Elisa Shearer. (2016, July 7). "Pathways to News." Pew Research Center. Accessed at: <http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/pathways-to-news/>.
- 7 Elisa Shearer and Jeffrey Gottfried. (2017, September 7). "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2017." Pew Research Center. Accessed at: <http://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/>.
- 8 Rebekah Dawn Giordano. (2014, May). "Tweeting the Boston Marathon Bombings: A Case Study of Twitter Content in the Immediate Aftermath of a Major Event." University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Accessed at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=journalismprojects>.
- 9 Timothy Burke. (2018, March 31). "How America's Largest Local TV Owner Turned Its News Anchors Into Soldiers in Trump's War on the Media." *Deadspin*. Accessed at: <https://theconcourse.deadspin.com/how-americas-largest-local-tv-owner-turned-its-news-anc-1824233490>.
- 10 David Beard. (2018, April 2). "Morning Mediawire: Local News Is Shrinking From the Sinclair Effect." Poynter. Accessed at: <https://www.poynter.org/newsletters/2018/morning-mediawire-local-news-is-shrinking-from-the-sinclair-effect/>.
- 11 Justin Wm. Moyer (2014, September 4). "Betty White Is Not Dead." The Washington Post. Accessed at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/09/04/betty-white-is-not-dead/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0e411c9c8d04.
- 12 Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese. (2014). *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- 13 Gallup. (2019). "Confidence in Institutions." Accessed at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.
- 14 Uri Friedman. (2018, January 21). "Trust Is Collapsing in America." The Atlantic. Accessed at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/trust-trump-america-world/550964/>.
- 15 Aaron Blake. (2018, April 3). "A New Study Suggests Fake News Might Have Won Donald Trump the 2016 Election." The Washington Post. Accessed at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/04/03/a-new-study-suggests-fake-news-might-have-won-donald-trump-the-2016-election/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7785a716749b.
- 16 Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump). (2017, February 17). Twitter, 3:48 p.m. Accessed at: <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/832708293516632065?lang=en>.
- 17 The Lenfest Institute. (n.d.). "About Us—Local Journalism, Innovation, Democracy." Accessed at: <https://www.lenfestinstitute.org/about/>.
- 18 Indra Lakshmanan and Rick Edmonds. (2018, August 22). "Finally, Some Good News: Trust in the Media Is Up, Especially for Local Media." Poynter. Accessed at: <https://www.poynter.org/news/finally-some-good-news-trust-news-especially-local-media>.