

The Golden Age, Maybe?

Many reporters, producers, and editors believe that it's all over. Their kind of Journalism — with a capital J — is kaput. Quick cuts, three-second sound bites, three-graf snippets of news, and the new technology have taken over. In-depth, multidimensional reportage of any kind is becoming but a quaint and nostalgic memory.

This new column will be examining some of the presumptions, such as the one above, that accompany the “communications” revolution as they apply to capital-J Journalism. Despite the lamentations we're hearing, it may well be that the golden age of real Journalism is poised to begin.

Consider this: a basic problem of journalism has always been *length*. For anybody who cares about a subject, and knows a lot about it, the typical journalistic account of anything is too short. For everybody else, it's too long. No happy medium seems possible.

So far, anyway.

It just so happens that in electronic communications, this basic problem of journalism evaporates into the ether, as it were. Flattened trees are no longer necessary; nor are thirty-minute newscasts full of 1:10 “stories” packaged among eight minutes' worth of Ex-Lax and Geritol commercials.

Unlike generations of reporters, editors, and producers before them, the new breed won't have to grieve that their best stuff is on the spike or the cutting room floor.

That doesn't mean they vacuum up every fact, unevaluated, and regurgitate it into the public maw. What it means is that important, complicated, thoughtful Journalism — some of which takes time and/or space to convey — will become routinely possible. Even perhaps compulsory.

In the “old” journalism, suppose you're sent to cover the whateveritis in Bosnia. As always, you can't tell the real story, only what happened yesterday, in a few clipped sentences or pictures. The result is that the audience, whether readers, listeners, or viewers, is often or even usually — if you listen to some critics — misled. Our time- or space-limited journalistic protocols ordinarily preclude penetrating the veneer.

Suppose, instead, that when you get assigned to Bosnia, you bone up beforehand on *everything*. You get there and find the historic and ethnic and religious war, and you find people who personify the issues precisely, but it takes a few thousand words to explain what your eyes and experience and intelligence have trained you in particular to *see*. In the journalism of the coming media, you report it all, and more, and more. You take the pictures, the video; you capture the sounds; you connect what you're *seeing* within the context of the reading and research you have done, with journalistic inquiries that have gone before, and with history and

sociology and religion and . . . and . . .

So, you do your story. Your summary piece might not be that different from, say, that story of the “old” journalism. But that's just the beginning. As your summary appears on the reader's or viewer's screen, you've highlighted some key words and some key pictures. The reader just moves an indicator to a highlighted word or picture and, whammo, the machinery does magic; up pop all sorts of options for more and more and more, interconnections to the whole subject, in parts or wholes, documentaries, books, you name it. Whatever you'd like to know appears on the screen virtually instantly. In full color. In full motion video. With sound yet.

The reader/viewer/listener can go as deeply or as narrowly as she chooses; she can stop with just the summary, as if she were reading *USA Today* or watching the *CBS Evening News*. Or she can read or view one sidebar, or read a history of Bosnia, or watch a documentary or two or three. She can spend two seconds or two minutes on your dispatch, or two days, depending on how deeply she cares to dig.

In fact, our ever-more-complicated world sometimes can't and shouldn't be shoe-horned into 800 words, or 8,000. Here we have all these journalists who are ever more highly educated, ever more sensitive, ever more thoughtful, ever more cosmopolitan — and we tell them to boil whateveritis down to 800 words.

Three newspapers are already experimenting with this new in-depth Journalism. They are the *San Francisco Examiner*, *The Virginian-Pilot* and *The Ledger-Star* in Norfolk, and, above all, *The News & Observer* in Raleigh, North Carolina. Ticking away in *The News & Observer's* rather incredible electronic service (which I dialed up from home) sits an account of a conference held at the Nieman Foundation last May. The topic: the role and challenges of public-interest journalism in an expanding information marketplace. Shallow this account certainly isn't. Says the introduction:

Assembled here in hypertext format are full transcripts from the conference discussion sessions (nearly 100,000 words), plus the seven commentaries, linked to pertinent documents, photographs, a few audio and video clips, numerous Internet archives, and other sites . . .

The new forms of media will finally allow journalists to deploy some of the sophisticated knowledge and skills they've worked so hard to gain. Yes, the ultimate Journalism may be just about to happen. What will it require of its practitioners? Watch this space.

Stephen D. Isaacs

Stephen D. Isaacs is a professor and associate dean of Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism and co-chair of the university's Center for New Media.

LETTERS

THE AGE OF IRON PYRITE, MAYBE?

In CJR's new Technology column ("The Golden Age, Maybe?" November/December), Stephen D. Isaacs says that the "basic problem of journalism has always been length." And since technology now allows both journalist and reader to file and retrieve anything on demand, including full texts and background material, the "basic problem of journalism evaporates into the ether," and "the golden age of real Journalism is about to begin." All that with as much of a straight face as print can bear.

In fact, the basic problem of journalism is not "length" but media conglomeration and the consequent reduction of staff, diversity, and *time* to do an adequate job. As to the retrieval of reams of background material, there is no evidence that the number of news readers who search databases is any larger than (or different from) those who use the library to do their research — free.

Technology makes news processing faster and more efficient for those who own or can access and have the time, money, and interest or need to use it. But one-third of all children and nearly half of African-Americans never see a computer in school, and even fewer see one at home. Only about one in three of the more affluent homes has a computer. For the vast majority, newspaper technology means speeding up, chopping up, and jazzing up the news. For journalists, it means further loss of control to a few wholesalers and global marketers of media "software."

Technology, as it is used, also speeds mindless instant twenty-four-hour imagery of mayhem and trivia, and exacerbates the gap between the information rich and information poor. Diversity of perspectives, not fitting into the machine, and democratic citizen initiative, not technocratic fantasies, can liberate journalists — and the uses of technology — from the new "golden age of

real Journalism" imposed on them.

GEORGE GERBNER
Professor and Dean Emeritus
The Annenberg School for Communication
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pa.

CENTERS OF ATTENTION

Lloyd Cutler is right about some points: Washington coverage tends to vastly overemphasize the president and downplay everyone else ("On the Presidency and the Press," CJR, November/December). That's true in the way major news organizations deploy their resources — over-covering a president's every sneeze and golf game — and in the way most every newspaper, even those without their own White House reporter, plays Washington news.

Travel to almost any city on any given day, pick up the local paper, and page-one Washington news is, de facto, White House news, culled from the AP, *The Washington Post*, or *The New York Times*. It is a grossly distorted portrait of Washington — as if the president exists in a vacuum — which can't just be blamed on the White House regulars but on the editors back home at the smallest newspapers.

For its part, the Clinton White House insists on courting the *Post*, the *Times*, and a small number of other extremely powerful opinion-leading organizations; it has not, however, sought to diffuse its message among other news outlets. And believe it or not, there are others: papers from Seattle to Palm Beach maintain their own people in Washington but this White House has largely ignored them in order to court more influential organizations. By this point during the Bush administration, I'd met in small conferences with Bush twice; so far, I've yet to be in such a setting with Clinton.

A good number of hometown editors have the same problem the Clinton White House does. They buy into the influence of the *Post*, the *Times*, and the AP — to an extent, understandably. What's not so understandable is that, like Lloyd Cutler, they complain bitterly about the outcome of their

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