

Chapter 1

Ethics and the Commodification of Journalism¹

Carol, a co-anchor of a respected local news broadcast, had begun to have serious doubts about the direction in which her station was headed. Then, one day, the station hired a talk-show host known for his raunchiness and shocking behavior to appear on the 10 p.m. newscast as an occasional commentator. The co-anchor's doubts mushroomed into full-fledged disgust, and she resigned her job. The move, although not totally unexpected, nevertheless shocked the staff. That would be the last night that this journalist would sit at the anchor desk after more than a decade. Colleagues from news organizations all over town gathered at the station for a vigil over pizza and pop (Samuels, 1998). Earlier, the co-anchor had written in one of the city's daily newspapers: "Many of us in the trenches of this battle believe that television news is already overwhelmed with too many transient fires, random acts of mayhem and network programming plugs. And now we see ... the poster child for the worst television has to offer, being added to the 10 p.m. news menu." The talk-show host's response? "What the hell? It's only reading a prompter. I mean, they make it seem like it's journalism" (as cited in Futrelle, 1997).

The controversy generated intense criticism, leading both the talk-show host and the remaining co-anchor at the station to quit. Eventually, the station's president acknowledged that he had erred in hiring the talk-show host, and the station ran ads in all the local newspapers attempting to reassure viewers of its trustworthiness. The co-anchor, for her part, went on to bigger and better things, receiving recognition from a journalism association and eventually landing a spot as a correspondent for one of the American television networks (Mitchard, 1997; Samuels, 1998).

The journalist was Carol Marin, a respected investigative reporter for NBC affiliate WMAQ-TV in Chicago, as well as co-anchor of its 10 p.m. newscast. WMAQ-TV hired Jerry Springer as a commentator in 1997. As of this writing, Marin was back in Chicago as a special contributor to the local NBC station and a political columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. As the Society of Professional Journalists award suggests, she has come to be regarded as something of a "paradigm person" (Pellegrino, 1995, p. 257) within the narrative tradition of virtue in American journalism. In a word, her story is a parable for journalists.² The purpose of this book is to develop

1 Portions of this chapter were originally published in Borden (2000).

2 Although the lessons we drew from this story are different, I owe the idea of thinking about it as a parable to syndicated columnist Jacquelyn Mitchard (1997) of Tribune Media Services Inc., who referred to the Marin-Springer stink as a "kind of parable" (¶2) about journalism in one of her columns.

a theoretically grounded framework for understanding and addressing the ethical challenges illustrated by the Marin parable. I will rely on the concept of a *practice*—not just in the sense of journalism as something you do or a set of techniques for producing journalism—but in philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s (2007) sense of a cooperative endeavor that gives meaning to moral action. Ed Lambeth (1992) first suggested applying MacIntyre’s work to journalism, and others have since followed suit. My argument contributes to this scholarship by bringing attention to the normative and strategic functions of a practice as a collective entity in journalism. Specifically, I hope to show that *journalism as practice* has the potential to provide journalists with a robust group identity that can distinguish them from others in the media marketplace and reinvigorate the occupation with a new sense of purpose. A healthy practice would constitute a viable moral community capable of inspiring real solidarity among journalists. In conjunction with an effective collective organization and support from allies, *journalism as practice* should be able to better withstand the moral challenges posed by commodification.

The Marin parable serves, at one level, as a kind of cautionary tale about journalism. It illustrates how the process of commodification that began with the penny papers of the nineteenth century has matured in combination with more recent economic, technological, and cultural forces in such a way as to potentially overwhelm the public-service tradition in journalism. For one thing, journalism has become increasingly indistinguishable from other kinds of mediated communication, with a resulting loss of legitimacy. In the 1980s and 1990s, this trend mostly manifested itself in the blurring between journalism and entertainment, with journalists chasing tabloid stories such as Olympian Tonya Harding’s assault on her ice-skating rival Nancy Kerrigan in 1994. As of 2007, the most notable blurring is between journalism and politics, as traditional journalists compete with cable pundits and Internet bloggers for the ears, eyeballs, and respect of the public.³ Happily, the Marin story contains hopeful lessons for journalism’s future as well. One is that journalists might have some success in enhancing their legitimacy if they take a stand on behalf of standards central to their purpose and if they can rely on the support of their colleagues when they do so. The Marin story also shows that members of the public do indeed expect more from journalists than they are getting and that they will respond—if given the opportunity—to efforts by journalists to restore their confidence. However, the obstacles to success are considerable, given the long history of commodification in American journalism and recent market changes that have put pressure on media companies to emphasize commercial values in their news operations. This chapter

3 Bloggers are editors of web logs, or blogs. These are web sites that offer a mix of commentary, personal notes, and links to other sites of interest to their readers. Sometimes they are created by news organizations or written by experienced journalists. In other cases, they are edited by experts in other fields. However, sometimes blogs resemble diaries written by “average” people eager to share their opinions and experiences. Those blogs that perform recognized journalistic functions—including conducting research, verifying information, interpreting that information in written reports, then distributing those reports to a wide audience—may represent an expansion of the alternative press rather than a non-journalistic or quasi-journalistic genre or medium.

examines these trends and discusses the ethical implications of commodification for journalism before laying out the book's argument for *journalism as practice*.

History of Commodification in American Journalism

News became a commodity in the nineteenth century. Broad social trends of urbanization, immigration, industrialism, and consumerism (Dicken-Garcia, 1989) created a demand for local news in newspapers, rather than for political news from distant capitals (Blondheim, 1989; Schudson, 1978). The steam press made huge circulations possible for the first time and allowed newspapers to take advantage of economies of scale. With a few pace-setting dailies in New York reducing their price from 6 cents to a penny in the 1830s, a new mass market was born (Baldasty, 1992). This also was a time when the boundaries among books, magazines, and newspapers were quite porous in terms of their content, distribution, and packaging, paving the way for the "commodification of writing and the fluid circulation of text" (Ohmann, 2003, p. 173) among genres that is characteristic of the media today. These transformations, plus increasing reliance on advertising as a source of revenue, made huge profits in publishing possible for the first time and introduced branding as a market strategy (Ohmann, 2003). This "advertising-supported, for-profit" model was later adopted by the new broadcast media of radio and television when they came on the scene in the first half of the twentieth century (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001).

The telegraph was another important technological development for journalism. Now news was not only more diverse than ever, but it could be transmitted instantaneously (Blondheim, 1989). There was a sense now in which the news never stopped and had to be continually managed, foreshadowing the round-the-clock news operations we know today. Demand for news during the American Civil War increased use of the wire and locally paid reporters, as opposed to freelance correspondents (Smythe, 1980). Circulation at the trend-setting large metropolitan dailies jumped, and the press came out of the war as an industry in its own right, characterized by large corporations experiencing rapid growth (Dicken-Garcia, 1989). This development prompted critics after the war to complain that newspapers were more concerned with profits than the public good.

One way in which US newspapers addressed this concern was to adopt the norm of objectivity, which emphasized a non-partisan, empirical approach to the news. It had the happy result of also making news appeal to a broader audience (Soloski, 1989). In the new era of niche markets, objectivity has become less effective as a means for securing audiences. *NewYorkmetro.com* columnist Kurt Andersen (2005) notes that "ideological media" like Fox News and blogs (¶2) are succeeding in the market because they are profitable: "Last time around, the new technology and business models squeezed overt partisanship and quirks of sensibility out of the news; this time, they are allowing them back in (¶9)."

The Wall Between Editorial and Business

Compatible with the fact-value distinction characteristic of objective journalism in the United States was the institution of a virtual “wall” between the editorial and business sides. There was a time when even the buildings housing newspapers were designed in such a way as to limit, if not outright prevent, direct access to the newsroom by folks from the business office (Roberts, 2004). The wall was never impregnable, but it became a journalism norm even for news divisions in the entertainment-based media of radio and television. Press critic and journalism professor Jay Rosen wrote in a 2004a post to his blog *PRESSthink*:

The wall is commonly called the ‘separation of church and state’ by newsroom pros, who speak metaphorically yet with great passion and precision about this sacred divide. And who is the church in that comparison? It isn’t the counting room, it’s the newsroom. The church is supposed to be journalism. The money side is of course profane. (One: J-School as school of theology, ¶12)

The wall began weakening at US newspapers when they became monopoly businesses thanks to an antitrust exemption signed into law by President Nixon in 1970. Their new ability to operate without any effective competition allowed newspapers to achieve double-digit profit margins (Socolow, 2005). Conglomeration and marketing trends in the 1980s began to require editors to work with managers from other departments on organization-wide goals, rather than simply minding the newsroom (Underwood, 1993). As the publicly traded media corporation has come to dominate the journalism field, the news has come to be regarded as just another profit center within the parent company. Three-fourths of managerial bonuses in the newspaper industry, for example, are based on a mix of editorial and financial goals, with financial goals constituting as much as 90 percent of the mix. A full 20 percent of executive bonuses are based strictly on financial criteria, such as staying at or below budgeted newshole or staffing levels (Cranberg, Bezanson & Soloski, 2001). These incentives prompt managers to implement market-oriented policies ranging from focus group-driven coverage to “synergistic” strategies that combine news, entertainment, self-promotion, and advertising, often through converging different media. Such efforts have resulted in varying standards even within a single news organization (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004). A recent example of synergy gone bad was the short-lived innovation of including paid advertiser links in news stories on *Forbes.com*; the online news publisher removed the links after editorial staffers complained of the appearance of a conflict of interest (Morrissey, 2004). A case that got a lot of attention in the United States was the deal in which the *Los Angeles Times* and the Staples Center sports arena split the profits on an issue of the paper’s Sunday magazine without input from the newsroom (scholars and professionals analyzed this incident in a series of case commentaries in Hodges, 2004).

These examples illustrate institutional conflicts of interest, in which the news organization itself—not individual journalists per se—finds itself in circumstances in which journalistic performance may be unduly influenced by non-journalistic

interests (Borden & Pritchard, 2001). Media mergers increase the potential for this ethical problem because conglomerates entangle news organizations in a web of outside interests that are impossible to escape completely (Borden & Pritchard, 2001; Davis & Craft, 2000). Elliot Cohen (in Adam, Craft & Cohen, 2004) suggests that many US journalists have actually become “conduits to unethical corporate media practices that undermine the essential purpose or end of a democratic press” (p. 267) by acquiescing to and even consciously participating in policies aimed at securing government benefits, such as media deregulation.

Journalists may not deliberately distort news coverage to further their employers’ business interests, but there is evidence that self-censorship may be a cause for concern. A 2000 survey of nearly 300 journalists and news executives found widespread avoidance or softening of stories that might turn off audiences or adversely affect their companies or advertisers (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, in association with *Columbia Journalism Review*, 2000). Former CBS News anchor Dan Rather dubbed the climate of fear in today’s newsrooms a “new journalism order” at the 2005 News and Documentary Emmy Awards ceremony (Gough, 2005, ¶3). An example of this trend is the coverage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which focused on new content ratings for sex and violence and “largely ignored the bill’s dramatic changes in ownership rules that would lead to further concentration of media ownership” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001, p. 176). As long ago as 1955, Warren Breed was able to document how journalists learn—and follow—unspoken company policies related to news coverage. When they refuse to do so, they can get into trouble. Political reporter Jon Lieberman paid the price of termination for refusing to go along with his employer’s political agenda. He was fired by the conservative Sinclair Broadcast Group shortly before the 2004 presidential election. Lieberman had refused to participate in, then publicly criticized, the owner’s plans to put the news stamp on a biased documentary about Democratic Party nominee John Kerry. The Federal Communications Commission under President George W. Bush has aggressively supported media deregulation (Madigan, 2005; Romano, 2005).

The New Media Market

The corporate focus on profit margins at a time of industry-wide retrenchment also translates into budget cuts. Time Inc. announced 172 editorial job cuts at the beginning of 2007, including about 50 people at its flagship *Time* magazine, which was to close its bureaus in Chicago, Atlanta, and Los Angeles (Kelly, 2007). The newspaper industry has been especially hard hit. The *New York Times*, *USA TODAY*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post* and other broadsheets have literally shrunk in size to save on newsprint costs, changing their looks and also reducing the amount of space for news (Seelye, 2006). Staff reductions have been widespread, limiting the ability of affected newsrooms to cover local news, staff foreign bureaus, and mount investigations. Fear of diminished journalistic quality at the *Los Angeles Times* prompted top executives at the paper to follow Marin’s example and openly resist management. John S. Carroll, who had taken over as editor of the *Times* after the Staples scandal, resigned shortly after the paper’s troubled parent company mandated 60 editorial layoffs (“LA Times” cuts 160 jobs, shuts 2 papers, in round of

cutbacks, 2004). Later, Carroll cited budgetary pressures from the Tribune Company as a reason for his departure (Folkenflik, 2005). A year later, Carroll's successor was crossing swords with Tribune higher-ups over the same issue. Dean Baquet, with the support of publisher Jeffrey M. Johnson, publicly refused to make the staffing cuts demanded by corporate headquarters in Chicago. Baquet explained:

This newspaper does so many things. It is one of only three or four papers in the country with really robust foreign bureaus and that cover the war in Iraq in depth ... We have a D.C. bureau that competes on every big story. We cover the most complicated urban and suburban region in America. We do a lot of other things. You can't continue to do that if [staff reductions] keep up. (Rainey, 2006a, ¶30)

Nearly half of the *Times's* newsroom staff signed a letter backing Baquet and Johnson. Even the community got into the act, with a handful of wealthy residents making plans to buy the paper and operate it at a much smaller profit than the paper's 20 percent margin at the time. In a separate action, a local coalition of business people, including former US Secretary of State Warren Christopher, wrote to Tribune asking the company to stop making staff cuts at the *Times* (Seelye & Steinhauer, 2006). Employees at other Tribune properties jumped into the fray, citing budgetary concerns at their own newspapers. Almost 100 Newspaper Guild members at the *Baltimore Sun* signed a letter addressed to Tribune CEO Dennis FitzSimons stating that "sometimes you have to make the tough decisions and forgo short-term returns for long-term gains" (*Baltimore Sun* Newspaper Guild unit, 2006, ¶4). In an open letter to his publisher, a staff writer for the *Hartford Courant* wrote, "You can't make money at newspapering—and there is still plenty of money to be made in newspapers—by positioning the brand as a money-losing operation whose future depends on perpetual budget cutting and the concomitant erosion of quality" (Buck, 2006, ¶4). Unfortunately, the *Los Angeles Times* showdown did not end as well as the Marin incident. The Tribune company asked both Baquet and Johnson to resign and replaced them with executives who planned to move forward with the company's downsizing plans.

The *Los Angeles Times* was not alone in facing cuts. Several other newspapers took similar measures, including the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Seelye, 2005c). *Newsday's* top editor, Howard Schneider, resigned in fall of 2004 in part because of the severity of the staff cuts imposed on his newsroom—50 out of about 570 newsroom staff (Madore, 2004). The job cuts followed the disclosure that *Newsday* and several other papers had inflated weekday circulation figures to boost advertising rates. It is not just large metropolitan dailies that are making cuts. Deb Flemming quit as editor of *The Free Press* in Mankato (MN) in April 2005 when owner Community Newspaper Holdings Inc. announced new budget targets. The cuts were not necessary because revenues were down or expenses ran higher than expected; they simply were intended to bring the budget into line with industry standards. The paper's editorial staff of 30 was considered excessive for a daily circulation of 22,500. With Flemming's resignation, a few more editorial staffers could keep their jobs. "You need people to do the job," Flemming

told the Associated Press (2005b). “Without people, it will impact the quality of the product you give readers” (¶3).

In its comprehensive 2004 report of both new and aggregated data on American journalism in eight different media, the Project for Excellence in Journalism concluded that the touchstones of so-called mainstream journalism—newspapers, network television, local television, and the three big newsweekly magazines—had all suffered audience declines in the previous decade and that many traditional news outlets were making up for these losses by cutting staff, increasing workload, reducing newshole, and “in various ways that are measurable, thinning product” (p. 6). The organization’s 2005 and 2006 updates found the trend in downsizing continuing, with prominent losses at large metropolitan newspapers, news magazines, and radio news departments. Some pockets of reinvestment surfaced in 2004, but they tended to focus on “repackaging and presenting information, not in gathering it” (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005, Overview: news investment, ¶8).

Underlying this financial instability are recent changes in technologies, laws, marketing strategies, and political ideologies that are transforming the media market. Perhaps most influential has been the transformation of capitalism itself. Ohmann (2003) argues that we are experiencing a shift from the large stable corporations that developed beginning in the nineteenth century to a new form of capitalism he calls “agile capitalism” (p. 193). The effect of agile capitalism on the news industry, as well as other knowledge-based industries, has been “an astonishing proliferation of goods and segmentation of markets” (p. 191) characterized by rapid innovation.

Unfortunately, traditional news media have lagged behind the innovation trend. For example, the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that 62 percent of Web journalists reported newsroom cuts in 2004—a greater level of cutbacks than any other news media that year. The authors speculated that Internet outfits had faced the biggest cuts because of relatively low revenues in an industry accustomed to unusually high profit margins. Now that they can no longer take market domination for granted, newspapers and the broadcast networks risk losing the upper hand to non-journalistic companies and individuals who are more willing to experiment and invest online (Meyer, 2004b; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005). Although data for the 2006 update indicated an increase in online investments, the industry has a lot of catching up to do, and it is not doing it particularly well. There are so many sources of “content” now that journalists also are bending their standards to gain access to sources in what has become a “seller’s market for information,” according to the Project for Excellence in Journalism. The authors of the 2004 report concluded that the press is simultaneously being pulled in the directions of fragmentation and convergence as audiences disperse into niches and news outlets get swallowed up by ever-bigger conglomerates. The result: “Journalism is in the middle of an epochal transformation, as momentous probably as the invention of the telegraph or television” (p. 4).

The Ethical Costs of Commodification

Jane Jacobs (1992) talks about two survival strategies that provide the moral foundations for different occupational specialties. The commercial syndrome is the strategy of those who trade for a living and provide for a society's basic needs—in the case of the news industry, the executives and advertisers. The guardian syndrome is the strategy of those who administer, acquire or protect various kinds of territories. Its aim is to prevent corruption and fight enemies, including foes such as disease and ignorance. In the case of reporters, the aim is to guard the moral order itself, according to Ettema & Glasser (1998), who aptly describe this role as “moral custodianship” (p. 63). Other guardians include professionals and artists, who may protect learning and art by monopolizing knowledge, for example, or protecting the creative process. They perfect their talents primarily for the sake of their work's intrinsic value—not economic gain—within traditional frameworks that are themselves carefully guarded. The commercial and guardian syndromes contradict each other because they rely on different moral precepts. Therefore certain things are virtuous in one syndrome but vicious in the other. Each syndrome, taken by itself, is morally legitimate and internally consistent. However, when one syndrome arbitrarily chooses moral precepts from both spheres, it can become systematically corrupt, losing its meaning and failing to check its own worst vices. The result is degeneration into what Jacobs calls “monstrous moral hybrids” (p. 80).

Journalism is in danger of becoming such a monster. Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon (2001) in *Good Work* argue that journalism has been corrupted because editors, rather than being its guardians as before, have become “agents of the corporate hierarchy” (p. 134). Unfortunately, executives tend to see wealth as the ultimate good. Executives are not the only ones guilty of this, of course. Money is what drives not only the investment market, but medicine, law, education, and a host of other spheres in which excellence should not be defined in monetary terms (Ohmann, 2003). Governing these spheres on the basis of market principles distorts the meaning of health, justice, and learning just as surely as the meaning of an honor is lost if one could merely buy it. In a similar way, making the news nothing but a commodity to be shaped according to a market's taste leaves it with no intrinsic value.

Nevertheless, the managers' sphere and the journalists' sphere are necessarily linked by circumstance. Journalism in the United States is a private business that relies on advertising revenues and (to a lesser and lesser extent) subscribers to underwrite its good works. Journalism needs business to finance news production and distribution, and to retain its independence from the state. At the same time, business needs journalism. Evidence has accumulated in the newspaper industry, at least, to show that quality is positively associated with audience loyalty and higher household penetration in the long run.⁴ When quality goes down beyond a minimal level, circulation drops too. Advertisers go where the readers are. “Aggressive dilution of the quality of their journalism can make managers look like geniuses to

4 However, actual causation cannot be proven in non-competitive markets, where the effects of newsroom investments are difficult to determine (Meyer, 2004b).

their investors for a while. But, in time, the inevitable price is paid” (Meyer, 2004b, p. 215). The symbiosis between business and journalism, in short, is a difficult but necessary one.

For this symbiosis to work well, trade-offs are required on both sides to preserve the integrity of each sphere. Unfortunately, the trade-offs that take place in news organizations tend to be tacit and to disproportionately favor commercial interests. MacIntyre (1979) notes that organizations tend to tie profit to other organizational goals (for example, if we increase our ad revenue, then we have more newshole). This is how news organizations can combine commercial and guardian priorities together in a way that disguises potential clashes between the two camps. Organizations also prevent open conflict with commercial goals by compartmentalizing expertise and responsibility so that the two kinds of values do not appear to contradict each other (Keough & Lake, 1993).

Such partitioning of human experience enables people to operate with two discourses that are logically contradictory; they use each when situationally appropriate (Silverman, 1993). This is essentially a coping strategy—necessary for everyday functioning, but undesirable insofar as it obscures value tradeoffs and corrupts the integrity of each domain (Jacobs, 1992). Deep-seated contradictions between the two syndromes may emerge only when traditional roles become blurred (Keough & Lake, 1993), as when one party views a journalism issue what another sees as a purely business matter. (Borden, 1997, p. 39)

An example would be closing a news bureau. Journalists would see the news bureau as an important way to stay abreast of developments in an important location, to cultivate sources, and so on. A manager may look at closing the bureau as simply a matter of cutting costs and using resources more efficiently (perhaps substituting wire coverage for the correspondents who used to report out of the bureau).

Loss of Public Confidence

Some observers have pointed to newsroom cuts and competitive market pressures to explain a rash of recent press scandals:

- *USA TODAY* discovers that its best foreign correspondent is guilty of repeated fabrication and plagiarism.
- Local television stations get caught airing unlabeled “video news releases” from the government as news.
- The *New York Times* investigates substandard reporting of government officials’ statements leading up to the Iraq War.
- CBS News relies on unauthenticated documents to back up an explosive election-year story questioning the president’s military service.
- *Newsweek* retracts an incendiary story reporting that the government had found evidence of Qu’ran desecration by US military officers at Guantanamo Bay.
- Reuters distributes doctored photographs of fighting in Lebanon from its understaffed global photo desk in Singapore.

It is little wonder that the sources for Jayson Blair's fabricated stories never reported his inaccuracies to the *New York Times*. "It may be that the expectations of the press have sunk enough that they will not sink much further. People are not dismayed by disappointments in the press. They expect them" (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005, Overview: public attitudes, ¶21). Lack of confidence makes it hard for journalists to serve the public well. From a business standpoint, it also affects journalism's ability to sell audiences to advertisers (Meyer, 2004b).

The American public's low opinion of both newspaper and television journalists was confirmed in Gallup Poll results released at the end of 2004 indicating that journalists ranked lower on honesty and ethical standards than bankers and auto mechanics (Mitchell, 2004). Between 1985 and 2002, in fact, the percentage of people rating news organizations as highly professional and moral fell dramatically, while the proportion who thought the news media tried to hide their foul-ups jumped from 13 to 67 percent, according to survey trends aggregated by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005). Cable news—with its opinionated programming airing 24 hours a day alongside more traditional journalism—ranked highest, at 38 percent, in "doing the best job of covering news lately" in a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in early 2002. For perspective, the 2004 Project for Excellence report notes that this percentage is "more than twice that of network, nearly three times that of local television and nearly four times that of newspapers" (p. 19).

These shifts in audience confidence crystallized during the 2004 US presidential election. Voters relied on the Internet for election news to an unprecedented degree. According to a survey of 1209 voters conducted after the election by Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2004a), 21 percent used the Internet as their main source of campaign information, compared with 3 percent in 1996 and 11 percent in 2000. Although reliance on newspapers increased to 46 percent from 39 percent in 2000, it pales in comparison to the 60 percent of voters who cited newspapers as their main source in 1996. Continuing earlier trends from the 1990s and 2000, television remained the major source of campaign news for 76 percent of voters. Yet the single most dominant television source was not a traditional journalism outlet, but Fox News, with its partisan journalism format. Fox News was cited by the single largest percentage of voters (21 percent); the most cited network source was NBC News (13 percent). In a separate Internet survey of 2543 wired newspaper readers from around the country, the Associated Press Managing Editors' National Credibility Roundtables Project reported that those who considered blogs especially useful cited the new online journals' willingness to question the mainstream media as a major aspect of their appeal. Michael Hodges of Nashua, NH, said in his e-mail response to the survey: "In the aggregate, bloggers are much more balanced because they instantly call one another on bias, slant, errors in logic, and inadequate information. It's a network effect that is better than the mainstream 'networks'" (Pitts, 2004, ¶5).

The View from Journalists

Traditional journalists have become defensive in response to such attitudes. Their pessimism just seemed to be confirmed when they discovered in early 2005 that a correspondent for an online “news” service owned by a Texas GOP activist had been given daily passes to White House press briefings and news conferences for two years, despite using an alias. The correspondent, James D. Guckert, wrote for a conservative web site called Talon News under the pseudonym Jeff Gannon. Guckert first drew attention because of the perception that he asked easy, partisan questions at briefings and news conferences, in effect passing off propaganda as news with the Bush Administration’s complicity (a role lampooned for several weeks by Garry Trudeau in the daily political cartoon *Doonesbury*). Guckert, who had no journalistic experience, later resigned from Talon News; the site itself shut down for revamping in the wake of the scandal, according to a message posted to the site (www.talonnews.com). Besides questioning the decision by the White House press secretary to give a daily press pass to someone not using his real name, veteran White House reporters questioned the scrutiny being given to the legitimacy of news organizations allowed representation in the White House briefing room. *New York Times* reporter Richard Stevenson complained in an interview with trade magazine *Editor & Publisher*: “I don’t think it is good for our profession to have the briefing room hijacked” (Strupp, 2005).

Later that year, Hollywood actor Sean Penn went to Iran to report for the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Fathi, 2005) and Yahoo! News started testing a search tool that would pull up results from blogs as well as mainstream news sources (DiCarlo, 2005). In this kind of climate, it may not be surprising that a substantial majority of the nearly 550 journalists surveyed in 2004 by the Research Center for the People and the Press “believe that increased bottom line pressure is ‘seriously hurting’ the quality of news coverage” (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2004b, ¶2). The report noted that the percentages of both national and local journalists concerned about business pressures were considerably higher than in earlier surveys conducted in 1995 and 1999. Journalists associate profit-driven news decisions with infringements on their autonomy and with potential conflicts of interest (Borden, 2000), as reflected in all the codes suggesting that “journalists—individually or in the aggregate—are, or should be, free of business-related constraints imposed by those who pay them and distribute their work” (McManus, 1997, p. 8). They also worry that bottom-line pressures lead to sloppy, simplistic, timid reporting (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2004b). A former newspaper reporter, who is now a book editor, complained in a letter sent to the Romenesko blog run by the Poynter Institute:

You still have many good newspapers and reporters out there. But you run a bank, you hire bank tellers. You run a fast-food joint, you get people flipping burgers. You run a newspaper where the priority is high profits for distant shareholders, where stories become “product,” where staffers become “human resources,” where frightened reporters worry themselves sick over byline counts and “getting beat” by their shallow stories in the

competition, where pre-fab, art-driven layouts take priority over story content, then you get more dullards working for a Revenue Stream. (Henry, 2005)

In its 2006 report, the Project for Excellence in Journalism minced no words about who is winning the argument at the top levels of US news organizations:

From here on, at many companies, the fight on behalf of the public interest will come from the rank and file of the newsroom, with the news executive as mediator with the boardroom. There are some notable exceptions, and journalists who work in those situations today consider themselves lucky. Meanwhile, at many new-media companies, it is not clear if advocates for the public interest are present at all. (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006, Major trends, ¶4)

Journalism as Practice

When a local news broadcast in a major market hires Jerry Springer as a commentator or the White House admits a reporter from a fake news agency to its press briefings, journalists' status as communicators with special claims to legitimacy is indeed precarious. From an ethical standpoint, journalism has to have a distinct identity if journalists are to clearly understand what they are and what they are not, if they are to stand for some things and against others. Without a clear articulation of their collective purpose, no one will have any kind of yardstick by which to judge journalistic performance. Former *Minneapolis Tribune* readers' representative Richard P. Cunningham (1995), writing soon after the Associated Press Managing Editors approved new ethical guidelines, underscored the importance of this step. "As the trash piles up higher around us," he wrote, "we need to convince readers and viewers that we are different! What better way than to publish a clear set of ideal guidelines, to say publicly that we live and work by them and to invite readers and viewers to cite particular clauses in the guidelines when they think we have violated them?" (p. 12).

Unfortunately, Springer's crack about local television news not even being journalism hits close to home. The handling of former President Clinton's affair with intern Monica Lewinsky continues to be an instructive example of how blurred the boundaries between journalism and other non-fiction media have become. When the story first broke, Lewinsky led the network broadcasts—and also *Entertainment Tonight*. Some Associated Press photographers, in their zeal to get a picture, followed the car in which Lewinsky was driving so closely that they actually bumped into it—no better than the mercenary paparazzi. Meanwhile, the esteemed Washington Post was taking its cues from the notoriously unreliable Drudge Report on the Internet. In subsequent weeks, the Lewinsky story overshadowed the collapse of the Russian economy, the Serbian assault on ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, and the first US federal budget surplus in decades. When journalists act too much like entertainers, people just assume that journalists are in it for the money, for the fame, for the titillation. When journalists act too much like partisans, people assume that they are not making a serious effort to rein in their prejudices. The stakes are high. If journalists are unable to clarify journalistic goals in relation to other occupations (Winch, 1997, p.

3), they may not be able to ensure meaningful control over what is defined as news, command substantial autonomy in how they do their work, or summon enough credibility to perform their social functions.

Practice Makes Perfect

American journalists have tried to stand out by identifying themselves as the only occupation tagged for constitutional protection and by taking on the trappings and obligations of professionals. So far, these arguments have not succeeded in giving journalists a group identity that can withstand the pressures of commodification in current market conditions. I hope to show that journalism as practice has the potential to serve this function. Journalism as practice is a normative concept that entails the following characteristics: an institutional context, an overriding purpose, a viable moral community, collective organization, and internal goods that can only be realized and extended through the practice.

The outline of my argument is as follows. Chapter 2 lays out the virtue-ethics framework upon which MacIntyre (2007) relies and critically discusses the notion of a practice as it applies to journalism. Chapter 3 details journalism's tradition. A tradition, as MacIntyre describes it, is an historically situated, ongoing argument about what constitutes the good life. Journalism's tradition articulates what constitutes good journalism and being a good journalist. I will focus on ideas related to the development of reporting as an occupation and as a distinct identity. In the first of four *Practically Speaking* features that discuss relevant examples at length, a sidebar to Chapter 3 examines an important *character*, or model, of virtue in journalism: CBS reporter Edward R. Murrow.

Chapter 4 sets out the distinguishing marks of *journalism as practice*, as well as its *telos*, or ultimate purpose. A theory of journalism is proposed that relies on a communitarian account of participatory citizenship and Code's (1987) notion of epistemic responsibility. This chapter, finally, offers a preliminary account of the practice's internal goods—those that are oriented toward the realization of the *telos* and that can only be realized as a journalist.

Chapter 5 explains the intellectual and moral virtues needed to realize and extend journalism's internal goods, including intellectual honesty and moral courage. It identifies institutional goods external to the practice of journalism that have the potential to corrupt the practice, including profit. The emphasis of the discussion will be on virtues needed to sustain the practice, rather than on individual virtues needed to demonstrate good character. The *Practically Speaking* feature takes a look at how *Newsweek's* Qu'ran desecration story from 2005 failed to meet the highest standards of journalism's discipline of verification.

Chapter 6 focuses on the practice as a moral community that can support journalists who resist ethically questionable business requirements. The concepts of shame and solidarity will be analyzed to argue that an effective moral community fosters a true willingness among journalists to sanction each other and also to go to each other's aid. The chapter concludes with a discussion of individual resistance in the absence of such support, including a model for evaluating resistance options. The *Practically Speaking* feature illustrates how the practice provides an interpretive

framework for collectively understanding and refining important moral concepts, using as an example journalists' evaluation of the 1981 Janet Cooke fabrication case at the *Washington Post*.

Chapter 7 critically analyzes the potential of professionalism as a form of collective organization for *journalism as practice*. Two key functions of professionalism are analyzed—ethical motivation and occupational power—in terms of both their potential usefulness and their potential problems. A range of options for the organization of journalists are presented. The *Practically Speaking* feature discusses rhetoric produced by journalists to differentiate themselves from the bloggers who discredited *60 Minutes Wednesday's* 2004 report on the National Guard service of President George W. Bush.

The final chapter discusses some promising developments, including recent efforts by non-profit organizations and media-reform groups to promote quality journalism. Attention also is given to the responsibility of news managers and news organizations for sustaining *journalism as practice*. The chapter concludes by suggesting steps that journalists and citizens must take to launch a successful social movement aimed at protecting virtuous journalism from the excesses of commodification.