

## The Virginia NEWS LETTER

# The 'New' News Media and Public Trust

By Sandra Mims Rowe

Last August in the rarefied atmosphere of the Aspen Institute, a new publisher attending an invitation-only seminar on Journalism and Society asked the provocative question, "How do we define quality and hold ourselves accountable for it?"

The discussions from which the question of quality arose swirled around the nexus of where and how journalistic values compete with profits. It was the right question, and she was in a fertile environment to have it addressed. Among the two dozen executives The Aspen Institute had gathered were the chairman and CEO of Time Warner, the president of CBS Television, the chairman of Knight Ridder, the editors of *Time*, *Newsweek* and MSNBC on the Internet.

Around a single table you had old media, sort of old media, new media and soon-to-be converged media. You would think that group would know the answers, that they would be the ones calling the shots. Not necessarily, it turns out. That would have been yesterday.



Sandra Mims Rowe

Today, even the CEOs at that meeting don't call all the shots. Most work for someone else. They work for stockholders, certainly, and demanding ones at that, used to ever-increasing profits or cash flow. But most everyone was also an employee of an even bigger media company than their own. Welcome to the age of media convergence.

The challenge of adapting to the new business models and the resulting increasing commercialization of journalism changes the game for all of us.

Can journalists adapt to the new business models and at the same time apply the values we hold dear, values that alone ensure journalistic credibility and integrity? And, as the publisher asked, what is quality and do journalists recognize it as their ethical responsibility? Do they know that the integrity of the newspaper or TV station or magazine is in their hands? Do they make decisions regarding coverage and play of stories understanding that each decision speaks to the character of their journalism and their publication or



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*Until recently, newsrooms could be sheltered from market pressures.*

broadcast?

Certainly journalism has long been commercial in the sense that it has been profitable. With most of the bills paid by advertising, the enterprise has thrived because it is good at connecting sellers of goods and services to interested buyers. With the ascendancy of television in the last half of the 20th Century, the connecting of willing buyers and sellers became primary. Newspapers, because of their different history, their means of delivery and their more apparent public service role, held themselves out as different. Their newsrooms until recently have been sheltered, determined to live in a world apart from day-to-day market pressures—and largely able to do so.

What's different today? A lot.

In the past decade we have witnessed market forces and technological reasons for the rapidly changing media landscape. Along the way most newsrooms were jolted out of their isolationist tendencies. They are no longer sovereign states within their own companies.

The forces on the horizon today are both more promising and more frightening than what we have already seen. We are racing headlong into a world in which computers, telecommunications and television converge and assume the characteristics of each other. All media will participate in this, and, no doubt, as consumers, we will all benefit. But for journalists the new world has scary aspects galore.

We want to believe that excellent business results and high journalistic quality are related. It can be true, is demonstrably true in some cases. But not always. We want to believe that because people thirst for quality in all things, they thirst for it in news. We want to believe that high quality—not just size or speed or dazzle—will win out. But the marketplace doesn't speak with a single voice—the marketplace wants it all, the trash and the truth and everything in between. The customers, not the journalists, will sort out their reliance on each. And the marketplace rules. But if the relationship between quality and profitability isn't a sure bet in the news marketplace, then is the relationship between the two at best arbitrary or even capricious?

Because this is a time of great change characterized by the blurring of lines between business and news and marketing, we must better articulate and apply the standards that distinguish journalism from rumor mongering, talk show blather and celebrity chit-chat.

Some media seers among us assert that the profound changes that characterized media in the infancy of the Internet are a mere suggestion of what's to come once the Internet and broadband burst into adolescence. "Convergence [of media] will make the Internet revolution seem quaint," a media

company CEO said recently. I can hardly wait.

You could argue, and many do, that even the journalists who squeal the loudest about the coming convergence benefit from working across the breadth of properties their companies own.

"The synergy skeptics need to chill out," wrote *Chicago Tribune* business reporter David Greising, who describes himself as a synergy survivor.

"When newspaper reporters like me take our words off the printed page and apply them in other media, it forces us to look at our stories in different ways," he wrote in a column published shortly after his company announced its purchase of the *Los Angeles Times*. "Appearing on television forces me to look for broader aspects of my stories that will appeal to an audience with a more casual interest in news. Taking phone calls on a radio call-in show makes me more directly accountable to listeners in a way that writing a newspaper story rarely does. And rushing a scoop onto the Internet revives competitive instincts that sometimes wear away as we progress in our profession."

Busy fellow, Mr. Greising. All that writing, filming, taping and sending. I don't doubt that he's the same as the rest of us—a guy with deadline pressure trying to do his best work while staying true to his own principles and the company's goals. Good journalists don't sell out their principles because of their owners' business interests, whether they work for *The Chicago Tribune* or ABC—oops, I mean Disney.

But my vote of confidence doesn't count. Given the public's skepticism—bordering on cynicism—about media, the question is: Do the citizens we claim to serve trust the integrity and independence of journalists, and will the new media landscape make it even more difficult for them to do so?

The evidence suggests that even in the infancy of convergence they do not. Asked whether newspapers were concerned mainly with the public interest or with making profits, adults questioned in a 1998 national survey for the American Society of Newspaper Editors said the profit motive was more important than public service. Half of those questioned thought newspaper editors would allow advertisers' interests to influence news decisions. In television it's even worse. Another study showed that more than 90 percent of the public—and sadly almost the same percentage of television news directors—believe that the drive for ratings "sometimes" or "frequently" influences news judgment.

Philip Meyer, the Knight Professor of Journalism at the University of North Carolina, writing recently in *USA Today*, said now that media

will no longer be defined by their different delivery systems, they will need something else to make themselves distinctive.

“There is no mystery about what that something else will be,” Meyer wrote. “What the new media forms need to capture is the favored position in our heads as the trusted source.” There isn’t much room in all our heads, he said: “The battle should be fierce.”

The trusted source. Powerful words, these. They suggest that journalists will apply principled and consistently high standards to their work. They suggest that their corporations won’t make business or marketing decisions that compromise the integrity of the news product. They suggest that the CEOs of these huge corporations, not likely to have come from a journalistic tradition themselves, will nevertheless believe top-quality journalism is critical to their long-term success. They suggest reverence for traditional values: commitment to accuracy and fairness; honest and rigorous reporting; proper context and depth in storytelling. They suggest virtuous, principled newsrooms. They suggest quality.

Quality and convergence. The two words aren’t steel to magnet. In the new media millennium, we don’t think of them as having the same symbiotic relationship as, say, dinner has to food.

The new business model makes perfect sense—for business. Bigger media, merged and converged journalists, multi-skilled and multi-tasked, are increasingly the norm. Those who aren’t leading the revolution must nevertheless adapt to it. What journalists had better sort out is how to guarantee that the new business model works for journalism and for the news audience we serve.

Wishing for the public’s trust and respect does not make it so. So what should we consider? What challenges and ethical questions do we face as we go forward into this brave new media world?

How about the obvious fact that with power in the hands of fewer companies and with journalists working across lines, there are potentially fewer choices for consumers in the local market even while there is an overwhelming explosion of information available.

In the local journalism world, once most cities and towns became one-newspaper towns, the competition for local news shifted to different media in the same market. Newspaper reporters could no longer be scooped by another daily newspaper in their market, but they still had to look out for television reporters, for example. And, frequently, because of the different method of presentation or because of different perspectives, a TV reporter’s take on an event or issue differed from his print competitor. The television reporter had

the advantage of video and immediacy and the demands of brevity. He had to tell in 200 words a story that a print reporter strolled through at a comparatively leisurely thousand words or so.

Now in Norfolk, Virginia, in Chicago, Illinois, in Dallas, Texas, and dozens of other cities, the same reporter working for the same company may do news reports for every medium the company owns or partners with in a market. Rumpled print reporters, looking like unmade beds, are lining up for lessons in makeup so they can be “on-air talent.” On-air talent—interesting phrase, that.

Leonardo DiCaprio, the movie idol du jour for teenage girls, is “on-air talent” even when he interviews the President of the United States about Earth Day, as he recently did for ABC News—to the absolute horror of many journalists. They were troubled because the emerging definition of a journalist is anyone who gathers and disseminates information, a definition that with the Internet makes anyone with a modem, the modern-day megaphone, a journalist.

It’s the slippery slope from news to news-lite to entertainment that journalists fear: If DiCaprio acts like a journalist, people will think he is a journalist. Yet the public registered disinterest in this journalistic brouhaha. They will make their own distinctions.

When will journalists learn it is only through the substance and the quality of our work that we can hope to emphasize the difference between entertainers, talk show hosts and journalists. It is what we do, not what we say, that counts. In the new media age, the most rigorous journalistic standards for news must be made more clear, not converged or compromised.

The strong and well-respected newspaper-based companies leading the way into the new world, the *Chicago Tribune* among them, explain that having reporters report for various media does not compromise values and is not a way to shave expenses but rather a way to gain customers.

“If we rely only on printed word, ink on paper. . .our business will attrit over time,” said John Puerner, the new publisher of the *L.A. Times* in his first address to his staff. “So my philosophy is we give people information when they want it, and in whatever form they want it, as long as we get some compensation for it.”

It’s a long-standing theme for Arthur Sulzberger Jr., publisher of *The New York Times*. Arguing that the credibility and judgment is his newspaper’s real value rather than its means of distribution, Sulzberger six years ago said: “The plain truth is I don’t give a tinker’s damn how we distribute our information—Hell, if someone would be kind enough to invent a technology, I’ll be pleased

*The marketplace rules...rumpled print reporters line up for lessons in makeup.*

*Different media  
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to beam it directly into your cortex. We'll have the city edition, the late-city edition and the mind-meld edition. I am absolutely agnostic regarding methods of distribution."

Indeed, since many of us are intoxicated with the news business because we believe there is both great service and great joy in providing information critical to democracy's functioning, we should, like Sulzberger, care not one bit about the method of delivery. But we do.

We care because different media have different cultures. They tell stories differently, and they even define and choose news differently. TV is driven by entertainment, daily ratings, profits, and being first with the headlines. Because television newscasts cultivate that sense of urgency, they are much more likely to lead with and hype their best breaking crime story, for example, than are newspapers.

The Internet is an altogether different medium. Its advantages are speed and choice and lack of geographic limitations; it provides information across a broad base and has the ability to build interactive communities of interest in a way no other media can. But the driving force of this new medium is clearly commerce and the dream of even greater commerce. A newspaper's stories are not typically going to drive thousands of eyeballs to the Internet—as sports stories or chat rooms do—or cause a spike in the local TV station's Nielsen ratings.

The breaking crime story, the sports statistics, the explanatory issue story, even celebrity gossip are all news. But they are not interchangeable. How you play them, how seriously you take them, is a statement of journalistic character and values.

Those of us who care most passionately about emerging as the trusted media source must hold fast to a few things as we make this trip into the new merged, converged media landscape.

First, we must take with us the debate over our destination. One of the best things about journalists and the newsrooms they inhabit is the tendency of the best of them to be raucous, roiling, rowdy places of ideas. They function best as bubbling cauldrons. We're in danger of losing that. Some of today's buttoned-down newsrooms lack the passion to bubble and boil with ideas.

If the race among media is to be the trusted source, then we need more discussion, not less, about our standards and ethics; more ideas, not fewer, about how to best serve the public. We must engage the debate for the sake of learning and in the hope of influencing the outcome. And the debate must hinge on how to best apply the highest journalistic standards in the new media landscape.

We must travel along the new landscape with

some caution, also.

The converged media of today and tomorrow is a competitive grab for greater market share. It is driven by the determination that the only way to thrive—perhaps even to survive—is to provide all the news, information and entertainment sane souls can possibly consume and provide it 24-7 in whatever form any potential customer wishes to receive it. I imagine we are not too far away from being able to squeeze it out of a tube and rub it on. The mother lode from a single source.

Better that we should take with us a clearer commitment to the public interest. Serving the public interest, defined broadly, has been the backbone of journalism, and on it is built the journalistic reputation of the enterprise. It is characterized by more depth on issues of complexity, more explanation of matters of substance, and smarter journalism on everything significant in our lives. It provides insight and understanding, not just information.

It is *The Oregonian* assigning 10 reporters to education or more than 50 in the suburbs to cover the news closest to people's homes. It is spending months reviewing documents and interviewing dozens of people to piece together the troubled life of a young teen who was jailed even though he had committed no crime. It is the *Chicago Tribune* carefully examining all 285 Illinois death row cases and uncovering so many irregularities that the governor declared a moratorium on executions. It is a *Washington Post* reporter spending an entire year painstakingly researching and visiting the poorly regulated group homes for the mentally retarded in that city and seeing the worst of them closed.

This kind of journalism takes nothing so much as time to accomplish; time to think, time to talk it over, time for training. Complex stories, maddeningly, can take months to produce even in the hands of the most skilled reporters and editors. Providing citizens with information they are unlikely or unable to get by other means is the highest and best public service that journalism can offer. It's damned difficult—and expensive—to do well.

And if the new media Goliaths ultimately define entertainment as more important than news in all their media, or if they think that broad but shallow information is good enough for the market, if quality is not essential to their business mission, then they won't invest in newsrooms at a sufficient level to support public interest journalism.

And all the marketing in the world won't make up for the lack of it.

Today, with synergy and marketing the ascendant stars in the media firmament, we must also remember that marketing values can collide with

journalism values. If you don't believe that, ask the folks in the *L.A. Times* newsroom.

The ethical nightmare last year at the *L.A. Times* is instructive and worth revisiting despite the hundreds of thousands of words already written about it, most of them published in the trade press and in the *L.A. Times* itself, which does many things well but nothing quite so well as writing long.

The facts are straightforward. The new publisher of the *L.A. Times*, a business executive whose first newspaper job was that of president of the third-largest newspaper in the country, entered into a marketing agreement with the Staples Center, the new sports and entertainment complex in downtown L.A. The marketing agreement was not unusual as marketing agreements go: the newspaper received a skybox and other considerations, the Staples Center received financial support and promotion crucial for its financial success.

The Staples Center's grand opening was a big deal and, consistent with that, the newspaper planned to devote an entire issue of its Sunday magazine to celebrate it in the community. So far, so good. But the publisher, not knowing the ethical minefield she was about to lead her troops through, decided to satisfy part of the *L.A. Times*' financial obligation to the Staples Center by sharing the profits from that issue of the Sunday Magazine. In the marketing world, that's OK. In the journalism world, to have a private financial relationship with a source is an egregious breach of ethics.

When the deal was revealed in an alternative paper, the publisher was pilloried, the company shamed and others involved roundly criticized. The publisher appropriately accepted responsibility and took the brunt of the criticism. Ironically, it was that publisher, Kathryn Downing, who at the Aspen meeting only two months earlier had asked the provocative question, "How do we define quality and hold ourselves accountable for it?"

The *L.A. Times*' parent company has since been sold to the *Chicago Tribune*, and Downing has been replaced as publisher of the flagship paper, as have the company's CEO and the newspaper's editor. Kathryn Downing had baptism by a fire that could not be quelled in her brief term as publisher. I'm sure she learned many things. Among the lessons Downing most certainly learned must be the importance of having a journalistic definition of quality at the heart of the entire enterprise.

So what can the rest of us learn from the *L.A. Times*? We can draw lessons in ethics and leadership from what did not happen in that newsroom.

No one tried to stop the publisher as she made the biggest mistake of her professional life, a

mistake that would seriously damage the integrity of her institution. An editor's job is to protect the integrity of the journalism and therefore the integrity of the newspaper.

In this case, the marketing goals of the company so defined the culture that in practice they dominated all else. Throughout the newspaper, including in the newsroom, everyone—reporters, photographers, editors, everyone—had been told they needed to be team players, they needed to understand the importance of marketing their journalism and make decisions accordingly. News was never excluded, but according to a senior editor, it was never primary.

Mark Willes, the CEO, in his five years in L.A. made it clear he was a culture buster who expected a change in newsroom culture in order to accomplish the company's goals. He changed the culture, all right. And when the top editor in the newsroom didn't stand up for what was right, and the handful of other editors who knew about the deal in time to possibly stop it did not do so, the rest of the journalism world saw what can happen when the environment of a newsroom changes so much that the people doing the journalism are no longer confident its traditional values remain the heart and soul of their company.

The former executives in L.A. are good people, talented and well-intentioned. But it was their mistakes, not the positive things they did, that demonstrate more than anything in recent memory just how much newsroom culture and values matter in making the ethical decisions that make the organization worthy of trust.

As media organizations continue to merge and journalism becomes a relatively smaller piece of what they do and is no longer the reason many of these companies were created in the first place, then the fight to have journalism values at the core of the company will be more challenging. It also could be determinant. The credibility, and the trust, the ethical force of the entire enterprise, may depend on it.

Nothing could supply greater confidence about the trustworthiness of the media map of the future than if we had as fellow travelers and leaders the mentors of an earlier age.

Many would argue, and I would agree, that the journalism of today is generally better, higher quality than it has ever been. But that journalism of an earlier age, for all its flaws, taught values. One of those was love of craft. Another was integrity. You could see the backbone of steel sometimes required of strong, independent and ethical editors. Sure, they cared about their corporations, and they expected their owners to make money. But the most memorable of those mentors were

*What happens when news is no longer the primary goal?*

contrary fellows who were admired for their independence as much as their journalism. We could use more principled leadership in newsrooms today.

I had such a mentor at *The Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk. His name was Perry Morgan. The son of a poor Georgia sharecropper, he was born in the dawn of the Depression and collected \$1.50 on his father's last crop. Perry was gifted storyteller, demanding teacher, loving friend. And though he just died last November and was working in the newsroom almost to the end, he was most surely of another time.

Perry's journalism didn't bend to convergence, though he was pleased to have the additional and far-flung readers of his column that came along when the newspaper's Web site began carrying it. For him, journalism was defined by service to the reader. Seeing that value in action as a young editor was then, and remains today, the most significant professional gift of my life. Once, in conversation about the company that employed us both and for which we felt great affection, I said, "Oh, Perry, you love this newspaper." He corrected me. "No," he said, "I love the reader." Every decision he made showed it.

His passion for ethical behavior was forged by a naturally questioning mind that spared no one from its probing interrogatories. "What, pray tell, is this?" Perry would ask about a single offending phrase in a 3000-word story. More than once when I explained some decision I had made, he would slow me down, asking simply, "Why would you do that?" leaving the question hanging in the air like the humidity of a summer afternoon in his native Georgia.

Today's young journalists more than ever need leaders like Perry Morgan, demanding editors defined by their journalistic integrity—flesh and

blood editors who live their values and are never reluctant to state their responsibilities to their newsrooms and to their readers.

Trust has never been a more precious commodity or more challenging to cultivate and retain. In the end, with all media fighting each other for the audience, there will not be a single winner. People will choose among us depending on their needs. But the choices should come from media that see strong competitive advantage in their differences, not their similarities.

The most trustworthy media will continue to celebrate the values of journalism over those of entertainment or commerce. They will accept the difficult task of doing more than just gathering and disseminating information. They will help provide insight and knowledge in their reports. Only then will we fully discover the wondrous power and potential this new media age offers us. ●

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Sandra Mims Rowe was inducted into the Virginia Journalism Hall of Fame this spring. A native of Harrisonburg, she was executive editor of The Virginian-Pilot in Norfolk before taking her current job as editor of The Oregonian in Portland, OR. She is a member of the Pulitzer Prize Board of Directors and past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. This was first delivered as the Robert W. Rubl Lecture in Ethics at the University of Oregon.*

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