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# As journalism changes, so must you

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By Brent Cunningham and Alan C. Miller



Enlarge By Web Bryant, USA TODAY.

As the lines separating news and entertainment, opinion and fact, and professional and amateur increasingly blur, every week presents a new chapter in the debate over the definitions of "journalist" and "journalism." Is James O'Keefe an activist filmmaker, a partisan provocateur or an investigative reporter? Did the *National Enquirer's* John Edwards love-child scoop deserve a Pulitzer Prize? What does it mean that the anonymous people who uploaded cellphone video of a young woman dying during protests in Iran won a George Polk Award, one of journalism's highest honors?

Our culture of news and information has never been richer or more democratic; anyone with an Internet connection can contribute to the public conversation. As a new survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project and the Project for Excellence in Journalism makes clear, we have become a nation of news grazers whose "relationship to news is becoming portable, personalized and participatory."

But as the concept of "journalism" expands to include citizens with cellphone cameras, the microblogging service Twitter and social media such as Facebook, some of the developments that make this new media reality so full of potential also make it fraught. That same Pew survey found that 70% of respondents feel overwhelmed by the amount of news and information from different sources, and 72% think most sources of news are biased.

The traditional news hierarchy has been upended. With actual news, and items that look suspiciously like news, coming at us from a variety of outlets, how do we know what to trust? How do we distinguish credible information from raw information, misinformation and propaganda? And if all information is created equal, as the flattened informational landscape sometimes suggests, why will anyone seek out quality

journalism — especially if we think it's all driven by bias anyway?

### Informed, engaged

There is a need for distinctions. All information is not created equal, and it is crucial for the health of our democracy that people have the skills to find what is credible — and to understand why the distinctions matter. This is particularly important for the next generation of news consumers, who spend ever more time accessing (and creating and passing along) entertainment and information on an evolving array of digital devices but are not being given the tools — or even

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being taught the need — to sort fact from fiction. A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 8- to 18-year-olds spend an average of seven hours and 38 minutes each day on entertainment media — a 20% increase in the past five years. It also found that "use of every type of media has increased over the past 10 years, with the exception of reading" — and reading, of course, includes newspapers and magazines.

Despite the ability, with just a few keystrokes, to drill down into the rich veins of news and information online, some young people consider Google their primary information source. This study amplifies one from 2007 by the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard that found many teens and young adults are "ill-equipped to process the hard news stories they encounter."

The nascent news-literacy movement has begun to address this challenge. The Center for News Literacy, a news literacy course at Long Island's Stony Brook University and the News Literacy Project — which is in seven middle schools and high schools in New York City, Bethesda, Md., and Chicago — are giving students the skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news in all its forms. But news literacy is not widely taught in U.S. schools, and the focus on standardized testing has tended to drive out "civics" or "current events" courses. We need a national effort to create a savvy, digital-age citizenry that is informed and engaged.

The Federal Communications Commission's National Broadband Plan, which was released last month, offers an important opportunity to increase news-literacy education to millions of students. The plan, authorized in the \$787 billion stimulus package last year, is a long-overdue effort to shore up our digital infrastructure by extending high-speed Internet access to the entire country.

Think like journalists

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But once the infrastructure is in place and the information is flowing, how will people use it? Gone are the days of passive news consumption, where we all tuned in to the evening newscast. Today, citizens need to think like journalists because they increasingly are serving as informational gatekeepers, both by creating and publishing original content online and by passing on (and thereby endorsing) news and information created elsewhere.

For the professional media, increasing news literacy is an opportunity to build an audience for public-service journalism. About 75 active and retired journalists have participated in News Literacy Project classes, sharing their experiences and answering questions about quality journalism. Fourteen news organizations are participating in the project. We encourage more news outlets to endorse news literacy and find ways to get involved.

Sustaining serious journalism in the digital age is a topic of much discussion and experimentation, most of which focuses on the product — the supply side of the information equation. But there will be no solution without demand from a citizenry that understands and values quality journalism.

*Brent Cunningham is the managing editor of the Columbia Journalism Review. Alan C. Miller is the executive director of the News Literacy Project.*

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