

Starting Over

by Terry Eastland

It's premature to write an obituary, but there's no question that America's news media—the newspapers, newsmagazines, and television networks that people once turned to for all their news—are experiencing what psychologists might call a major life passage. They've seen their audiences shrink, they've had to worry about vigorous new competitors, and they've suffered more than a few self-inflicted wounds—scandals of their own making. They know that more and more people have lost confidence in what they do. To many Americans, today's newspaper is irrelevant, and network news is as compelling as whatever is being offered over on the Home Shopping Network. Maybe less.

The First Amendment protects against government abridgment of the freedom of the press. But it doesn't guarantee that today's news media—some would already say yesterday's—will be tomorrow's. Though most existing news organizations will probably survive, few if any are likely to enjoy the prestige and clout they once did. So it's time to write, if not an obituary, then an account of their rise and decline and delicate prospects amid the “new media” of cable television, talk radio, and the blogosphere.

The “new media” carry the adjective because they began to emerge only in the 1980s, when the media of newspapers, newsmagazines, and network and local television news had long been firmly in place. Most newspapers had been around since the first decades of the 20th century, and though rising costs and competition caused some to be shuttered in the decades after World War II, there were still more than 1,700 papers published daily in the 1970s. *Time* and *Newsweek* were established, respectively, in 1923 and 1933. Network television newscasts were reaching most parts of the country by the 1950s, and local stations eventually provided their own news programs at various points in the day.

The most important old news organizations were the outlets that covered stories in the nation's capital and abroad. They included *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*; *Time* and *Newsweek*; NBC News, CBS News, and ABC News; National Public Radio and public television's various iterations of what is now called *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. When people talked about the “mainstream” or “establishment” media, these were the organizations they had in mind. They were leaders among the media generally, and shaped how regional and local outlets practiced journalism.

They were also part of America's first sizable national elite, which emerged after World War II in response to the needs of a nation whose central government was larger and more invasive, costly, and ambitious than ever before. Political leaders, lawyers, academics, businesspeople, and certain practitioners of that once-disreputable trade, journalism, populated this elite. As in the other elites, mem-



“No one can eliminate prejudices—just recognize them,” declared CBS’s Edward R. Murrow, one of the founding fathers of TV news, shown here on the set of his 1950s show, See It Now.

bers of the media elite held degrees from many of the same (elite) universities. They believed that they had a responsibility to improve society, and they thought of themselves—as no ink-stained wretch had before—as professionals.

The most influential journalists understood that news is rarely news in the sense of being undisputed facts about people or policy, but news in the sense that it’s a product made by reporters, editors, and producers. They knew that news is about facts, but that it fundamentally reflects editorial judgments about whether particular facts are “news,” and if they are, what the news means and what its consequences may be. They knew, too, that those who define and present the news have a certain power, since news can set a public agenda. And they weren’t shy about exercising this power. That’s what made them dominant—an establishment, in fact.

At their best, the elite media pursued stories of public importance and reported them thoroughly, accurately, and in reasonably fair and balanced fashion. And they did that a great deal of the time. They were never the relentlessly vigilant “watchdogs” they congratulated themselves on being, but they did sometimes do valuable work policing the abuses and failures of government and other institutions.

And they influenced the nation, most dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s. They probably tipped the close 1960 election between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy, when, as Theodore H. White reported in *The Making of the President, 1960* (1961), the coverage clearly favored Kennedy. They early and

correctly judged that the civil rights movement was news, and they turned news with datelines in the South into a national story of profound significance. They also affected the 1968 election—through what historian Paul Johnson called their “tendentious presentation” of news about the Vietnam War, which came to a head with the Tet offensive in January 1968, a major American military victory that the media cast as a defeat. Some described this portrayal as flawed reporting—notably the founding editor of this journal, Peter Braestrup, in *Big Story* (1977)—while others saw it as a product of bias. But the effect of the treatment of Tet was to help shift elite opinion decisively against the war. In March 1968, after nearly losing the New Hampshire primary, President Lyndon Johnson decided not to run for reelection.

And then there was the presidency of Richard Nixon. Nixon was never liked by the news media, to put it mildly, and he returned the favor, calling the press “the enemy.” When the judicial process exposed a “third-rate burglary” at the Watergate complex in Washington, *The Washington Post* pursued the story, with other outlets later joining in. Nixon became the only president in American history to resign the office.

The media establishment emerged at a time when Americans generally respected those in authority. But when, beginning in the 1960s, authority took a severe beating, the media establishment was the one authority that actually gained in strength. Crusading reporters and editors became cultural heroes—the rebels and nonconformists who refused to kowtow to anybody. The Watergate scandal in particular confirmed in the media the sense they had of themselves as independent guardians of the public good and the very conscience of the nation in times of crisis. Over the years, judicial decisions also went their way, securing greater protection for the exercise of media power. For the establishment media, life was very good.

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Since the 1980s, however, more and more Americans have stopped relying on the traditional media for news. Some have quit the news habit entirely. Newspaper circulation has been declining, and network ratings are sharply down. Mainstream outlets no longer have a monopoly on the news, their journalism is subjected to sometimes withering scrutiny, and they are ignored when they are not criticized. Life is no longer so good.

There are many explanations for why Americans have been turning away from their old news providers, including adjustments in how people now live and work (fewer have time to watch the evening news) and the lack of interest in news evident among younger generations whose tastes often carry them to MTV. But the media can also blame themselves for the change.

Here it bears noting that though journalists aspired to the status of pro-

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professionals, they never acquired the self-regulatory mechanisms found in law, medicine, or even business. The nation's journalism schools, which taught—and still teach—a craft better learned on the job, never really filled the void. Those schools often tended to hire former journalists lacking both the intellectual capability and the inclination to undertake serious analysis of the institutions whence they came. Critical scholarship by those outside the guild tended to be summarily dismissed, and the field was always thin on professional journals examining its practices and guiding ideas. Most of those that were tried—for example, I edited *Forbes Media Critic* from 1993 through 1996—found no footing. Media criticism, such as it was, leaned mostly to polemics and insider chatter (news people are happy to talk endlessly about themselves, evidently on the assumption that others are eager to listen).

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Of course, the media did have critics who didn't publish articles—ordinary Americans. Too often they'd turn on the evening news and hear about conflict and controversy. It was as though news, if it were to be real, had to be boiled down to some negative essence, some clod of dirt that the subjects of a story flung at each other. Or they'd see an interview in which a correspondent would ask a non-question question designed to put the hapless interviewee in his or her place. Thus in 1995 did a *CBS Good Morning* host “ask” then-senator Phil Gramm of Texas, “If you really want to reduce the deficit, are you going to have to cut entitlements? But I'm sure you don't want to talk about that.” Or the public would read news stories in which the writers took gratuitous shots at their subjects. Thus did Maureen Dowd, before her elevation from reporter to columnist at *The New York Times*, lead her front-page story on President Bill Clinton's 1994 visit to Oxford with a sentence stating that he was making “a sentimental journey to the university where he didn't inhale, didn't get drafted, and didn't get a degree.”

The negativity in the news may have resulted from the more personalized or interpretative journalism that began appearing in the 1960s. It represented a break from the old norm of objectivity by which reporters were obliged to keep their own views out of articles, and it was thought to help in uncovering the “real story” beyond any official statements and scheduled events. Perhaps the urgent need to compete for smaller pools of viewers and readers also played a role in the rise of negative news. But to judge by opinion polls, the public wasn't impressed. The negativity, not to mention the arrogance with which it was often served up, caused many to tune out.

The public had another problem with media figures: their political and social views. Surveys taken over several decades demonstrated that most national journalists voted Democratic and were politically and socially liberal. In 1962, *The Columbia Journalism Review* published a survey of 273 Washington journalists in which 57 percent called themselves liberal and 28 percent conservative, with the rest choosing “middle of the road” or declining any label. The conservative contingent was down to 17 percent when sociologist S. Robert Lichter and Smith College political scientist Stanley Rothman conducted another survey in 1980. Most respondents said they were “lifestyle liberals,” meaning that

they favored abortion rights and affirmative action and rejected the notion that homosexuality was wrong. Eighty-six percent said they seldom or never attended religious services. Eighty-one percent had voted for George McGovern in 1972. In 1992, another survey of 139 Washington-based bureau chiefs and congressional correspondents found that 89 percent planned to vote for the Democrat, Bill Clinton, in the approaching presidential election.

The surveys certainly said something about the media. But they did not say that the news the media provided was biased; that required its own demonstration. Members of the elite media often asserted that the public could count on their professionalism to ensure against bias. Yet they seldom admitted bias, even in stories in which it was all too obvious.

Nor would they concede that they might be missing news because they were disposed to look for it only in the kinds of places people of their mindset and values thought potentially newsworthy. The news they found in those

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places might indeed be legitimate news. But other sorts of news, to be found in places people of a different mindset and other values might think to explore, were often neglected. A case in point was the media's failure, in the run-up to the historic 1994 congressional elections, to examine seriously the substance

of the GOP's campaign manifesto, the "Contract with America." Only after the elections did the media take a much-belated look.

Whatever bias the media did not concede, and whatever places they skipped past where news might have been sought, there remained this essential fact: Most journalists were liberal in their political views and voting preferences. Today, no one really disputes that fact, nor have mainstream journalists changed much in this regard, for every new survey only confirms what all the previous ones reported. But when the mainstream media began their decline in the 1980s, they were reluctant to concede the point. In so many words, they often seemed to say, "If our liberalism is a fact—and we don't really know that it is—it's irrelevant."

The media bravely (perilously?) held that position even as the country continued a rightward movement that has now culminated, for the first time in a half century, in Republican control of both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. An increasingly conservative public was being asked to continue getting its news from people who, by and large, held liberal views. That was a tough sell, and it got even tougher because the new media made possible by emerging technologies offered alternatives.

The Cable News Network, founded in 1980, was arguably the first new media entity, its distinguishing characteristic that it offered news 24/7. Other round-the-clock cable news providers followed, including, in 1996, the Fox News Channel. Meanwhile, national talk radio captured large audiences, with none

The Shrinking News Audience

Daily U.S. newspaper circulation

1990:	62,327,962
2003:	55,185,351

Number of daily U.S. newspapers

1990:	1,611
2003:	1,456

By age group, percentage of American adults who read a newspaper “yesterday”

18–29:	23
30–49:	39
50–64:	52
60+:	60

Circulation of *The New York Times*

1990:	1,108,447
2004:	1,121,057

Circulation of *The Washington Post*

1990:	780,582
2004:	746,724

Circulation of *The Wall Street Journal*

1990:	1,857,131
2004:	2,106,774

Circulation of *The Los Angeles Times*

1990:	1,196,323
2004:	902,164

Time spent per day by 8-to-18-year-olds with all media: 6 hrs. 21 mins.

Time spent per day with print media: 43 mins.

Combined viewership of network evening news

1980:	52 million
2004:	28.8 million

Viewership of network evening news, by program

<i>NBC Nightly News</i>	11.2 million
<i>ABC World News Tonight</i>	9.9 million
<i>CBS Nightly News</i>	7.7 million
<i>PBS NewsHour</i>	2.7 million

Median age of network evening news viewers: 60

Percentage of people who believe “all or most” of what’s on

Network news	24
CNN	32
Fox News	25
C-Span	27
<i>PBS NewsHour</i>	23

Percentage of radio audience listening to news/talk: 16

Percentage of news/talk listeners ages 12–34: 15

Percentage of news/talk listeners age 50 or older: 65

Number of active blogs (updated in last two months): 6.8 million

Number of abandoned blogs: 13.1 million

Percentage of bloggers under age 30: 48

Percentage of Internet users who have read a blog: 27

Percentage of Internet users who don’t know what a blog is: 62

Sources: Newspaper Association of America, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, World Almanac and Book of Facts 1992, Audit Bureau of Circulation, Project for Excellence in Journalism, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Perseus Development Corporation, Pew Internet and American Life Project.

Big Media

bigger than that for Rush Limbaugh, who debuted in 1988. In 1999, the first weblog appeared on the Internet. Today the number of blogs—they make up the “blogosphere”—is growing every day.

The new media tended to be more hospitable to conservative views. And it was through the new media that a public growing more conservative in its politics began to find satisfaction. Which is not to say that the new media produced better news stories. They didn't, and still don't, because, cable news networks excepted, they don't do much in the way of original reporting. They analyze and opine on the basis of news reported not only by cable television but by the traditional media, which they daily criticize.

Yet the new media also do something else. To the traditional media, the new media have always looked awfully incomplete, as being more about politics and ideology than about news. Still, from their inception the new media have been landing blows on the old media precisely where it matters most. Remember that news is a thing made, a product, and that media with certain beliefs and values once made the news and then presented it in authoritative terms, as though beyond criticism. Thus did Walter Cronkite famously end his newscasts, “And that's the way it is.” That way, period.

But the question the new media have asked is precisely, “Which way was it?” And, in answering it, they have allowed people with beliefs and values different from those dominating the old media to have their say. Though cable and radio talk shows have been derided as shoutfests, they've enabled people to think differently about the news. Historian Christopher Lasch once observed that only in the course of argument do “we come to understand what we know and what we still need to learn.” The new media's chief accomplishment may well turn out to be that they opened for argument questions to which the old media alone used to provide answers.

A notable characteristic of the new media is speed (some would say haste). Their speed is another reason for the old media's travail. Consider what happened when Dan Rather reported that infamous story on CBS News's *60 Minutes Wednesday* suggesting that George W. Bush had shirked his duties while serving as a pilot in the Texas Air National Guard. The story was broadcast on September 8, 2004, and by the following morning bloggers were tearing apart documents essential to the story, revealing them to be painfully obvious fakes. Traditional media soon began picking at the CBS story, but it's not evident that, absent the blogosphere, the piece would have been deconstructed. Nor that a formal investigation by CBS itself would have ensued, which resulted in scathing criticism of the broadcast, the firing of the story's producer, the resignation of three other executives, and the earlier-than-anticipated retirement of Rather himself as anchor of the evening news.

The deeper point about the quick breakdown of the Bush National Guard story was that it revealed a media establishment without its old power and influence. CBS News and other establishment outlets wanted to determine what the news should be in the obviously important context of a presidential campaign. They had grown anxious about campaign coverage that seemed to them too influenced by “outsiders” and the new media. In early August, a group of Vietnam veterans opposed to John Kerry began running an ad that challenged his

account of his Vietnam service. The establishment media ignored their claims, but the blogosphere didn't. Nor did cable and radio talk shows, on which the Swift Boat Veterans, as they were called, made frequent appearances. Once Kerry formally responded to the Swifties, the big networks and newspapers had little choice but to cover the story, despite their dislike for it.

Some establishment journalists argued that the media now had an obligation to turn the spotlight on Bush. Syndicated columnist E. J. Dionne, Jr., a former reporter for both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, wrote, "Now that John Kerry's life during his twenties has been put at the heart of this campaign just over two months from Election Day, the media owe the country a comparable review of what Bush was doing at the same time and the same age. If all the stories about what Kerry did in Vietnam are not balanced by serious scrutiny of Bush in the Vietnam years, the media will be capitulating to a right-wing smear campaign. Surely our nation's editors and producers don't want to send a signal that all you have to do to set the media's agenda is to spend a half-million bucks on television ads."

Not just CBS News but several other establishment outlets were trying to reset that agenda by pursuing the National Guard story, a quest that would carry them to the door of the same man who passed the bogus documents to CBS and was described by the panel that investigated the fiasco as a "partisan with an anti-Bush agenda." CBS acted first, with fateful results, but none of the other media ever produced any authentic documents either. The story simply wasn't there.

In 1995, Jonathan Alter wrote a *Newsweek* column recognizing that the "old media order" was "in decline." The decline has only continued. Even so, it's hard to imagine an America without the news organizations that make up the old media, if only because they're still the main sources of independent reporting, and such reporting is essential in a country whose self-governing people need information to make all kinds of decisions. Yet for the old media to become newly credible, to regain respect and audience, in a country more populous and less enamored of elites than it once was, and more red than blue, they're going to have to dial down their imperial arrogance. They're going to have to learn from the best of what the new media offer, and perhaps even recruit bloggers to help with news judgment and fact-checking. And they're definitely going to have to look for news in places they formerly did not.

Occasionally you see evidence that an old media outlet is beginning to get it. Beginning, I say. Consider *The New York Times*, like CBS News a charter member of the establishment media, and, like CBS News, an institution burdened by a recent scandal (Jayson Blair's plagiarism and fabrications) which eventually cost top journalists their jobs. In January 2004 the *Times* effectively conceded the need to enlarge the field in which it looks for news when it deployed a reporter to cover, as the *Times*' press release put it, "conservative forces in religion, politics, law, business, and the media." It was as if the *Times* had decided that it should now cover some far-off, exotic country that had suddenly become a world power — and yet it was dispatching only a single correspondent to do the job! But at least that was a start. Finally, there was change. So the *Times* was right to put out a press release: This really was news. □