IN TWITTER AND WIKIPEDIA WE TRUST?:

ONLINE INFORMATION AND THE CRISIS OF CREDIBILITY

by

KRISTEN M. HEFLIN

(Under the Direction of James F. Hamilton)

ABSTRACT

Journalism is currently experiencing a severe crisis of credibility, and the Internet is often celebrated as a response to this crisis. Drawing from a historical-cultural analysis, this dissertation begins by historicizing the crisis of credibility in journalism and the development of the Internet as a decentralized network to provide the context necessary to better understand the expectations, practices and issues related to online information and the crisis of credibility. It then discusses the Internet's inability to serve as the solution to this crisis as being rooted in the contradiction between deliberation and verification, two values at the heart of journalistic practice, liberal democratic media theory and ultimately Western epistemology. Through analyses of popular and trade press evaluations of Wikipedia and Twitter this dissertation discusses the irreconcilable nature of these values and the ways journalists try, unsuccessfully, to reconcile these two values. Despite its promise, the Internet is not the solution to this crisis of credibility because online sources (such as Wikipedia) and non-professional contributions (such as those on Twitter) have been largely accommodated within traditional journalistic routines, professional norms and reigning conceptions of producing authoritative knowledge. Thus, journalists' use of Wikipedia and Twitter perpetuate the contradictions at the heart of journalism practice and traditional Western epistemology, which are the same instabilities that produce the present crisis in credibility. As such, this dissertation reveals that the crisis of credibility is not a technological one, but a cultural one about the inadequacy of liberal democratic media theory. The study concludes with a discussion of the inadequacies of liberal democratic media theory and an argument for the utility of a cultural historical approach.

INDEX WORDS: journalism, Twitter, Wikipedia, crisis of credibility, Internet, ARPANET, liberal democratic media theory

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KRISTEN M. HEFLIN

B.A., University of North Carolina, 2003

M.A., University of Georgia, 2005

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KRISTEN M. HEFLIN

Major Professor: James F. Hamilton

Committee: Horace Newcomb
Carolina Acosta-Alzuru
Janice Hume
Patricia Richards

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2010

## DEDICATION

For my mother who made everything possible through her hard work and unwavering expectations of greatness. For my father who was always in awe of technology and me. For Barry, who deserves countless medals for his boundless support.

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## PREFACE

As someone born in 1981, I am considered a digital native. I'm told we natives possess a unique relationship with the Internet, that we don't really know life without it. Well, I do . . . and I don't. I prefer instead to consider myself part of Generation Prodigy, because I remember when our family first subscribed to the online service provider Prodigy. As part of this generation, I can distinctly remember not having the Internet, but I've never conducted any serious intellectual or professional work without it. In a sense, I was born at the right time to be completely molded by the revolutionary nature of the Internet, while remembering that the "revolution" did not just happen overnight.

I was twelve when my father, the eternal early-adopter, first signed on to the Internet. I remember him grumbling with frustration when I picked up the phone and ruined his connection to the network. An avid amateur radio operator since he was a young boy, my father was no stranger to connecting with people on the other side of the globe. Yet, while chatting with someone across the world was not new, the Internet somehow made it different. At first, I didn't understand why it was such a "big deal;" why he would wake up at 5 a.m. to log on and stare obsessively at the screen all day. I figured it was something weird that every adult did.

But, one day in 1994, when he was running errands I finally got my chance to log on. After a couple of failed attempts I was connected to the world. For the life of me I can't remember what I looked at. All I remember was the glowing screen and my confusion about what to do next.

Today I have no such problem. The Internet is deeply ingrained in my everyday life. I log on multiple times each day through my laptop, desktop and phone. I use it to check the weather, catch up on gossip, read the headlines, conduct research and connect with friends. I search for information using search engines, distribute my own thoughts on my blog and comment on the thoughts of others via Facebook and Twitter. I live in a complex world where my interactions and relationships take place both on and off line.

But, as a member of Generation Prodigy I straddle a strange line. While I feel perfectly comfortable using the Internet and all of the communications platforms it enables, I feel distinctly isolated from it. I feel like an ethnographer, a participant observer. I actively participate in the online community throughout the day, but given the chance, I happily turn off the computer to escape the tyranny of the incessant demands and distractions of the online world. I would rather call a friend than poke them on Facebook. I would rather watch the news on TV than surf the thousands of multi-media headlines. But, despite my neo-luddite inclinations, my everyday life is increasingly spent online.

I am a digital native who has not yet gone completely native – I'm stuck in a strange limbo and I'm thankful for it. My complicated status provides useful perspective. I am at once part of and apart from the online world.

As a participant observer I recognize that none of these relations, forms or technologies are natural or inevitable. I see the Internet not just as a thing with a prescribed set of uses, but as a fluid, ever-changing platform simultaneously creating and created by social relations. I recognize this because I was raised *with* the Internet. The Internet was there for my formative years, changing alongside me. It was never a stable thing with stable uses. Its future, in terms of form and use, never seemed inevitable. Instead, the Internet was always surprising and still is today.

My experience and perspective also helps me recognize that online functionalities are not without precedent. My father's ham radio and our home telephone enabled us to "reach out and touch someone" across the world. Social networking happened everyday in the hallways and lunchroom of my school. News junkies like me could call in to shows like CNN's *Talk Back Live* and participate in the discussion of news.

Still, while these functionalities are rooted in practices each with their own long history, they are remarkably different online. As someone who researched her twelfth grade term paper solely in a physical library and then typed it on a typewriter, I am keenly aware of this difference. It is these differences and their implications that inspired this dissertation.

Perhaps I am on a quest to better understand how I can be so much a part of something and still feel so detached. Perhaps I am still that confused little girl staring blankly at the computer screen wondering what to do next. Or, perhaps, I am still trying to figure out what made my dad wake up so early to log on. Either way, I have not yet found the answer and so I will continue to look.

# CHAPTER 1

## BIT BY BIT, BYTE BY BYTE: APPROACHING THE CRISIS OF CREDIBILITY IN THE INTERNET AGE

Journalism is currently experiencing a severe crisis in credibility. As only one indication of its depth, a 2009 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that public confidence in press accuracy has hit a two-decade low. According to the study, 63 percent of respondents think news stories are often inaccurate, 70 percent believe news organizations “try to cover up their mistakes,” and 60 percent feel the press is biased.[1] Similarly, an August 2010 Gallup Poll found that confidence in newspapers and television news continues to hit a “near-record-low” with only 25 percent of Americans reporting that they have a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in either news source. [2] According to Gallup, such low confidence in the credibility of newspapers and television news places these organizations on par with banks and big business, a revealing finding considering both industries are often blamed for the recent economic meltdown.[3]

This situation is characterized by McChesney and Scott as “a full-blown crisis,” a crisis of credibility.[4] The symptoms and institutional fall-out of the present crisis are ubiquitous and intimately entwined. One symptom is a decline in readership and viewership of professionally-produced news. According to the Newspaper Association of America, newspapers lost 25.6 percent of their readership since 2000.[5] Viewership of local and network news also dropped across all four major broadcast networks in 2008 and 2009.[6] This drop in demand contributes to another prominent symptom of the current crisis, falling advertising revenue. Since 2007, the newspaper industry’s advertising revenue dropped more than 41 percent.[7] Local television news, network news, radio and magazines also saw their advertising revenues fall over the past few years.[8] This plummeting revenue contributed to the bankruptcy of several media outlets in 2009, including, most notably, the Tribune Company, which owned the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. Media organizations that do not face bankruptcy often face staff cuts. Newspapers in particular lost close to $1.6 billion of their annual reporting budget and reduced their newsrooms by 25 percent over the past three years. [9] Even *USA Today,* the second largest newspaper in the U.S., reported in August 2010 that the paper will cut 9 percent of its staff to offset its declining advertising income.[10] Still, newspapers are not the only news organizations to experience such reductions in revenue and staff. In 2009, declining revenue caused NBC News to enact double digit staff cuts and in 2010 ABC News cut nearly 400 employees.[11]

In addition to the financial pressures and reduced newsgathering resources that are symptomatic of this crisis, the industry has also faced since the mid-1980s growing criticism of the quality of news. According to the Pew Research Center, public assessments of press accuracy and fairness dropped continually since 1985, while the number of respondents who say news organizations are politically biased rose.[12] Established in 1986, the progressive media activist group FAIR also contributed to the rising tide of criticism by providing scathing accounts of media bias and sensationalism in its monthly publication *Extra!*[13] While FAIR has a clear agenda, the non-partisan Pew Center also found a shift in media coverage away from government and foreign affairs toward lifestyle, celebrity and entertainment media.[14] In fact, a 2008 Pew Study found that as newsrooms make cuts, the topics most likely to lose space and reporting resources are foreign and national news.[15]

In addition to the public and watchdog groups, journalists working for news organizations also lament the prevalence of heightened sensationalism, bias-driven news and infotainment. For example, Jack Shafer, media critic for *Slate,* frequently condemns reporting on “bogus trends” like Christian fight clubs, choking games, DIY burials and “Robo Tripping,” that stem from faulty research and a desire to “stir up moral panic” through sensationalism. He calls such reporting, “the journalism of grunts and moans, of unchecked stupidity and laziness, and wherever it appears it shrinks the collective IQ.”[16] Similarly, media columnist for *The New*

*York Times*, David Carr, is critical of what he sees as increasingly partisan journalism practices, saying:

> Where once there was a pretty bright line between journalist and political operative, there is now a kind of a continuum, with politicians becoming media providers in their own right, and pundits, entertainers and journalists often driving political discussions.[17]

According to Anderson, the downturn in news quality stems from the fact that "two-thirds of journalists nationwide believe that their news organizations have been pushed toward infotainment in an attempt to attract more viewers or readers."[18]

As audiences lose confidence in traditional news outlets, many see great promise in the Internet as a response to this crisis in journalism. For example, Leonard Downie Jr., the former executive editor of the *Washington Post*, contends that the internet has the power to significantly improve journalism saying:

> Journalists can gather news and information much more widely and deeply on the internet. They can update and supplement their reporting continuously on blogs and social media – and they can have their reporting enriched and fact-checked by their audiences.[19]

Due to the Internet's decentralized nature, many more people outside of professional news organizations can contribute to, distribute and access a large, ever-expanding body of information. As the thinking goes, by enabling people to find and distribute their own information, and to draw and advocate their own conclusions based on their own research and rationale, the Internet is touted as a means of fulfilling the intentions of the First Amendment. Given increased access to government documents, scholarly research, and expert opinions online, celebratory arguments about the benefits of finding information on the Internet can be compelling. Such arguments have been translated into practice. For example, 42 percent of respondents in the Pew Center study noted above (the bulk of whom are dissatisfied with the quality of traditional news media) are now turning to the Internet for most of their news. [20] While such statistics point to the Internet as an increasingly popular delivery platform, another 2010 Pew Center study found that in addition to users accessing the websites of legacy journalism organizations, participation from non-professional journalists is “clearly part of the news process” as online news consumption is increasingly becoming a “socially-engaging and socially-driven activity.” For example, 37 percent of Internet users have “contributed to the creation of news, commentary about it, or dissemination of news via social media.”[21] Among these users, 25 percent have commented on a news story, 17 percent have posted a link on a social networking site and 9 percent have created original news material or an opinion piece.[22] Similarly, among these “news participators” 21 percent visit blogging sites not affiliated with traditional journalism organizations for news and 12 percent visit news ranking sites like Digg. [23]

However, despite the persuasiveness of such arguments, seeing the Internet as an antidote to journalism’s crisis of credibility downplays problems in doing so. While a liberal-democratic theory of the media places great emphasis on verifiable information and deliberative decision-making as the foundations upon which the democratic process is built (as will be discussed), this study argues that the ways in which the Internet has been designed and is currently used impairs its ability to deliver on this normative vision. Two issues in particular will be explored in this dissertation, which are directly related to the design, operation, and use of the Internet. The first issue addresses the contradiction between verification and deliberation. These procedures lay at the heart of journalism practice, but are in many ways contradictory methods of validating information. The second issue addresses how journalists manage the exacerbation of the contradiction between verification and deliberation brought on by use of the Internet and the subsequent extension of participation in the journalistic process. This dissertation argues that journalists accommodate greater participation by using non-professional contributions as individual, isolated pieces of data for professionals to later weave into traditionally vetted stories.

**Liberal-Democratic Media Theory and News Organizations**

Many people have argued for the crucial role that communication plays in a democratic society. While these arguments are well-known, they need to be recalled here briefly in order to clarify the basis of this dissertation.

The necessity of communication for a healthy democracy is a central tenet of American political philosophy, as indicted by its protected status codified in the First Amendment. Inspired by a liberal philosophy articulated by John Milton and others, the rationale for elevating the press to such a protected position is based on ideas originated by Milton, which later became more commonly known as "the marketplace of ideas" and "the self-righting principle," though Milton himself never coined the terms.[24] For Milton, truth always emerged victorious in a vibrant marketplace of ideas, saying famously "Let her and Falsehood grapple; whoever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?"[25]

In the late 19th century, John Stuart Mill elaborated and refined liberal democratic expectations for communication. In *On Liberty,* Mill argues for the need to recognize more than one sound opinion. According to Mill, acknowledging this will bring one closer to the truth because one can see the "oscillation between the extremes" and thus arrive at the moderate center.[26] In keeping with his interest in insuring the periodic deliberation over the truth, Mill also famously argued against the tyranny of the majority.

> If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.[27]

This quote speaks to Mill's concern that democratic culture and public opinion could create a society of conformists, which would limit the introduction of fresh ideas and stifle the discovery of truth.[28]

In arguments such as these, the reliance on free and open public debate gives the public (as the seat of power) a central role. In such a conception, the role of the press is to inform the public of as broad a range of ideas and positions as possible so that it can come to its own decisions. As a result, liberal-democratic expectations for the media have now become the criteria by which many professional journalism organizations are judged. For example, the Statement of Ethical Principles for the Associated Press Managing Editors emphasizes the public's right to know, calls truth the "guiding principle," and states that newspapers should "provide a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism."[29] Similarly, the Code of Ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists maintains that "public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy."[30]

## The Crisis of Credibility

However, the degree to which these normative expectations fit lived reality has been questioned for some time, perhaps most forcefully and earliest by John Dewey and Walter Lippmann who, in their early-20th-century debate about the role of the press in a democracy, emphasized how American society had reached an entirely new level of complexity, which required wholly new conceptions of what a public is, how it might form in such conditions, and of the importance of communication in this formation.[31] On one hand, Lippmann insisted that it was impossible for the average citizen to process the vast amounts of information necessary to participate in direct democracy.[32] For Lippmann, deliberative, participatory democracy was unworkable because government propaganda and mass communications manipulated public consciousness to the point where citizens had no grasp on objective reality. Lippmann's view of the public as a static mass of irrational if not willfully ignorant people was the driving force behind his arguments for conferring the responsibility of evaluating and explaining complex decisions to bureaus of experts.

While Lippmann saw open, public deliberation of issues of the day as unfeasible, Dewey maintained faith in the possibility of deliberative democracy, arguing that communication could open the door to a "Great Community" where publics were brought into being through active and informed deliberation. In contrast to Lippmann, Dewey conceived of publics as active social formations oriented around a common concern. This conception of publics enabled Dewey to argue that it was the responsibility of the government and the press to provide all relevant information because such effective communication is necessary for these publics to understand themselves as a cohesive group and to deliberate their common good.[33]

While one might locate the beginnings of a crisis in the credibility of news in the work of Dewey, Lippmann, and other critics of the era, the crisis has its deeper roots in larger trends and institutions of the day, primarily early-twentieth-century fears of wartime propaganda, and its institutionalization in market economies in the form of public relations. The short-lived Committee on Public Information, which was established in 1917 to influence public opinion about American intervention in World War I, used mass-communications outlets for its propaganda campaigns. After the war was over, the Committee became the target of widespread criticism for misleading the public, generating hysteria and providing the drumbeat to war.[34] Despite the existence of pacifist and labor resistance to the war throughout its duration, the acceptance of this propaganda by many American citizens heavily influenced Lippmann's views about publics being susceptible to manipulation. [35]

The crisis of credibility accelerated in the late 1940s when the Commission on Freedom of the Press argued that the professional ethic of objectivity, when defined simply as accuracy, did not provide the substantive context to help citizens deliberate and participate in public affairs. Instead, the Commission suggested that the press operate with "social responsibility" in mind by providing information about public affairs, enlightening the public, and safeguarding individual liberties.[36]

Such recommendations became even more relevant in the 1950s, when many press outlets uncritically reported the McCarthy hearings, televising the communist witch hunt word-for-word, thus practicing objectivity as accuracy and journalism as transcription. In 1960, the aftermath of the televised Kennedy-Nixon debate spurred questions about audiences valuing superficial characteristics over substance and the role of the media in supporting such views.[37] In fact, the press was implicated in supporting, encouraging and misrepresenting a range of views throughout the explosion of social change that occurred in 1960s, including the 1967 race riots that inspired the Kerner Commission and the antics of the Yippies at the 1968 Democratic National Convention and elsewhere.[38]

Fueled by a loss of credibility of government in the wake of Watergate and the loss of referentiality of the visual (what some called the "postmodern condition"), the crisis accelerated. The fragmentation and unrest of the 1960s, coupled with expectations of increased participation by a number of previously marginalized groups, placed added pressure on media outlets to provide substantive and diverse information, which these outlets were ill-suited to provide for several organizational, economic and political reasons. By the 1990s, the crisis had deeply affected the reputation of news organizations. Surveys conducted by the Pew Center (in addition to the one cited earlier) show that respondents' faith in the press' ability to "get the facts straight" steadily declined from 54 percent in 1989 to only 37 percent in 1999.[39] By the early 2000s, faith in the media's ability to provide neutral, dependable information upon which to base collective decisions about society seemed thin indeed.

### Internet Possibilities and Problems

An antidote to the crisis of credibility seemed imminent with the emergence of what became the Internet and the subsequent platforms it provided for the production and distribution of a vast array of information. By putting in public hands the ability to produce, distribute and access a wide range of information, the promise that people outside of news organizations could be watchdogs of the watchdogs, thus able to evaluate the credibility of news organizations themselves, seemed an alluring and viable way to address this crisis. The development of blogs to disseminate news also seemed to fuel an emergence of a type of participatory, citizen journalism, one that shares similarities with the public journalism advocated by Dewey.[40]

Despite such promises and uses, evaluating online capabilities in terms of the normative expectations and importance of communication in liberal-democratic media theory identifies some key issues that deserve greater exploration. The first is seen by comparing liberal-democratic theory's emphasis on the need for credible, verifiable information.

One can see what is revealed by such a comparison in the case of search engines. While search engines seem to provide easy access to the most important and credible information, they actually produce an incomplete listing of relevant sites based on a ranking system that works more like a popularity contest than a reference librarian. The fact that search results do not present all available information on the Web is due to technological limitations that stem from the use of software programs called Web crawlers, or "bots," which search and build the search engine's index. Web crawlers are designed to navigate the vast amount of data on the Web in a way that systematically accounts for as much information as possible. To do so, these bots do not evaluate the credibility of information, but instead archive websites by searching popular and already indexed pages for links.[41]

The second issue that arises when online capabilities are judged in terms of liberal democratic expectations is the perhaps surprising difficulty of deliberative decision-making. While many commentators have noted a steady fragmentation of the polity into interest groups, niche markets, and specialized lifestyles, this phenomenon is also embodied in the online information-seeking process in the ways that public, collective deliberation required for informed, consensual decisions is, in practice, radically individualized. For example, Halavais argues that, when it comes to search-engine results, people often settle on sufficiently good answers instead of exhaustively seeking the best answer.[42] No one else enters the picture when the decision is made to believe information presented on the Web. Another way in which this individualization can be seen is in the use of online message boards, where users leave comments about their views on particular issues or events. These comments often feature individual views or opinions, comprising not a public in the Deweyan sense but a group of people talking *at* each other instead of a group of people deliberating on an issue to determine the best solution.

### Justification for the Study

This dissertation will address this crisis of credibility, the rise in importance of Internet-enabled, nonprofessional information that is posed as its remedy, and the degree to which online practices fulfill liberal-democratic expectations. In addition to addressing a sea-change in journalism currently underway (and thus important to investigate simply because of its currency and scope), the study also seeks to contribute to key literatures of the field.

While many studies of the Internet and democracy exist, they have yet to sufficiently address the issues identified here. Often narrowly technical issues are addressed, with one example being literature that addresses the technical operation of the Internet and the search engines used to navigate its vast archive of information.[43] This scholarship, which appears in computer science and library and information science journals, describes and evaluates the effectiveness of mechanical and mathematical operations of the Internet. However, these studies focus on technical issues, not the social or political implications of these technical operations.

Critical political-economic studies of the Internet do begin to address these implications, but focus narrowly on the ways capitalist interests determine the use of media technologies. The bulk of critical scholars argue that growing consolidation of ownership and weakening competition has created an environment where new technologies serve capitalist imperatives and ultimately overshadow democratic ones due to the consolidation of media companies and the commodification of participation. McChesney makes this point explicitly, saying the media system is a "significantly anti-democratic force" because it limits viewpoints and ensures only the most profitable ideas are heard.[44]

For these critics, consolidation serves the capitalist imperatives of expansion and control, by enabling media corporations to grow larger and dominate the public discourse, reducing the number of views expressed because a growing number of media outlets are owned by a shrinking number of companies.[45] Views that are not in line with the goals of this small number of media companies, not likely to attract a large audience, or views that are difficult to explain or access are not actively sought or are even suppressed because they do not generate revenue. Thus, for these scholars, consolidation strengthens capitalism and leads to a weaker democracy because the capitalist imperatives of media conglomerates override the public interest goals of having a wide variety of views expressed in the marketplace of ideas.

These critics also take issue with the participatory culture enabled by technological expansion, arguing that while new outlets for participation seem to open the door to resistance, diversity and informed debate, they actually strengthen capitalism and constrain democracy. While new media technologies may provide new outlets for participation, they produce participation without agency. For these progressive critics, the commodification of participation strengthens capitalism by creating new revenue streams (such as keyword advertisements based on surfing habits and the digitization of online content for online pay-per-play distribution on sites like iTunes), making advertising and marketing more effective, and requiring users to purchase particular products like Web cameras and broadband Internet access to participate. Since participation requires users to provide personal information or to purchase particular tools, those who do not do so are effectively left out, perpetuating the “digital divide.”[46] The commodification of participation also privileges some voices over others as corporations focus on producing content for and giving outlets to the groups considered the most important consumers. As a result, audiences are targeted and treated simply as consumers, creating public service content becomes secondary to increasing revenue and democracy is constrained.[47]

In contrast to this critical view is a group of scholars who discuss the Internet and the new media technologies it enables in more optimistic terms, relying on an uncritical brand of cultural populism and celebrating the democratizing potential of convergence. When the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 enabled the deregulation of communications laws, digitalization of content and the widening reach of the Internet, new outlets for communication emerged that were no longer under the control of the large media corporations.[48] As the growing tide of Web sites, online forums and blogs began to challenge the authority and dominance of corporate-owned media, scholars such as Jenkins, Barlow, Dena, Gordon, and Deuze celebrated what they saw as an increase in unregulated platforms for expression free from corporate control.[49] These scholars argue that the current turn toward the Internet is a positive development that democratizes communication by increasing the potential for audience participation and power, transforming producer and consumer roles, and challenging corporate control of mass media. For these scholars, this participation empowers audiences with an enhanced sense of agency because audiences have the power not only to resist the messages portrayed by the elite owned mass media, but also to participate in the construction of meaning themselves, which in turn transforms producer and consumer roles that consequently challenge the power of large media corporations.[50] Today there is room for bottom-up communication, a more participatory, democratic form of communication that enables users to generate their own content.[51] As a result, the power to set the parameters of public debate is not just in the hands of large media corporations, it is now seen to be in the hands of audiences too.

While both approaches to new media technologies offer useful insights on the democratic potential of new online communications technologies, both share an implicit technological determinism which downplays if not outright ignores political, economic and historical context. Several scholars have critiqued technological determinism for its failure to conceive of media as a contingent practice subject to human intention and agency and for its reliance on a reductionism that sees technology as either a cause or an effect of culture.[52]

More recently, a related body of scholarship leaves behind such polarized positions for more specific questions about the democratic implications of the Internet. In much of this literature, liberal pluralism maintains a privileged position where it is either implicitly assumed to be the only form of democracy or uncritically promoted as the optimal form of democracy. Schudson makes this point explicitly, arguing that the model of the individual informed citizen, or a pluralist conception of democracy, is “the only model that springs readily to mind when people think about the connections between democracy and digital media.”[53] Morrisett’s analysis of whether the Internet is a “technology of freedom,” one that enables citizens to engage in responsible discussion and deliberation, exemplifies this tendency to conceive of democracy as liberal pluralism.[54] Winston, an admitted cyber-utopian, also makes the implicit assumption that liberal pluralism is the penultimate form of democracy, saying “Digital technology gives us a second chance to revive political conversation in this country and bring democracy to the world, to go beyond the information age to a new Age of Reason.”[55] While Barber does not implicitly assume that liberal pluralism is the only form of democracy, his analysis of the Internet is informed by a form of liberal pluralism he calls “strong democracy,” one in which “citizens are engaged a the local and national levels in a variety of political activities and regard discourse, debate, and deliberation as essential …”[56]

Other scholarship troubles this singular vision of democracy and its normative claims by critically addressing multiple theories of democracy. For example, Jenkins and Thorburn argue that “democracy” is a disputed term.[57] Dahlberg and Siapera also present a collection of work that underscores how varied are conceptions of democracy.[58] Schudson is explicitly critical of relying on liberal-democratic notions about the potential of the computer for democracy arguing that “If the new digital media are to be integrated into a new political democracy, they must be linked to a serious understanding of citizenship, and this cannot happen if we simply recycle the old notion of the informed citizenship.”[59] Elaborating further, Schudson says he is fearful that “that our use of digital media may be imprisoned by a concept of democracy that is a century old and, even at its inception, was a narrow and partial understanding.”[60] Thus, by critically examining the relationship between democratic expectations and the Internet, this small area of scholarship is starting to address the kinds of questions addressed by this dissertation.

In addition to work regarding the Internet, convergence, and democracy literatures related to the institutional changes in journalism particularly in the last ten to fifteen years also add important knowledge to which this study seeks to contribute. Civic journalism, also called public journalism, appeared in the late 1980s and spread rapidly through the 1990s.

While scholarship on public journalism dates to the 1990s, such arguments have roots in the Dewey-Lippman debate, the reports of the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press as well as scholarship on deliberative democracy. A group of professional journalists who were dissatisfied with the poor quality of journalism began advocating ways to make journalism audiences participants in public affairs instead of disconnected spectators.[61] Several features characterize public journalism, including making a media outlet the forum for discussion and debate with audiences as participants, addressing the problems of everyday citizens, treating public opinion as emerging though a process of deliberation instead of polls, and using journalism to promote the public good.[62] Rosen, an early and prolific public journalism scholar, characterizes public journalism as simultaneously: "an argument about where the press should be going," "a set of practices that have been tried in real-life settings," and "a movement of people and institutions concerned about the possibilities for reform."[63] Charity identifies "consciousness raising," "helping the public to set an agenda" based on the priorities established by citizens themselves, "reducing issues to choices," appealing to "core values," "spelling out the costs and consequences of each choice," "bridging the expert-public gap," "facilitating deliberation," "promoting civility," and "vigorously" championing the public's choice as some of the key journalistic practices associated with public journalism.[64] While Haas argues that there has been a "general lack of theoretical development and specificity," in the literature on public journalism, its advocates typically operate on the assumption that journalism and democracy are "intrinsically linked, if not mutually dependent."[65] Such advocates also argue that a healthy democracy depends on a brand of journalism that enables active participation by citizens in the democratic process.[66] These advocates further argue that the lack of such citizen participation has led to the crisis of credibility in journalism and declining participation in democratic affairs overall.

In order to remedy these ill effects, Charity and others argue that journalists should re-evaluate the way they conceive of publics, not as spectators or consumers but as active and engaged citizens capable of participating in democratic governance.[67] In addition to rethinking publics, Rosen argues that journalists should reconceive their own role as "objective" or "neutral" observers, favoring instead a view of journalists as "political actors" with an interest in promoting the interests of everyday citizens.[68]

Various public journalism projects were attempted throughout the 1990s, partly due to industry concerns about the crisis of credibility, but largely because of industry worries about the future of journalism in light of technological changes and the growing public detachment from civic life.[69] Rosen elaborates on several of the "alarms" that triggered the move toward civic journalism as do Sirianni and Friedland, who found that by the end of the 1990s close to half of all U.S. newspapers had engaged in some form of civic journalism.[70] Several studies indicate that a majority of journalists approve of the practices associated with public journalism.[71] Still, despite this approval, Voakes found that the majority of journalists favored public journalism practices that were more conventional, less activist and closely associated with traditional journalist roles.[72]

Today new communications technologies pose new questions about the possibilities and potentials of public journalism. These technologies place greater emphasis on the multi-skilling of journalists, who are now expected to possess skills in multi-media production.[73] A number of scholars have addressed the challenges journalists face in a converged newsroom, where new technologies and old expectations produce a variety of issues, from training journalists in multi-media production to promoting interactivity among newsrooms and their audiences.[74]

A related literature that addresses citizen journalism updates these concerns about traditional journalist roles and audiences for the Internet age. Together, these and other findings indicate that mainstream media outlets developed limited opportunities for audience participation, and that professional journalistic norms were a major factor preventing such opportunities.[75] Gillmor argues that citizen journalism is a more discursive and deliberative form of journalism that resembles a conversation more than a lecture.[76] From individually produced political blogs to collaboratively produced sites like the Korean *OhmyNews*, citizen journalism has emerged as a challenge to traditional, professional journalism by employing online technologies that enable audiences to contribute their own reports and commentary.[77] By conducting extended periods of participant observation and interviews at the BBC, Wardle, Williams and Wahl-Jorgensen document how audience generated content is actually a range of different kinds of content.[78] Thurman examines the debates within nine major British news sites regarding changing journalist roles and incorporating user generated content, finding that the incorporation of citizen journalism was driven by local organizational and technical conditions, but that professional editorial concerns also played a significant role in such decisions.[79] Paulussen and his colleagues, in an effort to "look beyond the hype and high expectations about user generated content," explored the ways mainstream media in four European countries use and evaluate citizen journalism. Despite such limited opportunities, Bruns is optimistic about the potential of such "produsage" to revive democratic processes by "turning citizens into active produsers of democracy once again."[80] Bowman and Willis also make similar optimistic claims, celebrating the agency of a new breed of Internet-enabled grassroots journalists who are challenging "Big Media."[81]

Such optimistic claims about the value of citizen journalism and amateur content are not uncommon, but as with Jenkins' optimistic evaluations of convergence, such optimism is often paired with a limited analysis of political, social and economic context. While existing scholarship provides valuable insights, deeper forays have yet to be made into matters of interest in this dissertation. For example, the literature on convergent technologies poses important questions about the democratic implications of digital networks, but ultimately relies on technological determinism. While the literature that critically assesses the liberal pluralist conception of democracy in relation to the Internet comes closest to addressing issues raised by this dissertation, it has not yet addressed the issue of democracy and online information in relation to the crisis of credibility in journalism. Finally, though the literature on public journalism and its Internet-enabled off-shoot, citizen journalism, raise important issues about the role of the press, deliberation and participation in a democracy, few critical evaluations of online citizen journalism exist in terms of its ability to address the crisis of credibility within the context of liberal democratic theory.

## Theoretical Approach

In order to critically address how professional journalism regards and works with (or doesn't work with) increased user participation, this dissertation will use a generally conceived cultural-historical perspective. By rejecting mechanical-determinist logic and emphasizing radical contextuality, a broadly construed cultural-historical perspective is useful for challenging assumptions about the nature of technologies and their uses, and for generating additional ways of understanding their implications.

From this perspective, a technology such as the Internet is neither a symptom nor a cause of social needs. Mechanically determinist logic that posits either conception isolates technology from society, and limits questions about technology and society to ones about cause and effect. By contrast, a cultural-historical perspective of the kind to be used in this dissertation contends that technologies are social, and always already part of culture because they are part of and mutually constitutive of society. Technologies do not simply emerge; they are foreseen before they are built, developing out of several factors and social intentions that precede the invention. At the same time, once fully realized, technologies help reciprocally produce and/or change key social processes in unintended as well as intended ways.

The fluid social and cultural nature of communications technologies is what makes them challenging to study. Technologies are more than a machine; they are also the social intentions that shape the making, knowledge and use of the machine, with these intentions, knowledge, and uses continually made and remade. Further deepening the study of communications technologies is a recognition of their contextual determination. They are not inert, stable objects that can be isolated and studied apart from their context, because they do not exist apart from their social, economic, political, cultural and historical milieu.

The work of a number of scholars puts such a perspective to good use. For example, Williams provides compelling arguments and evidence for studying technologies as cultural and historical projects.[82] As but one instance, he traces to the mid-1800s the complex inventions, cultural developments and social intentions that produced television.[83] Marvin takes a similar approach, arguing that instead of locating the birth of new media technologies in the twentieth century, their roots should be traced back at least to the late nineteenth century. Such an approach, she argues, renders visible the social issues and negotiations surrounding the development of new media "long before their incarnation in institutional form."[84] Gitelman and Pingree also argue for a deeper historical understanding of "new" media, providing analyses of media between 1740 and 1915 because "this period is crucial to understanding how electronic and digital media have come to mean what and how they do."[85] More recent work continues this line of thinking. In *Always Already New,* Gitelman warns of the tendency to essentialize or grant agency to technologies.[86] In a more post-structuralist vein, Slack and Wise argue for historically and contextually specific analyses that use the concept of articulation as both an analytic tool and as a model of practice.[87]

Drawing on the work of scholars such as these, this dissertation contends that technologies are foreseen before their institutionalization, that no technology exists as a fixed form with inevitable uses, and that analyses of technologies must be analyses of context and articulation rooted in the historical record.

## Research Questions

This study begins with a key question, which is addressed throughout its chapters: How does the journalism profession view and use non-professional online contributions and online sources available through the Internet? And what are the implications of these views and uses for addressing the crisis in journalistic credibility?

In addition to considering this overarching question, each chapter focuses on its own particular question.

Chapter Two asks: In what ways has the crisis in journalistic credibility manifested itself in the United States? What was the formative context that generated and guided the development of the Internet and its characteristics? In what ways is the use of the Internet to address the promises of a liberal democratic theory of the press complicated by the Internet's heritage and design?

After considering these issues of historical context, Chapter Three addresses two additional questions: What is the range of industry views about the credibility of online sources? How do "legacy" or "traditional" journalism organizations use material from online sources?

Building on the issues discussed in the previous chapter, Chapter Four asks: What is the range of industry views about the credibility of non-professional online contributions? How do "legacy" or "traditional" journalism organizations use non-professional online contributions?

The final chapter discusses and speculates about the implications of the Internet for the crisis of credibility in journalism.

## Method

Given the questions above and the broadly conceived cultural-historical approach proposed as a perspective from which to work, a useful method should trace generative contexts, emergent ideas, and frameworks of knowledge that enabled the crisis of credibility, online capabilities and online practices to emerge. An interpretive cultural-historical method of the kind to be used in this study recognizes that the nature of history is to offer tentative analyses of relationships and practices as well as of the conditions that enabled these relationships and practices.

Analyzing processes in such a perspective requires the integration of historical, social and analytic methods and the collection of a broad range of material.[88] Thus, this study uses a combination of historical and analytical methods to identify patterns and commonalities in a variety of sources; from news accounts and government documents to trade publications and secondary sources. As Meehan and her colleagues suggest, sources should be evaluated for their authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning.[89] Materials were read with particular attention paid to definitions, rationales, uses, prescriptions about uses, statements of values, and evaluations of technologies, reading not only to understand the range of these statements, but also to understand the commonalities, patterns and predominant themes within these statements. In addition to requiring a wide array of sources, my analysis of these sources was grounded in historical, economic, industrial and social context provided by key primary sources and secondary works.

Examples of such a method in addition to Williams, Marvin, Gitelman and Pingree, and Slack and Wise illustrate its usefulness for addressing the general topic of the social constitution of technologies and the technological constitution of society. Winston draws on key secondary works, trade publications, government reports, popular press accounts and scholarship influential at the time of a technology's emergence and institutionalization to paint a picture of the Internet as not a radical technological change, but rather the product of a slow evolutionary process of development, with roots that date back to the first telecommunications networks in the nineteenth century. Winston also discusses how Information Theory, military needs, computer science research, government funding and geopolitical context also influenced its emergence.[90] In her study of radio and the American imagination, Douglas foregrounds her own relationship with radio, crafting imaginative interpretations based on her own experiences, pulling from documentary evidence when necessary to illuminate her point.[91] Her beautifully written study exemplifies the ways such an approach enables researchers to make insightful and powerful connections by drawing from personal experience and the historical record. Hamilton's recent work on democratic communications also provided methodological guidance, reminding me to question assumptions and to see these assumptions as interpretations, not facts. Through analyses grounded in the historical record, Hamilton foregrounds the mutual constitution of interpretation and history and asks compelling questions about whether previous interpretations continue to hold.[92] Such examples and remarks provide useful guidance for developing and conducting the study this dissertation details in the following chapters.

## Chapter Previews

*Chapter 2: Understanding Origins: The Crisis of Credibility in Journalism and the Rise of ARPANET as a Decentralized Network*

Despite the trend of increasing public mistrust of the news media, the crisis of journalistic credibility is not a new phenomenon. This chapter historicizes the ways the crisis in credibility manifested itself in the United States from the party press era to the present, revealing that the present crisis is rooted in past criticisms of partisanship and commercialization. It further demonstrates that these criticisms are based on the normative ideals of rationalism and empiricism that undergird liberal democratic theory.

After historicizing the present crisis of credibility, this chapter turns to a discussion of the Internet, one of the most compelling proposed solutions to this crisis. It argues that the Internet, developed as a decentralized network to meet the needs of both the academic and military communities, originated within a very different context to serve very different needs than those of journalists. As such, this chapter concludes that the Internet was developed for purposes completely alien to those of traditional journalism, in which originates what is argued in this study to be its at-best uneven adoption by journalism as a form of public deliberation.

*Chapter 3: In Wikipedia We Trust . . . Almost.*

Through a textual analysis of 155 popular press articles and 60 trade press articles written between April 1, 2007 and August 1, 2009, this chapter provides insight into the range of industry views about the credibility of the online source Wikipedia.  The time frame was chosen because it includes major events that both cemented Wikipedia's popularity as an online source and sparked discussions about the site's credibility; events such as, the Virginia Tech shootings (where Wikipedia served as a hub for information), the release of Wikiscanner (a program which revealed the controversial nature of Wikipedia edits by various corporations and political figures), and the incorporation of Wikipedia as a site for information on Google News. Through an analysis of journalists' explanations and justifications related to Wikipedia in these articles, this chapter finds that journalists assess the value of information on Wikipedia in two contradictory ways: either the information is valuable because it enhances deliberation or it is valuable because it has undergone a vigorous verification process. These different bases of evaluation not only demonstrate the complexity of value, but they also underscore an irreconcilable epistemological conflict at the heart of journalism, namely the contradiction between deliberation and verification. Where deliberation requires a public process of opening-up participation to maximize the number of voices within the marketplace of ideas, verification requires limiting participation to only those with the requisite expertise to verify the authenticity and dependability of data. Seen in this way, deliberation and verification are logical opposites.

This chapter then argues that, despite this irreconcilable conflict, both Wikipedia and journalists attempt to reconcile deliberation and verification through Wikipedia's policy of "neutral point of view" and through journalists' use of Wikipedia as a "roadmap" during the initial stages of reporting rather than as a stand-alone source. In characterizing Wikipedia as a roadmap, journalists maintain a procedural distinction between the processes of deliberation and verification, accommodating deliberation to a point, yet safely triaging it within traditional journalism practices.

*Chapter 4: I Tweet, You Tweet: Journalists' Use of Twitter and the Individualization of Participation*

This chapter focuses on journalistic use and evaluation of non-professional online contributions through an analysis of popular and trade press discussions of Twitter during three particular time frames; during the height of the protests surrounding the 2009 election in Iran (June 12 through June 26, 2009), during the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti and its aftermath (January 12 through January 26, 2010), and during a relatively slow news week (February 19 through 26, 2010). The first two time frames (the Iran election and the earthquake in Haiti) were selected because due to the limited availability of traditional sources, journalists relied heavily on Twitter to provide information. As such, these events signaled a period of heightened discussion and debate about Twitter that yielded a good deal of journalist commentary for analysis. In order to avoid an analysis that focused too narrowly on journalists' evaluations of Twitter in terms of breaking news, this chapter also focused on discussions of Twitter during a relatively uneventful news week as well as trade press articles from January 2009 to February 2010 (a more general time frame that did not necessarily focus on a specific breaking news event). More specifically, this chapter builds from an analysis of 39 newspaper articles and 118 broadcast news transcripts about Twitter and the Iranian election, 18 newspaper articles and 64 broadcast news transcripts about Twitter and the earthquake in Haiti, 22 newspaper articles and 55 broadcast news transcripts about Twitter during a slow news week and more than 25 articles about Twitter in the trade press.

What emerges from this examination is Twitter's journalistic role as a conduit instead of a point of origin for information. Journalists use Twitter as a conduit for sources traditionally used in news reports, namely eye-witness accounts and personal opinions. While this use may be technologically novel, journalists' use of Twitter does not confront the practices that drive and perpetuate the present crisis of credibility in journalism. Instead, journalists see Twitter as more of a supplement than a challenge to traditional journalism because it enables a type of individualized and professionalized empiricism, which journalists safely accommodate within established professional practices.

*Conclusion*

This dissertation concludes by asserting that, based on the findings of this study, the Internet is not a solution to the crisis of credibility because its promise has been largely accommodated within traditional journalistic routines, professional norms, and reigning conceptions of producing authoritative knowledge. Instead, as the chapters on Wikipedia and Twitter suggest, the current use of online sources and non-professional contributions perpetuates the epistemological conflicts at the heart of journalism. Building on this contention, this dissertation further argues that there is no simple technological fix to this crisis because it is not one of technology, but is instead a cultural one about the inadequacy of liberal democratic media theory.

## Conclusion

Understanding the ways journalists use and evaluate the information obtained and presented through online information and communication technologies is an important step in understanding the value these technologies have for addressing the crisis of credibility. By analyzing the formations, expectations and evaluations of online information sources, this study contributes to the larger discussion of the role journalism and new media technologies play in providing the diverse, credible information and substantive deliberation necessary for a healthy democracy.

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## CHAPTER 2

## UNDERSTANDING ORGINS: THE CRISIS OF CREDIBILITY IN JOURNALISM AND THE RISE OF ARPANET AS A DECENTRALIZED NETWORK

While scholars have examined both the crisis of credibility in journalism and the decentralized nature of the Internet, few if any have examined in-depth the relationship between the two. For example, McChesney and Scott trace the history of American press criticism and the concomitant crises in credibility experienced by mainstream (or legacy) journalism organizations, but in their discussions of the Internet, they focus on the paradoxical relationship between the expansion of communication channels and the reduction of diverse views, not the relationship between the decentralized structure of the Internet and the present crisis in credibility that plagues legacy journalism organizations.[1] Similarly, Poster argues that "the Internet is above all a decentralized communication system," but his analysis focuses on the ways this decentralized nature of the Internet "resists the basic conditions for asking the question of effects of technology" not the implications of this decentralization for journalism's crisis in credibility. [2] Also, while Singer's work serves as useful background to understanding the implications of "convergence" and increasing online participation for newsroom practices and norms, her research does not discuss these changing norms within the context of the present crisis of credibility in journalism.[3] More generally, when scholars examine the relationship between journalism and the Internet, they tend to focus on either empirical investigations of the credibility of online information or the impact of the Internet on professional news practices, not the implications of the Internet's structure for addressing the present crisis in credibility.[4]

This chapter seeks to begin to bridge this gap between these previously separate branches of scholarship. Exploring the relationship between the crisis of journalism's credibility and the rise of the Internet not only connects the too often disparate fields of journalism studies and cyberculture, it also helps clarify the limitations of the Internet as the solution to the crisis of credibility.

Beginning with a discussion of the present crisis of credibility in journalism, this chapter historicizes the present crisis as rooted in the criticisms of partisanship and commercialization that arose in the United States. It then explores how the Internet, as the most compelling solution to this crisis in credibility, developed to meet very different needs than those of mainstream journalism organizations. Following this Internet analysis and discussion is an investigation of the invasion and gradual acceptance of non-professional online content from the 1990s to today. The chapter concludes by asserting that, while the Internet may seem to be the solution to the present crisis of credibility, its difficulty in solving the crisis is rooted in both its own development and in its attempted adaptation to journalism as a form of public deliberation.

## The Crisis of Credibility in Historical Perspective

While it may seem that the current crisis of credibility in journalism emerged from the heightened press criticism that began in the mid-1980s, the crisis spans the history of the press in the United States. From the political press era to the Progressive Era, through the Great Depression to the Cold War and beyond, press criticism has persisted. Emphasizing its ubiquity, McChesney and Scott argue that "We should ask ourselves at what point in the last century a large chunk of the American people have not felt themselves badly underrepresented by the press."[5]

From its inception, press criticism in the United States has been based on normative ideals of rationalism and empiricism, ideals which also undergird liberal press theory and the oft-noted "marketplace of ideas." Where empiricism places value on gaining access to the broadest possible range of information and views so as to compare them to discern the truth, rationalism places value on the abilities of people to critically deliberate the value of this information to arrive at the truth. Where press criticism in the political press era of the early 1800s focused on distortions due to partisanship, criticism from the Progressive Era onward has also focused on distortions of these processes due to commercialization.

During the political-press era, press criticism focused on the negative implications of partisanship. According to Lee, the partisan press period was the "era of black journalism" where newspapers reached a great "depth of degradation," as sycophants of political parties not servants of the public interest.[6] However, contrasting opinions of the era exist which highlight some of the positive outcomes of partisanship and patronage. For example, Baldasty argues that the patronage system of the era served to "*guarantee"* competition and diversity in the press because all parties had their own publications, whether or not they were in power.[7] He also argues that patronage provided the financial support necessary to nurture and grow the printing and circulation of magazines and newspapers.[8] Hamilton makes a similar argument, noting that the political decisions such as postal subsidies and resulting regulatory structures developed within this partisan climate enabled the development of transportation and postal systems as well as systems of financial patronage. He contends that these developments not only promoted the printing and distribution of newspapers, but also supported the newspaper exchange practice, where editors received newspapers from other towns and passed the information on their readers. Hamilton contends this newspaper exchange practice facilitated by the partisan context of the era enabled "vigorous public debate."[9] Dicken-Garcia makes a similar point, arguing that partisan newspapers nurtured political debates. "Major discussions were continual, with the merits and demerits of causes portrayed, proportions of phenomena ascertained, and absolute principles brought out 'in the course of debate,'" she remarks.[10]

During this period, editors primarily viewed readers as voters who needed to be convinced of party platforms via the press.[11]According to Baldasty, there was "no room" for neutrality in press coverage, objectivity was inappropriate, and editors who did not take a fervent stand often faced ridicule.[12] In contrast, editors who effectively portrayed partisan views received support in the form of government or party patronage.  For example, many partisan papers received free postage through "franking" practices and financial support through contracts as official state or federal printers.[13] From the late 1700s through 1860, the government subsidized the production of particular newspapers by awarding contracts for printing laws, forms, letterhead and various documents ordered by Congress.[14] These government subsidies were often the lifeblood necessary for keeping many publications in operation. Loyal editors and publishers also received political appointments for their work. [15] This mutually beneficial relationship between the press and political parties ensured that the bulk of information available to the public had a partisan slant. In fact, in a content analysis of nine newspapers from 1831 to 1832, Baldasty found that the median percentage of political content in the papers ranged from 51 to 70 percent, far more than any other topic including business news.[16] However, for Baldasty, this partisan slant was not necessarily a negative outcome because, due to the relatively inexpensive cost of starting a newspaper and the widespread availability of financial patronage, virtually every political party and group could publish and distribute their views.[17] Smith also argued that, despite its partisan content, the political press had a value beyond serving party interests. He said, "As a connecting link between citizen and government it helped to attach people to their country and aided unity and nationality."[18]

Still, while partisan content predominated, some at the time criticized partisan practices as paradoxically preventing the number of viewpoints available in the marketplace of ideas. For example, in 1828, the House Committee on Retrenchment issued a report that implicated partisanship in misleading the public by clouding the truth and limiting perspectives. The report condemned executive patronage as the "uncompromising vindication of those in power," and "the unsparing abuse of those who are not," equating patronage to the harsh practices of Britain's infamous Star Chamber and labeling it a "pecuniary censorship of the press."[19]

Critics of such partisanship were often implicit advocates for commercialized journalism, which also enjoyed popularity throughout the mid-1800s. For example, in the 1830s, William Leggett, editor of the *Post*, a Democratic paper at the time, advocated for journalists to separate themselves from their partisan duties. He argued, "To discharge fully, the duties of a public journalist would be to elevate the vocation to the loftiest summit of human dignity and usefulness."[20] In other words, he supported a move away from party patronage and toward a form of journalism that did not rely on public funds. Though he worked for a partisan paper, Leggett criticized the bias that limited the perspectives presented in the partisan newspapers of the day and the "public error" that partisan editors allowed to circulate. An 1842 Senate Committee on Printing report echoed Leggett's call for increased impartiality noting that it was crucial that Congress have access to "intelligent and impartial reporters" who would provide accurate accounts of their views instead of partisan commentary.[21]

As the decade wore on, calls for an ample array of accurate information and access to the truth led to government reform that eliminated the patronage system and provided further support for the commercialized press, the birth of which officially occurred in 1833 in the form of the penny press.[22] In 1846, Representative John Wesley Davis, a democrat from Indiana, argued for eliminating patronage as a way to improve the quality of information and to promote a press that was "pure and incorruptible."[23] He further explained his view of the ideal press saying:

> The public press should be kept pure and uncorrupt: it ought to be devoted to truth, and to truth alone; it should lend its mighty and controlling power to the cause of morality and of high patriotic principle.[24]

While Mindich argues that calls for such an unbiased press and greater "objectivity" surfaced throughout the political press era, as the examples above indicate, during the 1830s "many newspapers formally severed their party ties and an ethic of nonpartisanship emerged, although it was practiced unevenly."[25] Calls for objectivity gained further traction in 1846 when Congress passed a law replacing the elected partisan public printer with a contract system that favored the lowest bidder.[26] While the contract system had its own inadequacies, the reform marked the beginning of the end of patronage and a move toward the further commercialization of the press. In 1860, the vast system of government patronage permanently ended with the establishment of the Government Printing Office.[27]

While partisanship continued to arouse press criticism at the turn of the century, Progressive Era criticism also began to highlight the problems associated with commercialization. With the decline of partisan patronage and a changing social landscape that included urbanization, technological innovation and industrialization, American newspapers underwent a "rapid and extensive" transformation at the end of the 19th century.[28] Though the commercialized penny press existed alongside the political press from the 1830s onward, political-economic and socio-cultural changes at the turn of the century created an environment where commercialization was no longer a choice, but a veritable necessity for the survival of most newspapers. From 1830 through the late 1800s, the fixed costs for newsgathering, labor, paper and printing technology increased so markedly that even if political patronage had continued, it would no longer be enough to sustain newspapers.[29] For example, during the mid-1800s, the operating costs of the *New York Tribune* almost quadrupled, the staff of the New York *Evening Post* and the *Globe* doubled, and the *Chicago Tribune* had to make significant financial investments in new cylinder presses.[30] To address these rising costs and a growing distrust of politicians as "self-centered and corrupt wire pullers out of touch with the people," the some press outlets began to adopt a new vision of news that deemphasized politics and promoted an entrepreneurial form of the newspaper. [31] Though the penny press emerged on the heels of the political press as its commercialized twin, commercialized journalism was more concerned with increasing circulation and profits than promoting political views. In fact, James Gordon Bennett's first edition of *The Herald* contained a stern renouncement of partisan journalism, announcing that the paper sought to "openly disclaim," "all politics" and "commit ourselves and our cause to the public." Instead of serving political interests, many editors and publishers saw newspapers as "*nothing more* than a business."[32] This business-minded view stemmed from the increasingly expensive start-up and operating costs of running a paper.

The increased need for marketing spurred by industrialization also enabled the entrepreneurial mindset, as many mainstream newspapers became a "servant of business" to meet their own financial needs and the needs of their growing constituency of advertisers.[33] As industrialization facilitated mass production and mass distribution, marketing became increasingly essential for manufacturers to remain profitable. While Lee notes that advertising existed in American papers since 1704, it gradually assumed a larger role in newspaper revenues.[34] During the Progressive Era, advertising grew exponentially, from close to $1,354,000 in 1863 to $39,135,306 in 1879 and to $1,120,238,000 in 1929."[35] In fact, by 1929 advertising comprised 74.3 percent of newspaper revenues.[36]

The increasing importance of advertising revenue coupled with rising operating costs created a situation where many mainstream newspaper owners pursued strategies that placed business interests ahead of objective newsgathering. Baldasty argues that such pro-business practices caused newspaper quality to suffer.[37] For example, some publications wrote flattering "news" articles or "reading notices" about advertisers.[38] Others censored unfavorable content at the request of advertisers. Those who did not abide by advertiser demands often lost lucrative advertising contracts, as was the case when E.W. Scripps' Seattle *Star* refused to suppress articles about the Bon Marche department store.[39] According to Scripps, the result of such advertiser influence was a timid and corrupt press incapable of informing the public. "I do not believe that a newspaper publisher can serve honestly both the reading public and the advertising public," Scripps said. [40] Publishers also sought to maintain low operating costs by keeping journalists underpaid and overworked. Many newspapers paid writers by space, a process that led some journalists to exaggerate details or fabricate information to produce more sensational stories that stood a good chance of making the paper.[41] Such destructive compensation policies led one journalist to lament that "Men write 'for space' and with no higher aim it is no wonder that there is little regard for the truth."[42] In addition to these practices, the exodus of experienced reporters from the field due to low pay and the increasing reliance on syndicated content further reduced the quality of newspaper content.[43]

During this time, "muckrakers" like William Irwin and Upton Sinclair wrote scathing analyses highlighting the detrimental results that stemmed from the commercialization of journalism. These "muckrakers" argued that because private ownership enabled many mainstream newspapers to be run as a business, publishers were more interested in improving the bottom line than serving the public interest. They argued that as a result of this commercialization, traditional journalism was failing democracy in two major ways; it did not provide the diverse range of views necessary for rational democratic decision-making and it did not provide the unclouded, empirical truth the public needed for effective self-governance.

In 1911 Irwin, a muckraking journalist advocating for reform, wrote "The American Newspaper," a series of critical analyses of American journalism for *Colliers.* Throughout the series, Irwin argued that the close and corrupt relationships between newspapers, big business and conservative politicians produced a situation where newspapers represented only the narrow interests of the elite. Irwin called mainstream journalism's close relationship to capital, "the disease which the public must help the free journalist to cure." [44] Irwin lamented the inability of newspapers to tell the "necessary truth" due to "corrupt commercialism in newspaper-making," and called for more honest newspapers "which tell the truth in the language of the people."[45]

Upton Sinclair offered a similar critique in *The Brass Check,* his muckraking expose of mainstream American journalism. As a socialist on the verge of an unsuccessful run for Congress, Sinclair was already a household name due to the popularity of his investigative novel about the meat-packing industry, *The Jungle*. In *The Brass Check*, Sinclair defined traditional journalism as "the business and practice of presenting the news of the day in the interest of economic privilege."[46] During the first half of the book, Sinclair discusses the ways he tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to publicize his socialist causes and his investigations of unfair business practices. He then argues that such topics do not receive coverage because they conflict with the capitalist interests of newspaper owners and advertisers, saying:

> A capitalist newspaper may espouse this cause or that, it may make this pretense or that, but sooner or later you realize that a capitalist newspaper lives by the capitalist system, it fights for that system, and in the nature of the case cannot do otherwise.[47]

Sinclair then follows this assessment with his succinct judgment, “I would say that to expect justice and truth-telling of a capitalist newspaper is to expect asceticism a cannibal feast.”[48]

In an effort to bridge the widening credibility gap and address the rising tide of criticism, the Progressive Era also marked the start of a move toward professionalizing journalism. Schudson argues that during the 1880s and 1890s, reporting became “a self-conscious and increasingly esteemed occupation.”[49] During this time, many reporters, drawing from the Progressive “drive to found political reform on ‘facts,’” began to see themselves as “scientists” who systematically uncovered social facts.[50] According to Schudson, accuracy became increasingly central to reporting as several newspapers like the *New York Herald* and the *Baltimore Sun* stressed the importance of separating fact from opinion in their editorial policies.[51] Through this move toward more widely accepted professional practices and expectations, the industry sought to address the corrosive influence of partisanship and commercialization head-on before both damaged the profession and the bottom line.

One of the first steps toward professionalization was the establishment of press associations. Though several press associations already existed to advance financial and social interests, the Missouri Press Association, founded in 1867, was one of the first press associations established to promote professionalization.[52] The founding members of the MPA felt strongly that journalism was a profession, not a trade, and as such should promote “unsullied,” non-partisan accounts for the good of society.[53] In 1876, the MPA established a loose code of ethics that further stressed the importance of serving the public interest above partisan interests. In outlining the code, one member eloquently proclaimed: “Let us illustrate royal virtue by resisting them [bitter words and partisan excesses]. . . While we are sometimes *partisans* we are always *patriots* . . .”[54]

In 1923, the American Society of Newspaper Editors formally acknowledged the democratic obligations of journalists and the need for professional standards of conduct in the first formal code of ethics, The Canons of Journalism. [55] These Canons emphasized journalists’ commitment to the public interest, not commercial interests, and the need for truthfulness, accuracy, impartiality and independence in journalism. For example, the canon on independence clearly condemned partisanship and devotion to commercial interests arguing, "Freedom from all obligations except that of fidelity to the public interest is vital."[56] The Society of Professional Journalists expressed a similar commitment to serving the public interest when it drafted its code of ethics, based on the Canons of Journalism, in 1926. The code begins with the core beliefs of SPJ:

> WE BELIEVE the agencies of mass communication are carriers of public discussion and information, acting on their Constitutional mandate and freedom to learn and report the facts.
>
> WE BELIEVE in public enlightenment as the forerunner of justice and in our Constitutional role to seek the truth as part of the public's right to know the truth.
>
> WE BELIEVE those responsibilities carry obligations that require journalists to perform with intelligence, objectivity, accuracy and fairness. [57]

These proclamations not only portrayed the ideal journalist as "above it all" and a servant of the public interest, but they also emphasized the centrality of truth and rational deliberation in democracy.

In addition to promoting criteria for professional and ethical conduct, these press associations also supported formal journalism education as a way to professionalize the industry. To provide this formal education, Walter Williams, a Missouri press leader and MPA member, oversaw the opening of the first journalism school at the University of Missouri in 1908. [58] In addition to taking courses that focused on practical and historical issues, journalism students at the University of Missouri were also expected to memorize and abide by the *Journalist's Creed,* a moral code developed by Williams in 1914, which argues that journalists are "trustees for the public."[59] The ethical, professional and educational standards set by the University of Missouri influenced other fledgling journalism programs of the day like the one established at the University of Colorado in 1909.[60]

In addition to promoting a brand of journalism free from partisan influence and committed to the public interest, the movement toward professionalization also sought to protect journalism from the pitfalls of commercialization by placing limits on advertisers. During the Progressive Era, many trade associations emerged to reduce the practice of competitive price-cutting for advertising revenue and to limit the ability of advertisers to place demands on newspaper content.[61] For example, in 1909 the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA) created a Free Publicity Department, which "launched into a noisy crusade" against the practice of press agents demanding free publicity or "puff" pieces in newspapers. [62] The ANPA also conducted research on advertising practices and compiled a list of "responsible advertising agents" who did not engage in deception.[63]

While professionalizing journalism attempted to ameliorate the credibility gap, criticisms of partisanship and commercialization continued throughout the twentieth century. For example, during the Great Depression, journalists themselves became critical of the conservative partisan bias that permeated media coverage of FDR and his New Deal policies. While the social welfare programs proposed by FDR were popular among voters, a great majority of publishers criticized Roosevelt and his policies in print.[64] In fact, a study conducted by the Democratic National Committee during the 1936 campaign found that 60 percent of the press opposed FDR.[65]

Many journalists saw this conservative bias as a destructive force that "betrayed the responsibility and public obligation demanded of the press in a democratic society."[66] Instead of serving as a representative voice of the people, the press continued to widen an expanding credibility gap by promoting the conservative, anti-New Deal views of big business. Critics like John Dewey, Leo C. Rosten, and George Seldes argued that the partisan practices of editors and publishers favored commercial interests over the public interest. For example, Dewey argued that newspaper managers were the "henchmen of big business," who abused the freedom of the press and preserved the status-quo by diverting "the public mind into all sorts of irrelevancies."[67] In his 1937 book, *The Washington Correspondents*, Rosten critiqued the "unabashed manipulation of news in the service of policy" and the limited number of political perspectives that subsequently stemmed from newspapers being "Big Businesses."[68] Similarly, Seldes detailed the ways businesses purchased the good will of newspapers, participated in news-making, and even outright owned newspapers.[69] In *Freedom of the Press*, he argued that the press would not truly be free to tell complete and impartial truth until it rid itself of the economic, social and political interests that pervade and corrupt the system. "We have had a very few liberal, fearless newspapers, but we have never had a free press," he declared.[70] The result of the 1936 Presidential election clearly demonstrated just how out of touch the press was with public opinion. Despite vehement attacks printed by conservative newspapers across the country, FDR won by a landslide. [71]

As America entered World War II, the continued prevalence of criticism about commercialization and partisanship sparked a movement for industry self-regulation. Remembering the long battle with the Roosevelt administration over newspaper codes mandated by the defunct National Recovery Act, media mogul Henry Luce decided to preclude additional government intervention by sponsoring a commission to discuss the "proper function of media in modern democracies."[72] In 1947, after four years of interviews and deliberation, the Commission, which became known as the Hutchins Commission, produced a comprehensive report on the failings of the American media and suggested solutions for dealing with these failings. The Commission's report, *A Free and Responsible Press*, argued that freedom of the press was in danger due to commercial and political interests:

> When an instrument of prime importance to all the people is available to a small minority of the people only, and when it is employed by that small minority in such a way as not to supply the people with the service they require, the freedom of the minority in the employment of that instrument is in danger.[73]

To remedy this danger, the Commission outlined the tenets of what many call “social responsibility theory,” which contends that since the press enjoys a privileged place in our democracy, “it is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication in contemporary society.”[74] Such essential functions include; servicing the political system by providing information about public affairs, enlightening the public and safeguarding individual liberties.[75] In other words, social responsibility theory called on the press to forgo partisanship, but also to privilege the public interest over commercial interests. The Commission stressed self-regulation, but argued that if the media was deficient in providing such services, some government agency must step in and see to it that they do.

More than a decade after the Hutchins Commission outlined its recommendations many reporters answered their call by serving as critical government watchdogs during the Vietnam War. Hammonds argues that while the media initially portrayed the government’s vision of the Vietnam War, drafting reports directly from press releases, journalists began to challenge the government’s optimistic vision as the war dragged on. He details the ways journalists, through increasingly critical reports and investigations began to sway public opinion against the war.[76] By 1968, even the “most trusted man in America,” Walter Cronkite, who had recently returned from a trip to Vietnam, spoke out against the war issuing his now famous evaluation that the United States was “mired in stalemate” and should engage in negotiations “not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.”[77] Cronkite’s statement was just one of the more prominent examples that reflected the growing public discontent. This mounting frustration coupled with increasingly critical reports in the press ultimately pushed the United States to withdraw from Vietnam in 1975.

Despite the socially responsible behavior of the press during the Vietnam War, less than a decade later, disillusion with the media coverage of progressive issues coupled with an increasing consolidation of media ownership sparked a new wave of press criticism about commercialization and partisanship that continues today. McChesney and Scott argue that at least three factors contributed to this new wave of criticism. First, defeated New Left activists, who wondered why they could not build traction for their ideas and how so much of the population could be “misinformed and depoliticized,” identified the media system as the problem.[78] In *The Whole World is Watching*, Gitlin provides an in-depth look at the ways the mass media initially ignored and then covered the New Left group, Students for a Democratic Society, using “deprecatory themes” to frame their reports.[79] Second, news coverage of the Vietnam War and Reagan-supported death squads in Central America exposed the flaws of the media in covering military interests. In his analysis of the U.S. Central America peace movement, Smith details the various ways the Reagan administration “successfully worked” the mass media to sell the President’s policies including; “strategic press leaks, not-for-attribution ‘backgrounder interviews,’ ‘strategic polling,’ and well-timed, one-liner photo opportunities.”[80] Finally, media industries underwent a structural transformation that led to ownership concentration and a subsequent convergence of journalism practices.[81] According to McChesney and Scott, this consolidation and convergence produced a situation where, “Fewer companies and fewer journalists are covering fewer stories with fewer resources.”[82]

Critics such as Bagdikian and McChesney highlight the negative implications of this consolidation by arguing that commercial interests became the priority for newspapers while the goal of serving the public interest fell to the wayside. In *The Media Monopoly*, Bagdikian cites mass advertising as the catalyst for consolidation and the turn toward objectivity, a doctrine which he argues makes American news “increasingly conservative, not truly neutral, and too often devoid of meaning.”[83] Similarly, McChesney argues that media consolidation increases the pressure for journalism to be profitable, which leads to “easy-to-cover trivial stories,” and a “reluctance to provide critical investigations of the most important and powerful local commercial interests.”[84] Such criticisms of commercialization and partisanship are reminiscent of those made during the Progressive Era.

The criticisms that emerged in the political press and Progressive eras not only resonate today, but they are also more prevalent. At present, news outlets like Fox News and MSNBC continually face charges of partisanship. In October 2009, the Obama administration vigorously criticized Fox News for its highly partisan content announcing that the President and other senior officials would not appear on its programs. Anita Dunn, White House communications director discussed the move, highlighting her concern about the network's partisan approach saying, "As they are undertaking a war against Barack Obama and the White House, we don't need to pretend that this is the way that legitimate news organizations behave."[85] On the other side of the political spectrum, critics point to MSNBC as a partisan shill for the Democrats. During the 2008 election, Steve Schmidt, a senior strategist for John McCain's campaign, called MSNBC "an organ of the Democratic National Committee," arguing "It's a partisan advocacy organization that exists for the purpose of attacking John McCain."[86]

Data from the Pew Research Center support claims that both Fox News and MSNBC cater to a partisan audience. According to a 2009 report, the Fox News audience is 14 percent more Republican and MSNBC's audience is 9 percent more Democratic than the general public.[87] Still, cable news channels are not the only media outlets criticized for being too partisan. According to a 2009 Pew study, Democrats are considerably more positive than Republicans in their evaluation of *The New York Times*, and Republican assessments of *The Wall Street Journal* are almost as positive as their feelings toward Fox News.[88] In fact, several popular conservative blogs like RedState.com and RightWingNews.com regularly feature posts that highlight the "liberal media bias" of the *Times*. [89] In addition the partisan content on specific networks and newspapers, a 2009 Pew study found that 60 percent of Americans say news organizations in general are politically biased.[90] A 2009 Gallup Poll adds further support to this finding reporting that 60 percent of Americans think the news is either too liberal or too conservative.[91]

Today, media industries in general also encounter criticism due to continued ownership concentration and commercialization. This criticism typically focuses on the ways consolidation and commercial pressures place limits on the diversity of perspectives and citizens' abilities to determine the "truth." One of the most recent examples of such criticism relates to the Comcast/NBC Universal merger, initially proposed in October 2009. Under the terms of the merger, cable provider Comcast would gain control of the NBC television network, NBC's TV stations in cities across the country, and numerous cable channels.[92] As details about the deal emerged, several activist groups, elected representatives, citizens, and even a Commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission voiced concerns about the negative impact of such ownership concentration for the public interest. Activist groups like the Free Press Policy Council, the Media Activist Project, Free Press, and the Consumer Federation of America all issued statements opposing the merger citing its potential to "diminish media diversity."[93] In a July 2010 public hearing to discuss the merger, FCC Commissioner Michael Copps expressed his apprehension by saying that industry consolidation has "not been kind to the public interest," adding, "Shortchanging ownership diversity is shortchanging our civic dialogue."[94] Citizens and activists at the public hearing echoed his concerns with one activist arguing that further ownership concentration would "crucify on the cross of consolidation" local news, true media competition, diverse perspectives, and "possibly even drive a stake into the heart of our beloved democracy."[95] Senator Al Franken also stressed the negative implications of the merger for democracy arguing that the merger could lead to "less independent programming, fewer voices, and a smaller marketplace of ideas."[96]

The recent outcry against the Comcast/NBC Universal merger is just the latest example of criticism triggered by consolidation. In 2003, the FCC faced staunch criticism of its ruling to relax ownership rules. According to a 2002 survey conducted by the Consumer Federation of America, 49 percent of the American public felt that the cross-media mergers enabled by the relaxed laws would create less diversity in editorial points of view and 39 percent felt that diversity in local news would decrease.[97]

Thus, throughout the history of journalism in the United States, not only has criticism of the press persisted, but it has revolved steadily around either fear of or actual failure of the press to meet the normative goals of rationalism and empiricism, largely because the distortions of partisanship and commercialization place structural and intentional limits on the range of empirical information available for rational analysis.

## The Internet as the Solution to the Crisis of Credibility

Paradoxically, the most compelling response today to the crisis of credibility in journalism originated completely outside the journalism industry. During the Cold War, while journalism continued to be mired in a crisis of credibility, scientists within the academic and military communities were actively researching and forming a new, decentralized communication system, ARPANET. This communication system, which would later become the Internet, originated within a very different milieu than that of commercial journalism to meet the distinct communication needs of the military and academic researchers. As such, the Internet originated from assumptions, needs and intentions that were completely alien to those of journalism.

One can see the alien origins of the Internet when one compares the ways traditional journalism organizations and early Internet visionaries conceive of the role of participation. Traditional journalism is a closed system where the credibility and professional integrity of journalists stems from their expertise and the fact that only those with appropriate training and employment by a traditional journalism organization (such as a newspaper or broadcast news outlet) can participate. The move toward professionalization and the subsequent development and adoption of journalism codes also erected limits around who can be deemed a professional, credible journalist.

In addition to the barriers erected to keep the unqualified out, traditional journalism organizations also limit participation within their own ranks. Since journalism functions through a system of hierarchical control, there are limits to the participatory potential of even those considered to be professional journalists. Even though journalists are free to suggest story ideas, editors largely determine reporting assignments and ultimately decide which versions of these stories readers and viewers can see. For example, writers are not free to publish any story they wish, and editors function as gatekeepers who ultimately determine the stories that appear in print, over the air, or on the screen. Similarly, journalists are not typically free to report stories outside their “beat” because business interests require journalists to conserve time and resources by reporting only on areas with which they are most familiar.[98] Journalists are also typically discouraged from working collaboratively with reporters from other papers to cover a particular issue. Instead, journalists are encouraged to find their own "scoops," exclusive stories that have the potential to attract a larger audience and more advertising revenue.

In contrast, the early visionaries of the Internet saw open participation, albeit limited initially to the computer science research community, as central to the development of a fully functioning, decentralized communications network. From its inception in 1958, the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) fostered an open environment that encouraged researcher participation, collaboration and resource sharing. Since ARPA's overriding goal was to support and conduct scientific research for the military community to address Cold War needs, the organization's early work focused heavily on developing a decentralized communications network that could withstand a nuclear attack, a network known as ARPANET. Since the field of computer science was in its infancy, no single researcher had the "overall expertise or authority to direct the others as subordinates."[99] To overcome this limitation, ARPA administrators encouraged participation and collaboration among researchers, deeming it essential to generating solutions and building an effective system.

According to Abbate, "the organizational culture surrounding the ARPANET was notably decentralized, collegial, and informal," from the start.[100] Participation was open to anyone with sufficient interest in and knowledge of computer science. As such, graduate students worked alongside professors, consulting firms, and government administrators to develop suggestions and solutions. For example, in 1968 during the initial development of ARPANET, a group of graduate students, later known as the Network Working Group (NWG), met to discuss ways to facilitate computer-to-computer (or host-to-host) communications on the network. Since no rules had been established, the group agreed to meet regularly to discuss solutions with the guiding principle that cooperation should override ego. Hafner and Lyon contend that the group was a "community of equals" everyone involved could participate in generating ideas for reviewing and adopting new technical standards and code.[101] The group decided on the adoption of new terms and inventions by consensus. Even the way the NWG communicated, through memos titled Request for Comments (RFCs), promoted collaboration by removing barriers to participation. The first RFC set the tone by asking members to participate in any way they could:

> Notes are encouraged to be timely rather than polished. . . the minimum length for a NWG note is one sentence. These standards (or lack of them) are stated explicitly for two reasons. First, there is a tendency to view a written statement as ipso facto authoritative, and we hope to promote the exchange and discussion of considerably less than authoritative ideas. Second, there is a natural hesitancy to publish something unpolished, and we hope to ease this inhibition.[102]

Such loose rules encouraged members to participate and work together to solve pressing technical issues. In reflecting on the open environment established by the NWG, one participant remarked, "I did not feel excluded by a little core of protocol kings. I felt included by a friendly group of people who recognized that the purpose of networking was to bring everybody in."[103]

Other groups in addition to the NWG encouraged user participation and cooperation. When an ARPA program manager decided to sort out the complicated and scattered standards for email messages in 1975, he started the MsgGroup, where anyone with a suggestion could participate. The group became an "open air market" where anyone could voice his opinion about the proposed standards and protocols.[104] In fact, many members considered open participation so important that when some members proposed rules that would restrict the open nature of the discussion, they received responses ranging from chilly to angry. For example, when members of the MsgGroup tried to establish an official standard for the format of ARPANET email messages and thus close down the discussion, network users spoke up in opposition saying, "Who are these officials anyway? Why should this collection of computer research organizations take orders from anybody?" In response to this criticism, members who proposed the standard restated it as more of a "definition," not a requirement as much as a statement of what was "allowed."[105]

Participation was not just limited to discussion groups; it was encouraged throughout the development of ARPANET. From the beginning, there were no formal rules placing restrictions on the use of ARPANET for those who had access.[106] In keeping with the open, participatory structure of the network, the protocols and software that governed the technical operations of ARPANET were transparent and public. Anyone with access could also generate or adjust protocols or code. According to Salus, "each protocol was the result of many good minds at work, in meetings, over the phone, and over the (ever-growing) network."[107] For example, once Larry Roberts created the code for the first email management system, several others came up with adjustments and variations of his code, a move that Roberts and others embraced.[108] Similarly, Naughton notes that the FTP and TELENET protocols were the product of extensive participation collaboration.[109]

Technical difficulties also made participation and collaboration necessary to keep the network running smoothly. For example, when the initial interface message processor (IMP) software did not effectively control the flow of data through the network, users cooperated and agreed to slow down the rate of pushing data through.[110] This solution required a good deal of participation and deliberation among researchers who worked together to identify the problem and draft a solution. Such sustained collaboration and participation led Hafner and Lyon to note that:

> The tendencies of the ARPANET community ran strongly democratic with something of an anarchic streak. The ARPANET's earliest users were constantly generating a steady stream of new ideas, tinkering with old ones, pushing, pulling, or prodding their network to do this or that, spawning an atmosphere of creative chaos.[111]

In a 1970 report to a computing conference, three prominent members of the community explicitly noted the benefits of participation saying:

> The resulting mixture of ideas, discussions, disagreements, and resolutions has been highly refreshing and beneficial to all involved, and we regard the human interaction as a valuable by-product of the main effort.[112]

In contrast to the hierarchical controls that limit participation within traditional journalism organizations, the development of ARPANET as a decentralized communications network without a rigid hierarchical structure also encouraged participation and collaboration. Since the impetus for ARPANET was the military's need for a reliable communications network that could survive a major military attack, its organizational structure was developed to meet very different needs than those of journalism. Based on Baran's research that highlighted the vulnerability of centralized networks, the ARPANET developed as a decentralized network absent hierarchical order.[113] Instead, ARPANET relied on the participation and collaboration of its members (and their computers) to pass along information and maintain an efficient system. For example, the main way information traveled across the network, packet switching, required member computers to work cooperatively to distribute "message blocks" across different paths to their destination.[114] While computers at each node handled the technical aspects of packet switching, the process also required the explicit and continued participation of members who were initially skeptical that the process would slow their systems. Through the process of packet switching, every computer became a hub for information, with none central. This decentralized nature of ARPANET informed the construction of later networks, which today comprise the Internet.

In addition to their contrasting approaches to participation and hierarchical structure, traditional journalism organizations and the visionaries of the early Internet also differ in their regard for commercial interests. Commercial interests were not central to the development of the Internet. Instead, the main concerns of the original architects centered on ways to improve communication for the public good, in the sense that they sought to develop a reliable communications platform that could function during a military crisis. Developers of the Internet saw the free flow of empirical information as crucial for the national security, so much so that many considered their work as an "important responsibility, a way of serving."[115] As such, the initial purpose for ARPANET was to ensure the secure and undisrupted flow of information during a military crisis, a function which developers presumed to be in the public interest.

In this sense, the initial developers considered the Internet a public utility, albeit initially for a very restricted community of users. Conversations about the network centered on ways to make the network more effective and efficient, not how to make it a profitable enterprise. For example, Licklider's proposal for time sharing was concerned with creating an efficient way for researchers to share resources; it was never a proposal for generating revenue by adding access points to the network. Two MIT researchers at the time characterized the idea as paving the way for "an extraordinary[il]y powerful library serving an entire community – in short, an intellectual public utility."[116] In fact, the initial idea for the network was never patented; it was published in the public domain for free.[117] One software designer noted that software and code were "co-operatively written, freely shared and always regarded as being in the public domain."[118] Similarly, Naughton remarks that "not a single line of the computer code which underpins the Net is proprietary; and nobody who contributed to its development has ever made a cent from the intellectual property rights in it."[119] Reid adds further evidence to the case stating that the network was:

> . . . an almost militantly egalitarian and cooperative community. Nobody owned the network. Virtually nobody made money from it directly. Almost every piece of software that governed or accessed it was free (the people who wrote it generally did so from the goodness of their hearts, or to make names for themselves, or as parts of funded projects).[120]

This non-proprietary nature of the network and its code enabled the network to grow rapidly, as developers freely shared and improved programs.[121] Lessig refers to this rapid development as a “barn-raising,” where “anyone was free to participate” and “many people did” due to the public availability of freely shared protocols and software.[122]

As this section details, journalism and ARPANET, which later became the Internet, developed in very different ways, and under very different conditions to meet very different expectations. With journalism, the distortions caused by partisanship and patronage during the political press era led to calls for increased impartiality and the establishment of commercial journalism as a remedy. Thus, journalism developed as a closed, commercial system where participation was limited to professional journalists who were charged with preserving the public interest despite being restricted by the business interests of their employers. By contrast, the Internet developed in some similar ways as initially a closed system accessible to a small group of research scientists, but post-1970s becoming an open, non-hierarchical system where participation was considered central and necessary for the development of an effective network. This difference is at the heart of public debates about the role and place of the Internet and non-professional contributions to journalism.

### Journalists’ Incorporation of Non-professional Content

Nearly thirty years after the initial launch of ARPANET, the decentralized, participatory Internet began to encroach upon the hierarchical and commercially-driven profession and industry of journalism. This encroachment progressed throughout the late 1990s and mid 2000s when the news contributions of non-professional journalists began to receive public attention. Initially, journalists were hesitant to accept these non-professional news contributions, but as they became more prevalent and useful, journalists steadily began to incorporate them in their news routines.

An early example occurred in 1998 when a little-known blogger, Matt Drudge, broke the story about President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky, a story that *Newsweek* was initially hesitant to report.[123] Drudge’s incursion into the news arena drew criticism and reflection from journalists who were uncertain about the implications of these non-professional online contributions for journalism. One journalist noted that Drudge's brand of partisan, sensationalist journalism is not new, but rather reminiscent of the stories told by the penny press papers in the 19th century. He argues that while many professional journalists may "look down their noses" at him, Drudge:

> . . . actually belongs to a venerable tradition. Joseph Pulitzer was a penniless immigrant; Horace Greeley dropped out of school at 15 to work in a print shop. Like Web pages now, newspapers were cheap to set up in the 19th century. And objectivity was almost unheard of.[124]

He further argues that "for better or worse," Drudge's work represents a return to a more sensationalist, partisan brand of journalism where the news "wasn't delivered in a deferential whisper -- it arrived like a rude democratic missile crashing through a windowpane."[125] As this journalist notes, Drudge's work is not without precedent, but he is also cautious not to equate Drudge's work with mainstream news.

Similarly, another journalist is hesitant to include Drudge within the ranks of professional journalism. He argues that "As Drudge has become more prominent, so has the knowledge that one should not regard his scoops as gospel or disregard them totally."[126] This statement further indicates the uncertainty surrounding Drudge and the non-professional "news" content he provides. Echoing this uncertainty, another journalist is hesitant to herald "Web independents" like Drudge as the next generation of journalism, but also acknowledges that the popularity of the Drudge Report influenced traditional journalism organizations to expand their own content on the Web.[127]

As non-professional news content gained increasing attention in the mid 2000s for providing useful empirical information, some journalists began to acknowledge the potential of these online contributions for improving journalism. For example, when Senator Trent Lott made a controversial comment at Strom Thurmond's birthday party in 2002 indicating that he supported Thurmond's anti-Civil Rights Act platform for president, bloggers immediately broke the news while mainstream outlets like *The New York Times* did not report the story until five days later.[128] In *Free Culture*, Lessig argues that while the story of Lott's comments about Thurmond disappeared from the mainstream press within forty-eight hours, the story had a much longer life cycle in the blogosphere. Bloggers continued to research the story and, according to Lessig, "Over time, more and more instances of the same 'misspeaking' emerged," until the story reappeared in the mainstream media and Lott was forced to resign as Senate majority leader.[129] One journalist argued that the case represented "a defining moment for the vibrant online culture of weblogs - nimble, constantly updated, opinion-driven Internet journals, freed from many of the constraints of the established media."[130] In addition to acknowledging some characteristics that enable blogs to break free from the restrictions of traditional media, he also argues that blogs have the potential to improve journalism by keeping a story from prematurely "expiring." [131] Similarly, another journalist notes that while Lott's comments went unnoticed by journalists who were there to "cover a birthday party, not a speech on segregation," bloggers and other "Internet sleuths" "kept the story alive."

While journalists' commentary on the Lott controversy demonstrated a preliminary recognition that non-professional contributions had the potential to improve journalism by providing empirical information, the 2004 "Rathergate" scandal further solidified this opinion. On September 8, 2004, CBS news program *60 Minutes* aired a report from Dan Rather featuring four documents critical of President George W. Bush's service in the Texas Air National Guard. Within hours of the report, bloggers on sites like LittleGreenFootballs.com and Powerlineblog.com began to question the authenticity of the documents arguing that the memos looked like they were written using a modern computer.[132] Power Line posted a long analysis of the documents, identifying signs that they might be forgeries.[133] Little Green Footballs followed suit demonstrating how the same memos could be written using Microsoft Word.[134] The morning after the blogs reported the potential forgery, *The New York Times, The Washington Post,* and *USA Today* each reported on the questionable authenticity of the documents.[135] One journalist notes that these blogs "blew the cyber-whistle" that ultimately led to CBS anchor Dan Rather losing his job.[136]

According to this journalist, the online discussion surrounding "Rathergate" demonstrated a trend that had been brewing for the last two years. "The blogsphere," he wrote, "has been growing in influence, with some one-man operations boasting followings larger than those of small newspapers."[137] Another journalist discusses the rising relevance of blogs, saying, "Before this year, blogs kept a relatively modest profile, and the mainstream media could comfortably treat them like amateur productions that could never compete with real news organizations."[138] However, he contends, because of incidents like the Trent Lott affair and the *60 Minutes* incident, blogs will never look as "low and lowly." He further adds, "It's entirely possible that they [blogs] will ultimately be assimilated into the mainstream media."[139] *Time* magazine expressed a similar view in its article naming Power Line the 2004 blog of the year:

> Before this year, blogs were a curiosity, a cult phenomenon, a faintly embarrassing hobby on the order of ham radio and stamp collecting. But in 2004 blogs unexpectedly vaulted into the pantheon of major media, alongside TV, radio and, yes, magazines, and it was Power Line, more than any other blog, that got them there.[140]

Building on this recognition that non-professional news content can be useful as a source of empirical information, journalists steadily incorporated these contributions into their professional newsgathering routines. Today, news outlets regularly use such contributions. For example, CNN used iReports to supplement traditional reporting in the case of the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007 and the "Miracle on the Hudson" landing of flight 1549 in 2009, among many other examples. In fact, a 2009 George Washington University and Cision survey found that 89 percent of journalists use blogs, 65 percent use social networking sites, 61 percent use Wikipedia and 52 percent use microblogging sites when researching their stories.[141]

Drawing from these recent examples, one could see how the Internet, as a decentralized means of distributing information, would seem to address the criticisms of partisanship and commercialization that plague traditional journalism. The Internet is assumed to open up boundless platforms for empirical information from a wide variety of sources, many of which are outside the centralized control of traditional media companies and their concomitant commercial interests. FCC commissioner Michael Copps reflected this assumption in a 2010 statement regarding proposed legislation on net neutrality saying:

> The Internet was born on openness, flourished on openness and depends on openness for its continued success. We must not ever allow the openness of the Internet to become just another pawn in the hands of powerful corporate interests.[142]

It is this open, dencentralized nature that makes the Internet seem like the solution to the partisanship and commercialism of traditional media because it is thought to provide an open, unlimited forum for rational deliberation and empirical information. One journalist highlighted this point explicitly saying, "Whatever the cause, the open Internet has been a boon for humanity. . . Individuals have access to more information than ever, communicate more freely and form groups of like-minded people more easily."[143] Mignon Clyburn, another FCC commissioner, echoed this view noting, "An open Internet is indeed the great equalizer. It enables traditionally underrepresented groups — like minorities and women — to have an equal voice and an equal opportunity."[144] Similarly, a musician in a popular band that had success creating viral videos celebrates the Internet as "the purest marketplace for ideas that the world has ever seen," he contends that the "amazing power of such a level playing field has revolutionized everything."[145]

Several scholars also contend that the Internet facilitates participation in political debate by enabling users to create and disseminate a virtually endless array of information via platforms like blogs and videos.[146] These scholars argue that the current turn toward the Internet is a positive development that democratizes communication by increasing the potential for audience participation and power, transforming producer and consumer roles, and challenging corporate control of mass media. For example, they contend that convergence facilitates participation by enabling audiences to create their own content and participate in political debate through new mediums like blogs and streaming video,[147] modify existing television and video game content,[148] prevent official repression of information by reporting news via cell phone,[149] and even challenge the imperatives of media companies by revealing plot secrets of TV programs.[150] Scholars who take this approach argue that because the role of audiences has changed from passive consumers to active co-creators and change-agents, the agenda setting and gate keeping powers of media corporations are effectively reduced.

These scholars also contend that this change in audience roles contributes to and is a result of a transformation of business models, a change from corporate controlled communications to a more diverse, democratic model of communications. Today, they argue, there is room for bottom-up communication, a more participatory, democratic form of communication that enables users to generate their own content.[151] As a result, the power to set the parameters of public debate is not just in the hands of large media corporations, it is now in the hands of audiences too. Dahlgren summarizes this sentiment commenting:

> From the standpoint of democracy and civic participation, with the proliferation of material available from so many different organizations – journalistic and otherwise – and the easy and continual updating, accessible and extensive archives that can be searched, and downloaded, this new era offers enhanced possibilities for engaged citizens to gain political knowledge and access a broader range of ideas and debates.[152]

## Conclusion

While the crisis in credibility of journalism may seem to be a recent phenomenon, it has roots that span the long history of press criticism in the United States. Present criticisms of partisanship and commercialization are not new. Critics have expressed such concerns throughout American history, offering criticisms based on normative ideals of rationalism and empiricism that are at the heart of liberal democratic press theory. During the political press era, criticisms focused on the negative implications of partisanship and the ways it limited the empirical information necessary for citizens to rationally deliberate and arrive at the truth.

Due to changes in the political, cultural, and economic climate, a commercial system “free” from the constraints of partisan expectations emerged throughout the 1800s to reach a new height of influence and authority by the Progressive Era. While partisanship continued to spark criticism, Progressive Era criticism began to highlight the problems associated with commercialization, namely the ways commercial interests overshadowed the public interest of obtaining the empirical information necessary for rational deliberation. Though the movement toward professionalization during the Progressive Era sought to remedy the pitfalls of partisanship and commercialization, criticisms of both continued throughout the twentieth century, from the Great Depression to the Hutchins Commission to today where journalism continues to experience a crisis of credibility.

Ironically, the most compelling response to this crisis of credibility in journalism, the Internet, emerged completely outside of the journalism industry. Additionally, the precursor to today’s Internet, ARPANET, originated from assumptions and needs that were wholly different than those of journalism. In contrast to a closed hierarchical system, the developers of ARPANET promoted an open system where what emerged by the 1990s as seemingly boundless participation within the system was encouraged as necessary for the network to flourish. Also, in contrast to the commercial interests that influence the behaviors of traditional journalism organizations, ARPANET was developed to meet the public interest of improving the flow of information; establishing a network that could become a profitable enterprise was never the goal.

In the 1990s the decentralized nature of the Internet began to encroach upon the hierarchical routines of professional journalists. Today, traditional journalism organizations regularly use non-professional contributions. It is tempting to argue that the availability of such a wide array of empirical information on the Internet can address the criticisms of partisanship and commercialization at the heart of the present crisis of credibility. In fact, several journalists, citizens and scholars do. However, as will be argued, the practice of journalists themselves suggests otherwise.

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## CHAPTER 3

## IN WIKIPEDIA WE TRUST. . . ALMOST.

With more than 3 million English-language entries and 68 million monthly visitors, and despite having been established only in 2001, Wikipedia is one of the most heavily trafficked and frequently consulted information sources on the Internet.[1] According to Web research company Alexa, Wikipedia is currently the fifth most popular website in the U.S. and the sixth most popular in the world.[2]

Unlike many other websites that contain proprietary and copyright information owned by a single organization, Wikipedia uses an army of 91,000 active volunteer contributors who work collaboratively on more than 15,000,000 articles in more than 270 languages to produce what is now one of the largest reference sites on the Internet. This rapid growth is largely due to the site's reliance on an open-editing policy that promotes a "massive live collaboration" where users can contribute content regardless of their expertise or qualifications. [3] Expertise is not a prerequisite for Wikipedia volunteers because no original research or ideas are allowed; anyone can offer verifiable information linked to existing sources. Still, a lack of professional expertise has not limited how many people find it useful. In terms of its use, a recent study from the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 36 percent of American adults consult Wikipedia as a resource, with its popularity even higher among well-educated and current college-age students.[4]

While they are often hesitant to admit it, journalists are also turning to Wikipedia as a source for information—a move not without its detractors, who point to numerous examples of the problems in doing so. One particularly vivid example occurred in March 2009. A student who was interested in testing journalists' use of Wikipedia inserted a false quote in the Wikipedia entry of a recently deceased French composer. Several journalists repeated the fake quote in their obituaries for the composer, revealing their reliance on the site as a source while also raising questions about its value for professional journalists.[5]

This chapter addresses the issue of information and value through an analysis of professional journalists' use of Wikipedia. Throughout Wikipedia's rise in popularity, discussions and debates about the site's role in traditional journalistic practice have focused on its value as an information source. For example, one journalist notes that the quality of the content on the site can be "impressive," citing the comprehensiveness of the entry for the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal that includes 138 endnotes, 18 references, and seven external links.[6] By contrast, when asked his opinion of the site, a copy editor said, "I'm not sure what I could add, beyond 'don't use it' and 'it's junk'."[7] Despite opposite conclusions, the value of Wikipedia is determined in these and similar instances by the perceived credibility of its content.

However, credibility as a criterion of value is problematic. Credibility means different things to different people in various contexts. For some, information is credible if it has been vetted through extensive discussion and debate. For others, information is credible if it has been produced by professionals who follow strict procedures. For these reasons, definitions of credibility itself also need to become a focus of study. Doing so addresses a key lack in existing analyses of online sources such as Wikipedia, which tend to focus on credibility as a matter of isolated textual characteristics. For example, several scholars analyzed the site's articles and noted that, because false information is rare, the credibility of information on Wikipedia is high, especially in situations where several collaborators are engaged in editing a particular article.[8]

One particularly vivid example of this tendency to focus on credibility as a matter of textual characteristics is a frequently cited article in *Nature*, which compared the coverage of science topics in Wikipedia and Britannica. The authors found that despite numerous errors in both, the difference between the two was, "not particularly great," leading the researchers to conclude that high-profile examples of false information on Wikipedia are "the exception rather than the rule."[9] Similarly, Chesney's study asked academics to evaluate the credibility of Wikipedia articles, authors, and the site as a whole. Because these experts considered

Wikipedia's articles to be credible, he concluded that Wikipedia is valuable.[10] Another text-centric way in which the credibility of Wikipedia has been judged is to see whether and how quickly Wikipedia responds to malicious edits—probing the so-called "self-healing" properties of the site.[11] One scholar found that many inaccuracies were removed within 48 hours of their appearance.[12]

This chapter looks at the value and credibility of Wikipedia in a different way. Instead of focusing on textual characteristics, this chapter focuses on human practices and processes that produce these texts, make them significant and put them to use in certain ways. Focusing on practice requires paying attention to explanations and justifications of Wikipedia and its use to better understand the ways it is legitimized, defined, and assessed. Thus, for this chapter, evidence is drawn not from an analysis of Wikipedia's content, but from journalists' explanations and justifications related to Wikipedia. Since explanations and justifications rely on some kind of evaluative criteria, detecting what those criteria are and how they work in practice is of central importance.

This chapter will start by documenting the complexity of "value" as the criterion for assessing Wikipedia for journalism. It is complex because value can be determined in different ways. Informing the analysis in this chapter is a distinction between value due to deliberation and value due to verification, both of which are key procedures within conventional Western epistemologies for producing dependable knowledge. Something can be valuable because it is a product of the extensive deliberation of many people, or something can be valuable because it can be verified by other sources. As will be discussed, how and in what ways journalists discuss the credibility of Wikipedia in terms of deliberation and/or in terms of verification underpins their resulting use and evaluation of it.

The case of Wikipedia also demonstrates this complexity as an epistemological conflict. While deliberation and verification both stand at the heart of the professional ideology of journalism, they are in some ways opposites. Deliberation requires a public process, an opening up that seeks to maximize participation to produce a vibrant "marketplace of ideas," thus enabling a contest of claims in which truth can be discerned. In contrast, verification requires a closing down of participation and a restriction to only those with the requisite knowledge and expertise, thus enabling an expert and truthful account.

As will be discussed, and despite their opposition, deliberation and verification are provisionally joined in practice in the case of Wikipedia. The uneasy marriage of deliberation and verification can be seen in Wikipedia's stated policy of striving for a "neutral point of view" (NPOV). It is also present in journalists' use of Wikipedia as a "roadmap" to guide initial stages of reporting rather than a source for the final version of a story. The chapter concludes by reflecting more fully on the larger significance of professional efforts to neutralize if not ignore the conflict between deliberation and verification, and what this might suggest about the deeper roots of the current crisis of credibility.

## The Complexity of Value

Problematizing credibility means seeing it not as the presence or absence of specific textual characteristics but as a process through which texts are made to be credible. Viewing credibility as a process represents a break from the positivist notions of meaning and truth that inform analyses of credibility rooted in the text. Based on positivist conceptions, credibility is a function of how well a text matches and expresses a preexisting, stable, and verifiable truth. The problem with such an approach is that it isolates the text from society and limits discussions of credibility to degrees in which a text is "true" or "false," "good" or "bad." In contrast to this positivist approach, a cultural-historical approach to meaning and truth contends that both are constantly being made and remade because both are part of and mutually constitutive of society. Meaning and truth are fluid and unstable because they are contextually determined by different people within different historical and cultural milieu. Based on this approach, credibility is not a textual feature at all. Instead, it is a process of meaning-making in which people decide what makes a text valuable and thus credible.

In the realm of journalism (itself deriving in great part from larger Western epistemological traditions), the key practices that establish the credibility of texts are those of deliberation and of verification. A text is considered credible to the extent that it has been subjected to an extensive process of deliberation, and/or extensive verification. Scholarly work on this question provides arguments in favor of the centrality of both deliberation and verification for creating a social basis for agreement, which ultimately establishes credibility.

*The Value of Deliberation*

Much scholarly work focuses on deliberation as a central communicative practice that establishes credibility through consensus-building. For two scholars in particular, Habermas and Dewey, promoting and practicing deliberation is the central aim of communication. It is crucial for achieving the type of communication necessary to build consensus about the public good.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas highlights the value of deliberation for democratic processes, arguing that only a "public process of rational-critical debate" within the public sphere can bring about the "critical supervision" of government domination and establish a consensus about the proper course of action to assure the public good.[13] Through a historical and theoretical analysis, Habermas develops his concept of the public sphere, a figurative space where "private people come together as a public" in order to engage in "a debate over the general rules governing relations" through "people's public use of their reason."[14]

By focusing on the idea of the public, Habermas implies a general cohesion around a particular set of interests typically understood as the common good. Based on this notion of a rational public with a generally cohesive set of interests (i.e. *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*), Habermas argues that, in principle, rational deliberation should lead to an objective order, or the production of a consensus about the best way to assure the common good. According to Habermas, "Public debate was supposed to transform *voluntas* into a *ratio* that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all."[15] Through deliberation, the public transformed its demands into public opinion, a powerful product that could claim a kind of "moral authority" because it was steeped in rational argument and based on a public consensus about the common interest. Thus, for Habermas, the value of deliberation lies in its ability to keep domination in check and assure the attainment of the public good by enabling rational individuals to come to a consensus about the credibility of their own government and its actions.

Interestingly, where liberal theories of the press that derive from Milton link the extent of deliberation to the degree of truth, Habermas makes no such claim. For Habermas, truth is not a pre-existing entity that can be discovered through deliberation. Instead, truth is *made* through deliberation; truth is what participants agree upon through the process of "equal, uncoerced participation" and rigorous deliberation.[16] Habermas argues that a vibrant public sphere, which "depends upon both quality of discourse and quantity of participation," is absolutely necessary for a "rational approach to an objective order, that is to say, of truth."[17] In essence, for Habermas, truth is a discursive practice where "a proposition is true if it withstands all attempts to invalidate it under the rigorous conditions of rational discourse."[18]

While Habermas emphasizes the value of deliberation as a central democratic practice for preformed rational publics, Dewey argues that deliberation is crucial for a healthy democracy because publics are formed *through* deliberative practices. For Dewey, a public does not exist until "indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence." The commonality is not that everyone thinks the same ideas, but that they simply have "a common interest in controlling these consequences."[19] Dewey argues that only through deliberation and improved communication can the public fully recognize itself as a cohesive group and work to solve its problems. Without deliberation, he argues, "the public will remain shadowy and formless, seeking spasmodically for itself, but seizing and holding its shadow rather than its substance."[20] Thus, for Dewey, the value of deliberation stems from its role as a central mechanism for the formation of publics and public opinion, which possess an internal, moral credibility, as well as from its role in consensus-building through the negotiation of conflict.

Illustrating Habermas's and Dewey's compelling theoretical arguments are various common cultural practices in which deliberation plays a central role. For example, deliberation is a key element of representative and parliamentary forms of government. Since each group of constituents has its own needs that may conflict with the needs of other groups, representatives often face resistance in meeting the needs of their constituents. Such resistance comes in various forms, from unsavory legislation and budgetary constraints to political advertising and protests. To overcome these obstacles, representatives come together to hash out their disagreements and come to a consensus through deliberation.

Of course, this consensus-building process enabled by deliberation represents the normative ideal. In reality, there are often many behind-the-scenes negotiations and closed-door meetings. For example, in January 2010 House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced that the House and Senate planned to put the finishing touches on the healthcare reform bill "behind closed doors."[21]Almost immediately opposition voices cried foul with representatives and citizens making statements about the government "trying to hide" something. [22] In his State of the Union speech, President Obama confessed "With all of the lobbying and horse trading, the process left most Americans wondering, 'What's in it for me?'"[23]As these and other examples suggest, without deliberation, governmental decisions lose credibility because their legitimacy is rooted in their ability to engage different interests and arrive at a consensus.

Jury trials also exemplify how deliberation helps to establish the credibility of verdicts. Jury verdicts carry weight because they are steeped in the deliberative process where equal citizens discuss the facts of a case and arrive at a consensus about what is just. While jury decisions are not always popular or received as uniformly credible, such as the O.J. Simpson trial verdict in October 1995, such verdicts do little damage to the general credibility of the trial by jury process. In fact, in the days following the verdict, a USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll found that while 38 percent of respondents thought the jury system should be "substantially changed," 58 percent thought it should remain as it is.[24] Two years later, the trial of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh further exemplified the general merits of jury deliberations. One reporter commented that throughout the process "the jury went about deciding the fate of Mr. McVeigh in the same way a successful company might plot business strategy: with charts, diagrams and calm, rational discussion."[25] As this quote indicates, the process of trial by jury worked well; the jurors "methodically" deliberated the facts of the case, remained calm despite the emotional nature of the crime, and delivered a verdict based on evidence not anger. According to the foreman of the trial, arriving at consensus through deliberation was the key to reaching such a well-informed verdict. [26]

*The Value of Verification*

Much scholarship also asserts the value of verification for establishing credibility. Indeed, the entire positivist tradition is founded on the idea that a discoverable truth exists and that credible knowledge is based on accurate, comprehensive scientific observation and positive verification.

Such a procedure informed Comte's early nineteenth century claim for the value of verification. Comte sought to unite the practice of proto-social sciences through a common scientific method, arguing that "laws" about humanity and nature could be established and verified through the direct methods of observation, experimentation and comparison.[27] In *A General View of Positivism*, Comte discusses the role of the scientific method in producing verifiable information. He argued that there is an "invariable Order [sic], actually existing without us" and the task of the scholar is to unmask and verify this order by demonstrating it through the scientific method.[28] This scientific method served two goals; it formed the common procedural basis of knowledge production, and it established a common procedure for verifying outcomes. For Comte, verification is "the fundamental principle of sound logic," and "every hypothesis ought to be susceptible of verification."[29] In other words, outcomes are not valuable unless they can be verified because verification is crucial for establishing credibility.

In the 1920s, logical positivism as practiced by the Vienna Circle further emphasized the value of verification for establishing the credibility of information. Based on the work of Wittgenstein and expanded in Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic,* the Circle embraced the "principle of verifiability" as a central tenet of logical positivism. According to the principle, "a statement is held to be literally meaningful if and only if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable."[30] For these scholars, statements can either be verified in terms of their analytic consistency (pure logic) or they can be verified by the experience of data through our senses. [31] By insisting on the centrality of "the principle of verifiability," they proposed that verification is the crucial element for positive scientific inquiry. Without empirically verifiable information, they contend philosophers are "deceiving" themselves.[32]

In addition to these scholarly elaborations, and like the everyday practice of deliberation, verification also plays a central role as a means of establishing credibility in common cultural practices. One omnipresent example is the way identification documents function to verify the "true" identity of a person. From birth certificates and social security numbers to drivers' licenses and passports, almost every citizen of the United States carries a means of verifying her identity in her pocket. Many of the most mundane daily tasks, such as using a credit card, driving a car, or applying for a job require documents of identification to verify that you are indeed who you say you are. Thus, the verification of identity has real implications for a range of people and behaviors.

Verification also establishes credibility in the case of professional credentialing. Surgeons and physicians must take particular courses, obtain a specific advanced degree and pass rigorous mandated exams to become certified (verified) as credible medical doctors. Similarly, lawyers must go to law school and pass the bar examination before they can be certified (verified) as credible lawyers. Without such verification, doctors and lawyers would have to prove their credibility to each patient or client individually. Not only would such a process cause a logjam in productivity, but it would also be extremely difficult for laypeople to fully assess the credibility of professionals engaged in such highly skilled tasks. In this way, verification is crucial for credibility because it limits the potential for confusion, misrepresentation and even physical harm.

While deliberation and verification are very different practices, both play similar roles in establishing credibility by generating a common basis for agreement about what makes something credible. Deliberation establishes a common acceptance of a credible outcome by promoting consensus. Consensus lends credibility to decisions because the resulting agreement is based on a process of active deliberation and opinion formation about the public good. In different ways, verification also establishes a common basis for agreeing that something is credible through the scientific method and the use of empirical data.

Given the dual articulation of value in terms of deliberation and verification, we can begin to understand the constitution of credibility, not as an intrinsic feature of a text, but as a product of cultural practice. The next section builds on this notion of credibility by looking outside the Wikipedia text and instead focusing on the ways journalists negotiate the complex nature of value to build common assessments of Wikipedia's credibility.

Signs of the complex nature of value appear throughout journalists' evaluations of Wikipedia, providing further support for the view that credibility is constituted through common agreements about value. For journalists, value does not have one unified, stable meaning. Instead, whether they judge Wikipedia as valuable means at least two things; either Wikipedia is valuable because it enhances deliberation, or it is valuable because of its robust processes of verification. Through their comments in both popular and trade press, journalists describe the value of Wikipedia by either noting the benefits of the site's deliberative practices or by identifying the strengths of its verification processes. Where popular-press evaluations largely characterize Wikipedia as valuable because of its deliberative nature, trade-press evaluations focus predominantly on the site's processes of verification.

## Deliberation and Wikipedia

As one of the largest volunteer-produced reference sites on the Internet, Wikipedia relies heavily on policies and practices that promote deliberation.[33] According to Wikipedia, the site's greatest strengths as well as its greatest weaknesses both stem from its deliberative nature, which is practiced through an open-editing policy and the site's commitment to collaboration and consensus building. Wikipedia's open-editing policy enables anyone, even unregistered users and non-professional contributors, to create and edit entries. The rationale for this policy is that, due to this large base of contributors, Wikipedia can "significantly reduce regional and cultural biases found in many other publications," decrease censorship or biases imposed by particular groups, provide access to a wider breadth of knowledge, and quickly produce entries on breaking news.[34] As such, the institutionalization of open editing maximizes the potential for user participation, a key requirement for robust deliberation, and provides the framework for an active marketplace of ideas where anyone can contribute her views.

The discussion or "talk" pages attached to each entry also demonstrate the site's commitment to promoting deliberation, collaboration and consensus building. These "talk" pages serve as a prime forum for discussion and deliberation among users and editors, providing a behind-the-scenes look at the active debate surrounding each article. On these talk pages, users discuss issues related to article edits, debate the accuracy of information and work through disagreements, all with the goal of reaching a consensus about what the article should contain. This active debate and discussion on the talk pages exemplifies liberal-democratic ideals that posit deliberation and a vibrant public sphere as the route to valuable information.

Claims that Wikipedia is valuable because it enables deliberation appear regularly in the popular press. Perhaps it is no surprise that such claims appear in stories directed at popular readers, who are same ones enabled by Wikipedia's deliberative practices. Still, this view of Wikipedia is not just the result of popular press journalists kowtowing to their readers. Rather, this view stems from a tacit support of normative liberal-pluralist expectations that call for active deliberation for ensuring a healthy democracy.

In many such stories, journalists claim that Wikipedia's open-editing practices promote deliberation, thus improving the accuracy and value of information. Typically, they praise the vigilance of editors and users who work together to ensure the correction or removal of false information. One journalist comments that "seemingly no issue goes unnoticed" by the vast number of Wikipedia editors who work to spot and correct factual errors. Another journalist cites the tendency for Wikipedia's editors to "quickly correct inaccuracies" as the reason academic researchers chose to use Wikipedia as the platform for a "gene wiki" that would ultimately map the human genome.[35]

Lending further support to the point that open editing improves the value of the information on the site, another journalist features a quote from Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales who said, "You can't stop the vandals, in real life or on the Internet, but. . . each of these articles are constantly evolving, constantly being edited, constantly being improved." [36] Echoing the sentiment expressed by Wales, another journalist comments:

> With Wikipedia, anyone may add, edit or even delete entries regardless of expertise. Although that has led to pranks when hit television shows mention Wikipedia or endless revisions when dealing with controversial topics like abortion, the site's dynamic nature allows volunteers to quickly step in with fixes.[37]

While these evaluations focus on the site's open-editing practices, other popular press evaluations commend the ways Wikipedia's talk pages facilitate deliberation and consensus-building. According to these journalists, the site's talk pages provide the platform for open discussion about controversial issues and function to improve the accuracy of information on the site. According to one journalist, these talk pages are:

> the kind of virtual playground where prickly wordsmiths and news junkies (editing is supposed to be based on reliable sources such as newspapers, magazines and books) write in carefully constructed sentences, waxing earnestly about fairness, accuracy and

> neutrality. AGF—assume good faith—is the guiding principle. The goal is consensus, but disagreements are inescapable.[38]

Another journalist supports this positive evaluation of Wikipedia by providing a thorough account of the genesis of the controversial entry for Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He describes in great detail the ways these talk pages promoted deliberation among editors struggling to reign in the flood of biased and false edits and arrive at an acceptable consensus about what the entry should contain.[39]

## Verification and Wikipedia

While Wikipedia's open-editing policy and talk pages foster deliberation, they also enable the manipulation and falsification of information, requiring the site to institute protocols for verification in order to combat informational anarchy. Unlike the site's deliberative practices, which open up the possibilities for participation, these protocols for verification restrict participation to those with requisite knowledge and expertise in order to preserve the quality of information on the site. For example, Wikipedia has a loosely defined set of leaders and editors who gain respect based on the quality and quantity of their edits. In addition to casual users making changes, more than 75,000 editors watch pages and correct false information while more than 1,500 administrators have special powers to ban users, erase pages and temporarily lock entries to prevent edits.[40]

In addition to this loose hierarchy, Wikipedia also places limits on the type of information that can appear on the site. In particular, the site enforces two core content policies in an effort to preserve the site's value as an information source, "verifiability" and "no original research." "Verifiability" is the requirement that a reliable, inline citation be supplied for "any material that is *challenged or likely to be challenged, and for all quotations*,"[41] and "no original research," means effectively that "unpublished facts, arguments, speculation, and ideas; and any unpublished analysis or synthesis of published material that serves to advance a position" is strictly prohibited. [42] Both policies facilitate verification by limiting contributions to content that can be independently confirmed via traditional information sources.

In contrast to popular-press assessments that link the site's value to its deliberative practices, trade-press evaluations of Wikipedia characterize the site's value in terms of its processes of verification. Journalists writing to each other highlight the ways Wikipedia's editorial hierarchies and policies facilitate verification and produce valuable information by placing limits on participation. This trade-press focus on verification is understandable because these publications are speaking to an audience comprised of working journalists who commonly adhere to a professional ideology and practice committed to accuracy and verification. For example, journalists positively evaluated the ways volunteer administrators and editors rein in manipulation, contain wild speculation, and reduce the spread of false information by locking "particularly outrageous entries while they are massaged."[43]

One particularly vivid example of the ways this hierarchical structure supports verification, prevents disorder, and improves the quality of information is the case of "Joe the Plumber." Shortly after Presidential candidate John McCain mentioned "Joe the Plumber" in a 2008 presidential debate, a flurry of Wikipedia activity created a variety of conflicting entries and information. From disagreements about his worthiness for an entry, to arguments about what the article should be named, disputes proliferated until deliberation and collaboration no longer seemed possible. It is at this point, one journalist notes, that Wikipedia's hierarchical structure saved the discussion from plunging into chaos and preserved the quality of the entry because administrators locked the pages to protect them against editing by "unregistered and newly registered users" who were suspected of vandalizing the entry to promote particular partisan views.[44] Protecting this entry from edits by anonymous and new users effectively ended the edit war and suppressed the tide of revisions, while maintaining an atmosphere in which experienced users could collaborate to verify the details of the article. In this way, Wikipedia effectively limited participation and promoted verification by giving editorial power to particular users with the requisite expertise.

In addition, journalists also praised Wikipedia's formal policies for their ability to assist in verification. One article featured a discussion of Wikipedia's established guidelines for article creation and its policies for sourcing, drawing further attention to the fact that Wikipedia's verification processes insure the site is not a lawless forum where anything goes. [45] Another author supports this point, arguing that Wikipedia's policy requiring contributors to cite "reliable published sources" preserves the integrity of the article, maintains a level of collegiality, and "engenders trust among readers."[46] By detailing the ways these hierarchies and policies limit disorder, journalists drive home the point that Wikipedia is not anarchy, that there are checks and balances, and that Wikipedia is valuable because its robust verification processes insure that inaccurate information does not remain uncorrected.

**Reconciling the Irreconcilable**

While these evaluations of Wikipedia reflect the unsettled and complex nature of value, they also highlight an epistemological conflict at the heart of journalism between deliberation and verification. While deliberation aims to open up outlets for participation and broaden access to the marketplace of ideas in which all ideas compete, verification aims to restrict access and participation to only those skilled professionals with the expertise to correctly apply proper procedures. In this sense, deliberation and verification are logical opposites that act in contradictory ways despite how both are used to establish credibility. One cannot simultaneously broaden and limit participation.

However, despite this irreconcilable conflict, Wikipedia and journalists attempt to merge deliberation and verification in primarily two ways. First, Wikipedia does so through its policy that requires content to have a "neutral point of view." Second, and as a result of and corresponding with the neutral-point-of-view policy, journalists attempt to reconcile deliberation and verification by using Wikipedia as a "roadmap" rather than as a credible stand-alone source.

One of Wikipedia's main policies is that all content must strive for a "neutral point of view" (or "NPOV"). According to Wikipedia, having a neutral point of view is the core “nonnegotiable” editorial policy, which means that all Wikipedia content must represent “fairly, proportionately, and as far as possible without bias, all *significant* views that have been published by reliable sources.”[47] By insisting articles represent “all significant views” without bias, the policy of striving for NPOV shares similarities with objectivity, one of the primary journalistic practices of verification. As Schudson summarizes, objectivity is “the belief that one can and should separate facts from values.”[48] Through NPOV, Wikipedia strives to present all of the available, verifiable facts about an issue. However, NPOV differs from objectivity because it relies on both deliberation among its users and verification that all credible and sourced viewpoints have been included.

Due to its attempts to merge deliberation and verification, the process of achieving NPOV is at times arduous, particularly in cases where the subject is controversial. The difficulty in reaching NPOV stems from the requirement that all contributions also need to abide by Wikipedia’s policies of verifiability and no original research. Thus, contributions not only need to be verifiable and rooted in secondary sources, but they must also be approved as neutral by a host of users, editors and administrators through a deliberative process of consensus building. With particularly controversial issues, striving for NPOV often leads to seemingly endless deliberation and entries mired in continual edit-wars.

Ultimately, the difficulty with Wikipedia’s policy of NPOV is that it is inherently incomplete and inconsistent, not only because it seeks to reconcile deliberation and verification within a single policy (thus seeking to both broaden and limit participation), but also because the very term is internally incoherent. One cannot remain “neutral” and still have a “point of view.” Neutrality implies a view that is not expressed, while having a “point of view” implies that an opinion exists.

In their evaluations of Wikipedia, journalists cite the difficulties associated with striving for NPOV. One journalist describes the problems inherent in reaching a “neutral point of view” when dealing with the politically charged issue of “Joe the Plumber.”[49] He notes that within a day of John McCain mentioning “Joe the Plumber” in the presidential debates, the page dedicated to him was “created, deleted, frozen, created, and relegated to a section in another article” all with the intent of arriving at a consensus about the article’s adherence to NPOV. [50] Another journalist conveys a similar opinion of NPOV through his discussion of the seemingly endless struggle between verification and deliberation in the controversial entry for Iranian President Ahmadinejad. [51] In his discussion of the laborious route to NPOV, this journalist calls the process “disjointed” arguing that “There’s too much on-the-one-hand-then-the-other strained objectivity.” [52] This notion of “strained objectivity” highlights the contradictions associated with a process that embraces deliberation while also striving for verification. In the case of both Joe the Plumber and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, journalists noted that the deliberation on the talk pages for each entry simultaneously improved the content while also causing a logjam for editors seeking to establish NPOV. This conflicting result suggests the contradictory nature of a policy that requires an open platform for debate while also insisting that this debate culminate in a unified unbiased account. The notion of “strained objectivity” also calls attention to the similarities between NPOV and objectivity, a similarity which makes the information on Wikipedia more palatable to journalists.

While Wikipedia strives to merge the values of deliberation and verification through a policy of NPOV, journalists attempt to merge these irreconcilable values by defining Wikipedia’s place in the journalistic routine as not that of a dependable source, but as a “roadmap” to guide initial stages of reporting. Typical discussions of Wikipedia as a roadmap describe the value of Wikipedia as a source for background information, coupled with the insistence that it should never be considered a primary source. This simultaneous embrace and rejection of Wikipedia is related to and the result of Wikipedia’s policy of NPOV. Such evaluations understandably appear largely in trade publications where journalists attempt to sort out issues related to professional practice.

By asserting Wikipedia’s role as a roadmap, journalists reconcile deliberation and verification by drawing a clear procedural line between them. They embrace open discussion up to the point where they have to perform their professional duties, then deliberation is closed down and professional processes of verification take over. Through this practice, deliberation remains valuable, yet safely institutionalized while preserving professional credibility.

Journalists' characterizations of Wikipedia as a roadmap clearly reflect this division of practice, where deliberation is useful during the initial stages of reporting, such as gaining background or locating possible sources, but taboo if used to support actual professional reporting. One journalist expresses this view explicitly saying, "Wikipedia may be gaining some cautious converts as it works its way into the mainstream, albeit more as a road map to information than as a source to cite."[53] This view is also clearly expressed by an editor-in-chief, who says, "you go from there to find what most people would consider a more reputable source,"[54] and by a copy editor who argues the site "can be a great tool as a central clearinghouse for contextual information."[55] Another journalist explicitly acknowledges the utility of Wikipedia during preliminary stages of reporting, arguing that the lengthy citations on some Wikipedia pages are valuable as a "source guide" or "tip sheet" to other "more authoritative sources."[56]

Still, it is not just journalists doing background research who preserve the boundary between deliberation and verification. One journalist who actually *used* Wikipedia as a source in a story also maintained that the site should not be used beyond the initial stages of reporting. In his discussion of a story his paper ran that cited the Wikipedia page of an Arizona congressman, one managing editor said "we adopted a policy that says Wikipedia is not to be used as a prime reference source but could be used as a starting point in our reporting and fact-checking."[57] Even Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales expressed a similar opinion saying the site's utility for journalists is as a source for "background research rather than as a source to be quoted."[58]

Journalists also maintain this boundary between deliberation and professional routines of verification through comments that explicitly reject the utility of Wikipedia for professional practice, because the site's deliberatively produced content does not meet the professional standards for verification. For example, one editor said that while her paper cited Wikipedia for a story about martial arts, it is never the only source used largely because the paper "does not regard the online encyclopedia to be reliable."[59] Similarly, another editor says Wikipedia "can be useful as a starting point to look up other sites or for general information," but that "some of our editors don't consider Wikipedia to be very reliable at all."[60]

### A Crisis in Credibility, A Crisis in Epistemology

Ultimately, the significance of the conflict between these different senses of "value" explains more fully a key reason for the crisis of credibility in journalism today.[61] The conflict between deliberation and verification is not simply logical or procedural, but indicative of the instability at the heart of traditional journalistic practice. The values of deliberation and verification, expressed and elaborated as they are in so many ways as central to authoritative journalism, are logically irreconcilable. As the case of Wikipedia demonstrates, attempts to merge the two are at best incomplete and at worst incoherent.

When understood in this way, the crisis of credibility in journalism is an example of a more general crisis of dominant Western epistemology, informed as it is by an uneasy combination of post-positivism (in which deliberative acceptance by a community of scholars is the criterion of credibility) and empiricism (in which verification of results through the expert application of specific protocols and procedures is the criterion of credibility). Since deliberation is a key component of post-positivism, the irreconcilability of deliberation and verification connects this crisis in journalism to much broader debates. Similarly, because verification is a key component of empiricism, it also connects the journalistic debate about the value of Wikipedia to much broader debates.

An analysis of Wikipedia in the context of journalistic practice helps provide a deeper understanding of the crisis of credibility in journalism today. Rather than caused by new technologies, commercialization, too many untrained "journalists," or a world that has become too complex to begin to understand, the crisis of credibility in journalism can be found within the instability and contradictions of traditional Western epistemology.

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60 By “crisis of credibility in journalism” I mean the present trend, as represented by surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, which indicate that press accuracy has hit a “two decade low” based on respondents views, which increasingly question the media’s accuracy and professionalism. See: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Press Accuracy Rating Hits Two Decade Low,” http://people-press.org/report/543/ .

## CHAPTER 4

### I TWEET, YOU TWEET: JOURNALISTS' USE OF TWITTER AND THE INDIVIDUALIZATION OF PARTICIPATION

As the eleventh most popular site on the Internet, with more than 100 million users worldwide providing 4 billion updates (or "tweets") in the first quarter of 2010, Twitter is not just one of the most popular online social networks, it is also one of most active.[1] Twitter emerged in 2006 as a hybrid Internet and mobile phone-based communications platform that fuses instant messaging with text messaging, enabling users to instantly update large groups of people who subscribe to the service.[2] According to Twitter, the site is "a real-time information network powered by people all around the world that lets you share and discover what's happening now."[3] Users who sign up for a free account can send their own 140-character "tweets" to other users. They can also elect to receive others' tweets (such as fans subscribing to their favorite celebrity's account). Through its simple interface that asks users to answer the question "What's happening?" in 140 characters or less, Twitter collects and distributes a wide range of information from banal personal updates to significant real-time information. Since its inception, Twitter has experienced a 1,500 percent growth in users, including celebrities, world leaders, major corporations, non-profit organizations, professors, students, and others who use the site to communicate and investigate ideas.[4]

Added to this list of typical users are journalists, who use the site to solicit sources, disseminate information and generate feedback. One of the earliest journalistic uses of Twitter occurred during the October 2007 wildfires in Southern California where organizations such as the *Los Angeles Times* used the site to publicize important information such as evacuation orders and shelter locations.[5] Twitter also provided journalists with real-time eye-witness accounts of the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai.[6] More recently, Twitter served as the primary conduit for information about the protests surrounding the June 2009 Iranian election, a role that inspired some to deem the opposition movement “The Twitter Revolution.”[7] Twitter also provided updates, photos and calls for help, which assisted reporters in their coverage of the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Journalists also use Twitter to help fulfill the everyday responsibilities of their job. For example, more than 22,000 journalists follow the Twitter feed @helpareporter to find sources for a wide variety of stories and *The Wall Street Journal* relies on more than 100 Twitter feeds to obtain and distribute information. [8] In addition to relying on Twitter feeds to inform stories, *The New York Times* also uses the site to allow users to share recommendations and feedback.[9]

Despite its significant and growing presence, however, the few studies that focus on Twitter and its relationship with journalism have only begun to broach its use and implications. Lariscy and her colleagues asked questions about journalists’ use of social media, finding that only 3 percent of journalists use Twitter in their source mix. However, the study did not look at the ways journalists actually evaluate and use Twitter in professional practice.[10] Stassen also analyzed journalists’ use of social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter, but did so by focusing on the ways one South African news station used Twitter and the implications for that particular news organization.[11] Using an historical-cultural approach similar to this study, Arceneaux and Weiss looked at journalists’ characterizations of Twitter, but with an eye more toward understanding public reaction to the diffusion of the technology than toward journalists’ use of the platform and the implications of its use for journalism.[12]

In order to better understand the relationships and implications associated with the use of Twitter in journalism and its implications for the crisis in credibility, research should focus on the actual practices and evaluations of journalists across news organizations. This chapter will do just that, drawing on an analysis of journalist evaluations and actual use of Twitter during three specific time periods; the June 2009 Iran election protests, the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and a comparatively uneventful news week during February 2010.

What emerges in such an examination is Twitter's journalistic role as a conduit for information. Rather than being a source in its own right, as is the case with Wikipedia, Twitter functions as a conduit through which journalists obtain information from sources, largely in the form of eyewitness accounts and personal opinions. Both types of information are not new, but rather longstanding staples of newspaper content, thus suggesting that the journalistic use of Twitter—while innovative technically—has been made to fit rather than challenge existing uses and standards. By using tweets as eyewitness accounts and personal opinion, professional journalism safely triages user participation without calling into question the special status of professional journalism.

When seen in relation to liberal democratic press theory, Twitter's place in the journalistic world can be more generally characterized. Instead of challenging professional journalism practices by encouraging unbridled deliberation, Twitter enables a kind of individualized and professionalized empiricism, which journalists comfortably accommodate within traditional routines. For example, individuals offering their own accounts or opinions of events on Twitter do not directly engage each other in a process of public deliberation, nor do they cooperate in a public, open process of verification. Instead, journalists are the ones who integrate separate and distinct eyewitness accounts and personal opinions into a collective portrait or interpretation, demonstrating an inductive, data-driven mode of content creation. Thus, as a conduit, the use of Twitter does little to reconcile public skepticism with professional journalism, and thus does little to address the crisis in credibility so much a part of journalism today.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of liberal democratic theory's inability to deal with the possibilities, practices and relationships enabled by Twitter, particularly its inability to distinguish between types of sources and to fully theorize concrete forms of public participation. It then argues that, though journalism encourages two ingrained forms of public participation, eye-witnessing and personal opinion, both are in practice forms of empiricism. Expanding on this point, this chapter then discusses the ways journalists' use of Twitter also negates the potential of collective, public participation because journalists use Twitter as a conduit for individualized bits of empirical information. By doing so, journalists safely accommodate user participation within long-standing professional practices, thus preserving their status without critically reflecting on the practices that drive and perpetuate the crisis of credibility.

## From Public Participation to Individualized Empiricism

As elaborated in the previous chapter, liberal democratic press theory places public deliberation and verification at its center. Deliberation consists of a collective discussion and debate about the facts, about which facts matter, about their meaning and significance, and ultimately about which decision and action to take as a result. In a similar vein, verification consists of a collective process of comparison and evaluation of facts. As such, the public as conceived from liberal-democratic media theory plays an important role in the discernment of truth.

However, and just as with Wikipedia, liberal democratic press theory is ill-equipped to grapple with the complexities of Twitter and its role in journalism. One reason is because it cannot distinguish between different kinds of sources. Speaking semantically, sources can be either sites of origination or sites of availability. In the first case, information comes *from* a particular source, thus raising issues of veracity and authority of the source. For example, information about a crime can come directly from an eyewitness, leaving journalists and audiences to determine whether the source’s description of events is credible. In the second case, information comes *through* that source, with the only issue regarding that source (or, more accurately, that channel) being whether target audiences received the entire message. Twitter is a particularly strong example of this second type of source. Journalists use it not as a site of origin, but rather as a site of availability or, more precisely, as a conduit for information. Information from various sources does not come from Twitter as much as it comes through Twitter, which functions as a source for sources.

More specifically, two kinds of blind spots limit the ability of liberal-democratic media theory to adequately take account of Twitter and its journalistic use. First, and instead of distinguishing between these two types of sources, liberal democratic theory relies on a singular conception of a source as a site of origination, which limits evaluations of sources to assessments of credibility and verifiability. As such journalists typically rely more heavily on official sources and scientific research to support their stories. For instance, during the aftermath of the 2010 Gulf Oil Spill, journalists reported the official government findings that the oil in the Gulf had disappeared largely because the research represented verifiable science from a credible source. While a few fishermen and environmental groups provided evidence to the contrary, their views were largely overshadowed by the government's findings because their findings were not as easily verified and thus not perceived as wholly credible. The theory is less equipped to consider the credibility of information that cannot be verified.

Second, the normative nature of liberal democratic press theory says little about concrete forms that public participation takes. This blind spot stems from its philosophical roots in liberalism, which not only separates the individual from society, but also views the individual as the pre-existing building block of society. What is relevant for an analysis of journalistic use of Twitter is how this social theory corresponds to a theory of language and meaning. Much of this correspondence comes to us today through seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke, who argued that each individual makes her or his own meaning based on her or his empirically verifiable sensory experiences.[13] The problem with this account, as Peters summarizes, is that the primacy of the individual makes common understanding "highly problematic." Locke's account places "difference, plurality and interest inside people's heads," making it difficult to account for how individuals within this environment of "semiotic individualism" can effectively communicate ideas.[14] By locating meaning within the individual mind, Peters concludes that Locke "removes incommensurability from the public realm of politics and justice, and places it into the private realm of experience and choice," a move that "thereby denies public debate the resources for deciding among competing commitments and programs."[15]

To the degree that Locke's philosophy formed the basis of Anglo-American liberalism, which subsequently informed Anglo-American liberal-democratic media theory, the primacy of the rational self-sufficient individual remained. This focus on the individual as separate from society made it difficult for liberal democratic media theorists to adequately make sense of specific mechanisms for collective participation. Instead, public participation is discussed abstractly using terms like "marketplace of ideas" to label a general process where individual citizens actively participate by providing ideas and deliberating the veracity of those ideas. Liberal democratic theory says nothing about how exactly such a process takes place, what citizen involvement actually looks like, or how to evaluate the effectiveness of this participation.

Addressing this blind spot requires attention be paid to forms of public participation. Two such forms with longstanding importance for journalism are eyewitnessing and personal opinion. As Peters describes it, witnessing is an "intricately tangled" participatory practice that requires the observer to bridge the epistemological gap between experience and discourse.[16] He argues further that putting witnessed experience into words is "precarious" and represents "an intensification of the problem of communication more generally," because the direct transference of experience is impossible.[17] As lawyers, reporters and politicians can attest, different people who witness the same thing can produce wildly different accounts. As such, witnessing simultaneously supports and challenges the project of the Enlightenment by producing knowledge through cumulative observation that is also difficult to verify. As Couldry points out, witnessing can be active when participants seek to contribute to the media process through symbolic production, as in the case of Brightlingsea protesters who made roadside signs to insert their story within traditional media practices.[18] But Peters notes that it can also be a passive act in which an "accidental audience observes the events of the world."[19] According to Peters, journalists prefer the idealized passive witness who offers "just the facts" because such disembodied reporting reflects the journalistic norm of objectivity.[20]

From the institutionalization of court reporters witnessing trials in the early 1800s, through Edward R. Murrow during World War II to the amateur videographer who captured the

Rodney King beating in the 1990s, eye-witnessing has a long history within journalism practice.[21] According to Peters, news program titles such as *Eyewitness News, See it Now, Live at Five,* or *As it Happens* reflect the privileged and institutionalized role of eye-witnessing within journalistic practice.[22] Zelizer concurs:

> Ever since journalists were first expected to provide an account of events beyond the experience of ordinary citizens, they have relied on eye-witnessing to underscore, establish, and maintain their authority for reporting.[23]

Drawing on Raymond Williams, she maintains that eye-witnessing is a journalistic keyword that provides a common understanding for evaluating journalistic practice and helps journalists "maintain boundaries around which kinds of practice are appropriate and preferred."[24] According to Zelizer, eye-witnessing provides journalism "cultural authority" because it helps establish proof that a journalist based her report on actual experience.[25] As such, news organizations often rely on eye-witnessing to provide credibility and authority when audiences have no previous experience with the issues at hand.

Similarly, journalism also has a long history of soliciting and incorporating personal opinion. The letters to the editor section in newspapers is only one example of how personal opinion is accommodated within professional journalistic practices. From letters reporting news about the Roman Senate in 449 B.C. to professional letter-writers reporting news for European newspapers in the 1600s to the printed "news-letters" in early 1700s New England, the epistolary roots of American journalism run deep.[26] Hamilton supports this point by noting that "reportage was pioneered by handwritten letters of news."[27]Similarly, Schneider argues that well-to-do travelers, diplomats and other such officials included reports on news from afar in their letters home.[28] According to Wahl-Jorgensen, the letters-to-the-editor section is one of few "mediated sites of public discourse" to survive throughout the long history of American mass media.[29] Renfro argues that ever since the first letter to the editor, the letters column has become "a standard feature in most American newspapers."[30] Despite scholarly debates about the representativeness of letters selected for publication,[31] Kapoor and Botan argue that the section represents “among the few outlets available to the public for voicing opinion.”[32] Readers submit their thoughts on any subject and a selected few appear in print. As such, the letters to the editor section represents an institutionalized form of personal opinion or, as one editorial page editor characterizes it, the “one place where the reading public can make itself heard.”[33]

What is important to note here is that both eye-witnessing and personal opinion are forms of empiricism. Witnesses (some of whom are also journalists) offer accounts as dispassionate, impersonal descriptions of what occurred. Similarly, members of the public (as well as journalists) offer personal opinions as passionate and personal evaluations of the meaning and significance of events. Both description and evaluation serve as bits of empirical evidence to support a particular interpretation. Of course, in practice, both description and evaluation are intertwined, but the normative ideal treats them as distinct.

In certain social formations, empiricism as a means of verification can be a collective and public process. For example, during the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill citizens, government administrators and academics worked together to gather evidence to determine the scope of the environmental disaster. Citizens patrolled wetlands looking for damage, administrators probed industry leaders to determine the cause of the catastrophe, and academics took water samples to verify the extent of the pollution. The results of the collective process provided journalists and citizens with the empirical data necessary to better document the scale of the spill. As this example suggests, the potential of verification as a collective, public process can be not just a normative goal but an historical practice.

However, despite the importance of collective and public participation, Twitter’s use negates the collective and public in favor of the individualized. Its use as a conduit, a source through which information travels, dissolves the potential of a collective process into isolated bits of individualized data. Individual users contribute discrete fragments of information, reporting pieces of information and opinion without engaging each other. By enabling such behavior, Twitter also triages user participation within a longstanding and long-accepted role as individualized bits of empirical data for professional journalists to interpret and integrate. Such a move enables journalists to retain their claim to authority that derives from their professional status and procedures. As the case of Twitter exemplifies, public participation is encouraged, but in forms that do not call this professional status and role into question. By not critically reflecting on this status and role, its use in journalism does little to address the crisis of credibility regarding journalism, which often takes issue with or casts doubt upon the claims of professional status.

## Twitter as a Conduit

Throughout their use and evaluations of Twitter, journalists continually characterize the site as a conduit or a distribution channel for information. Journalists preface information obtained from Twitter in a way that is similar to how they refer to stories acquired from newswire services. For example, one network anchor explicitly calls Twitter a “service” that provides information and several CNN reporters introduce segments by saying that the information was “on Twitter,” a statement that suggests the site is a distribution channel.[34] Newspaper journalists also characterize Twitter as a means to acquire information, with one writer calling Twitter a “real-time reporting tool” and another arguing that the site is a “tool” and thus difficult to censor.[35]

More specifically, journalists discuss Twitter as a conduit for two types of information; eye-witness accounts and audience feedback, both of which stem from the participation of people who are typically not professional journalists. References to Twitter as a distribution channel for both types of information occurred throughout coverage of the 2009 Iranian election protests, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and even during a slow news week in February 2010. However, journalists portrayed Twitter as a conduit for eyewitness accounts more frequently during instances of breaking news where traditional information channels were not available, most prominently during the election in Iran and to a lesser degree during the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake.[36] Discussions of Twitter as a conduit for audience feedback occurred more evenly throughout all three time frames.

As one example, when the Iranian government prohibited professional journalists from covering the protests and events surrounding the June 2009 election, traditional news outlets relied heavily on Twitter as a conduit for eye-witness sources. Eye-witness reports from the streets of Iran distributed via Twitter frequently provided the first (and at times only) accounts of breaking news. One journalist remarked that he was "struck by how these protests are not only led by the people, but increasingly covered by them. They are our eyes and ears on the ground, as seen through their cell phones."[37] Another explicitly stated that "Over the last week, virtually all of the eyewitness accounts we've been seeing of the crackdown in Iran have come from Twitter**,** Facebook and other sites on the Internet."[38]

These eyewitness reports became fodder for print and particularly broadcast news as journalists sought to fill in the blanks with information from people on the ground. For example, a network nightly news program featured a tweet from an eyewitness source who said, "Whole city is shaking with very loud screams from rooftops."[39] CNN frequently featured eyewitness reports in the form of tweets with correspondents reading quotes directly off a Twitter feed such as:

> We saw militia with ax, chopping people like meat, blood, everywhere like butchers," and "They came out of the mosque and started beating everyone. Beat a woman so savagely, her husband fainted."[40]

Twitter feeds also provided the eye-witness sources for one newspaper journalist who reported that spectators described savage beatings, multiple arrests, "blood everywhere," and protesters beaten "like animals."[41] These eyewitness tweets supplied journalists the information they needed to perform their professional duties at a time when other traditional conduits for information were not available. The dissemination of these eyewitness accounts also inspired the opposition movement's nickname, the "Twitter Revolution," as witnesses on the ground spoke out via Twitter despite a harsh government crackdown on traditional communication outlets.

Journalists also relied on Twitter as a conduit for eyewitness reports during the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, another time when traditional communication outlets were not available. Several reports noted that some of the first images of the destruction in Haiti came through Twitter.[42] Witnesses in Haiti provided information on the devastation through tweets ranging from updates about the destruction at various locations to urgent calls for help. Much like the case with Iran, journalists who had few resources on site relied on eye-witness reports via Twitter to tell the story. One network news broadcast featured a tweet from an eyewitness who said, "Dead bodies are everywhere I haven't seen one ambulance or any professional medical care anywhere in Port-au-Prince."[43] Another report included a tweet from a witness who described children looking for water at an orphanage.[44] Much like the case with Iran, journalists pulled and displayed photos posted by eyewitnesses on Twitter. In particular, CNN regularly highlighted and discussed pictures of people "covered in dust," buildings "completely flattened," impassable roads and other scenes of devastation.[45] A major newspaper also described Twitter as a "lifeline" for its ability to share firsthand news and photos of the destruction in a way that could potentially facilitate rescue efforts and the distribution of aid.[46]

While journalists discussed Twitter as a conduit for eyewitness reports predominantly during times of dramatic breaking news, they consistently characterized the site as a conduit for audience feedback during both major news events and a relatively uneventful news week. Typically journalists solicited audience feedback by asking viewers to "share" or "weigh in" on particular topics by addressing their comments to a particular Twitter feed.[47] Several journalists ended their reports with statements asking viewers to "join the conversation," "tweet me," or "let us know what you think" by commenting on Twitter.[48] They also posed questions and asked viewers to respond via Twitter. For example, one network news reporter asked viewers to respond to a question about the health care bill, while another journalist asked viewers to submit questions for an upcoming interview with the CEO of Toyota.[49] These appeals typically resembled the statement of one reporter who said:

> We want to hear from you today as well. So let us know. Hit us up on Twitter and Facebook and our blog. Let us know what you think about the situation in Haiti. Is the relief getting there quick enough? Is all being done to help the people of Haiti?[50]

Though statements characterizing Twitter as a conduit for audience feedback largely stem from broadcast news journalists, print journalists made similar claims. One called Twitter's capacity for enabling feedback "the latest example of what I think of as the mutualization of a newspaper. Our readers have become part of what we do."[51] Another argued audience feedback in the form of traffic and news tips on Twitter not only helps his newspaper compete with other local news sources but also helps establish a better relationship with his readers. "More and more people are expecting that kind of conversation with us," via social networks like Twitter, he said.[52]

However, as a conduit for the type of empirical data typically used in professional practice, journalists regard Twitter as a supplement to traditional reporting, not as a challenge. One journalist specifically credited Twitter as a resource that helped her cover the breaking news in Iran.[53]Another acknowledged that he is following Twitter "minute by minute, moment by moment," because most of the information about Iran was coming from the site.[54] As tweets featuring eyewitness accounts and emotional pleas became the primary source of information about the protests in Iran, reporters called the site a "game changer," and a "significant" source for breaking news.[55] Such positive evaluations indicate that the site is a valuable resource, but a supplement to traditional reporting. One newspaper reporter makes this point explicitly writing, "Media around the world are using so-called tweets -- messages sent through the service -- from Tehran to supplement their coverage of the post-election upheaval."[56]

In addition to its utility in covering events in Iran, journalists further characterized Twitter as a supplement to traditional reporting during the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in

Haiti. Some of the first images of the devastation arrived at news desks via Twitpic on Twitter.[57] "Initially, networks and newspapers found themselves supplementing professional reporting with the Twitter tweets and cell phone videos of witnesses in Haiti," wrote a newspaper reporter. One journalist noted that when traditional media could not broadcast, technologies like Twitter "showed the world how bad things were in Haiti and how quickly help was needed."[58] In the aftermath, Twitter became one of the primary (if not only) ways journalists received information, leading one newspaper reporter to write:

> This week, Twitter again delivered vital information when other avenues were blocked . . . Twitter was where I found the first pictures of the devastation, images that soon showed up on the cable channels I was watching.[59]

As this statement indicates, Twitter supplemented journalists' efforts at a time when traditional news gathering methods were ineffective. Not only was the site a resource for receiving information, but journalists themselves sent updates from the scene via Twitter. For example, one journalist who did not have the ability to set up a live shot tweeted, "This is not over. There is a lot of dying being done. You hear it, you see it, you smell it."[60]

While eyewitness tweets helped reporters cover breaking news, journalists also used audience feedback to supplement their reports. Some journalists used viewer questions posted on Twitter in interviews.[61] In a conversation with a U.S. general in charge of recovery efforts in Haiti, one journalist used an audience member's question posted on Twitter to guide the discussion, "I have a really good question that came to me on Twitter, General. . . He says, 'Why not drop flyers to people there on the ground with the information so they can get it?'"[62] Other journalists used Twitter comments from viewers to supplement their reports. [63] In his discussion of healthcare, one journalist went "to the Twitter board" and read audience comments like, "Thousands of people are going broke and dying due to the American health care system. The summit was not a game to be won or lost."

On-air use of audience feedback obtained through Twitter also occurred throughout the protests in Iran as viewers expressed their opinions of the violence, particularly in response to the killing of a young philosophy student named Neda.[64] For example, one reporter read these tweets he "grabbed" from Twitter: "In Iran, one woman, Neda, becomes a symbol." and "Everyone go to Neda's funeral. If they attack, then it will end this. The world will revolt."[65] Journalists also supplemented their reports with viewer comments about the devastation in Haiti, reading tweets of support and requests for information about loved ones during their broadcasts.[66]

Statements in the trade press echoed this view of Twitter as a supplement to journalism. One journalist made the point clearly writing, "Twitter can be a serious aid in reporting. It can be a living, breathing tip sheet for facts, new sources and story ideas."[67] Another journalist was similarly explicit saying ". . . Twitter doesn't threaten the traditions of our craft. It adds, rather than subtracts, from what we do." A couple of reporters cited Twitter's ability to quickly distribute information as one of its greatest assets, making it "ideal for pushing out scoops and breaking news."[68] Still another credited Twitter with whetting the appetite for viewers to "come to us to get the full story."[69] Such statements indicate that journalists embrace Twitter as a resource, not a challenge to their professional practices.

### Participation, Deliberation and Status

Due to its potential to enable deliberation, verification and broader participation, one would think journalists' embrace of Twitter would be a positive step to address the crisis in credibility. By facilitating communication across geographic and ideological boundaries, Twitter would seem to provide a platform for open deliberation among its users. Similarly, by allowing users to post information virtually anytime, anywhere on any Internet-enabled device, Twitter makes it possible for users to report on and verify details about particular events. When combined with journalists' use of Twitter as a supplement, it seems as though Twitter would open up the professional process so that people would participate, engage, and trust journalism more.

However, despite its promise, Twitter appears not to be the remedy. As this chapter has argued, in actual journalistic use of Twitter, deliberation is non-existent, participation is effectively individualized, and amateur content is safely triaged within existing journalism practices.

At no time did journalists use Twitter as a platform to promote deliberation. Rarely did they use Twitter to engage participants in a dialogue about their experiences. Similarly, while journalists asked their audience to contribute feedback and respond to questions, they did not then respond to their viewers or serve as moderators to encourage deliberation among viewers and readers. Despite claims that Twitter exchanges are "two-way"[70] or that they make possible a "national conversation,"[71] viewers contribute individual pieces of information and opinion, but do not engage in a deliberative process. Journalists encourage an environment where people talk past each other or at each other, not *with* each other.

This kind of individualized participation underscores the existence of different modes of participation, while also underscoring the inadequacy of claiming that "participation" in general always extends public involvement. While participation can be collective (as discussed earlier with the example of people joining together to investigate issues associated with the 2010 Gulf oil spill) and active (as in the case where G-20 protesters march to voice their opposition to globalization), it can also be individual, such as when fans post comments on the blogs of their favorite musicians. It can also be passive, such as when consumers purchase yogurt without knowing that part of the proceeds go to fund cancer research.

Such nuances are, however, unrecognized by liberal democratic media theory. By conceiving of participation as a generic activity, it cannot adequately consider the reasons why just having participation is insufficient for addressing the current crisis of credibility. Liberal democratic media theory contends that incorporating participation produces a more dependable source of information, but in actual practice that is not necessarily the case. It lacks the ability to consider the implications of what could be called bounded or managed participation.

Journalists' optimistic comments about the use of Twitter in journalism reflect this limitation, indicating that they too see participation through liberal democratic media theory, in which any participation is a good thing by definition. They celebrate Twitter's ability to give a "voice to the voiceless" and its capacity to help people "share." [72] One journalist even went so far as to claim that because of Twitter, "The process of getting the word out is totally democratized."[73]

However, what such celebratory comments fail to acknowledge is that while the technology is novel, the forms of participation Twitter enables are not. While Twitter provides an innovative platform for distributing information, journalists manage the user-generated information through choices and professional practices. Journalists solicit user participation, sift through user-generated content, select the information they want to use and then re-represent this selected content to their audience. Throughout this choreographed process, journalists and news organizations remain at the hub. One journalist described this role as similar to the work of a curator.[74] Another reporter echoed this point by saying that journalists should be "kind of curating the stuff so that it's helpful to the outside world."[75]

A particularly common way that journalists triage participation on Twitter within traditional practices is by segregating amateur reports from professional reports through the use of caveats about the information being "unverified." These caveats typically occurred when Twitter served as a conduit for eyewitness reports. Textual markers of this segregation include examples such as "we cannot guarantee every piece of information," we cannot "verify the images," "we cannot tell you if each of these things is factual or is not," "we can't authenticate the information," and "we cannot confirm everything we see on Twitter."[76] Offering an archetypal proclamation, one journalist said:

> I'm going to say what I've been saying a lot, just because a piece of information is on Twitter doesn't mean we can confirm its accuracy, but a lot of people are using this to share information.[77]

Another clearly echoed this statement declaring, ". . . we cannot verify readily some of this material that we're going to show you. But we feel it's important to show you what's being put on the Internet."[78] One journalist identified his problem with using tweets to supplement reports on Iran saying, "I love Twitter, but with thousands of people turning out stuff, there's also been some misinformation that has been passed along."[79] A newspaper journalist repeated these sentiments by proclaiming:

> Nothing on Twitter has been verified . . . And just as Twitter has helped get out first-hand reports from Tehran, it has also spread inaccurate information, perhaps even disinformation.[80]

He follows up with a list of Twitter rumors about the events in Iran that later proved to be false. Some of the misinformation included, reports that opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi was under house arrest and exaggerated figures that pegged the number of protesters at 3 million instead of hundreds of thousands.[81]Another journalist outlined several issues of concern maintaining, "We can't independently verify what precisely we are looking at, when it was taken, or under what circumstances."[82]

Such statements serve as textual evidence of an organizational segregation of content, which effectively manages participation to preserve professional distinctions. By insisting that these eyewitness reports are "unverified," these journalists preserve their professional integrity while accommodating amateurs' participation to traditional practices.

Journalists' statements in trade publications serve as further evidence of the ways journalists segregate amateur participation organizationally. One journalist details the professional conflicts inherent in using unverified amateur content by saying:

> It's causing a lot of consternation within newsrooms, because they're not used to putting things on the air that they cannot verify 100 percent, or as close to that as possible.[83]

He notes that there is "lots of internal debate" about whether to use unverified tweets and insists "There's not like there's a manual on how to do this."[84] Another journalist makes a similar point by saying:

> . . . as you look at all the people who are reporting using these kind of various forms of Internet, they often will say things like, we cannot confirm, this person says or represents, a lot of awkward language for journalists, because this is of course not the way we normally speak.[85]

## The Crisis Continues

While Twitter itself may have the potential to enable new forms of participation, this potential is restricted within the journalistic process. Despite claims otherwise, most people likely recognize that their participation is limited. Though users can contribute their comments and insights, the structure and development of newscasts and articles remain largely unchanged.

By not paving the way for new forms of participation, Twitter cannot be heralded as the solution to the crisis of credibility, largely because the crisis is not a technical one of information delivery, but an epistemological one. Journalists' adoption of Twitter has not bridged the gap between the irreconcilable values of deliberation and verification, or between professional credibility and amateur contributions. Instead, journalists' use of Twitter perpetuates the contradictions at the heart of journalism practice and traditional Western epistemology, the same instabilities that continue to nurture the present crisis in credibility.

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# CHAPTER 5

# CONCLUSION

The originating claim for this dissertation is that journalism today continues to experience a deep crisis of credibility, with symptoms ranging from declining audiences and dropping revenue to ubiquitous layoffs and growing criticism. With opinion polling showing public confidence in the journalism industry at a "near record low,"(at least since such polling began) many see great promise in the Internet as a way to restore public confidence and enhance the value and usefulness of journalism.[1]

The primary conclusion reached in this dissertation is that the Internet is not the solution to this crisis, because the crisis is not a narrowly technical one, but a cultural one in the broadest sense.

The key question with which this study began was: What are the implications of industry views and uses of non-professional online contributions and online sources for the Internet as a means by which the crisis in journalistic credibility can be successfully addressed?

Each chapter addressed more specific, related questions. Chapter Two historicized the present crisis of credibility and the development of the Internet as a decentralized communications network created to meet very different needs than those of journalism. The present crisis of credibility in journalism is rooted in the criticisms of partisanship and commercialization that arose throughout the long history of American press criticism. Since their inception, these criticisms have been based on normative ideals of rationalism and empiricism, ideals that also serve as the foundation of liberal democratic media theory. Compared to the development of journalism, ARPANET, the precursor to the Internet, originated within a very different context composed of assumptions, needs and intentions completely alien to those of journalism. While the Internet may seem to be the solution to the crisis of credibility, its difficulty in solving the crisis is rooted in both its own development and in its attempted adaptation to journalism as a form of public deliberation.

Chapter Three explored the range of ways journalists make sense of Wikipedia. Journalists assess it in two contradictory ways: to the degree it enhances deliberation, or to the degree it has undergone robust processes of verification. While these evaluations of Wikipedia reflect the complexity of value, they also highlight an irreconcilable epistemological conflict at the heart of journalism – the conflict between deliberation and verification. Since one cannot concurrently expand and limit participation, deliberation and verification are logical opposites, despite both being key means for producing knowledge not only within journalism, but also within conventional Western epistemology. Journalistic use of Wikipedia attempts an uneasy marriage of deliberation and verification in Wikipedia's "neutral point of view" (NPOV) policy and by using Wikipedia as a "roadmap" during the preliminary stages of reporting, rather than as stand-alone source. By asserting Wikipedia's role as a roadmap, journalists draw a clear procedural line in practice between processes of deliberation and verification. Through this practice, deliberation remains valuable, yet safely triaged within professional practices while the credibility of the journalist is preserved.

Ultimately, the conflict between deliberation and verification is not simply logical or procedural, but indicative of the instability at the heart of traditional journalistic practice. As the case of Wikipedia demonstrates, the crisis of credibility in journalism is a more general crisis of dominant Western epistemology informed as it is by a complicated combination of post-positivism (in which deliberative acceptance by a community of scholars is the criterion of credibility) and empiricism (in which verification of results through the expert application of specific protocols and procedures is the criterion of credibility).

Chapter Four addresses journalistic use and evaluation of Twitter. Twitter functions as a conduit through which journalists obtain information from sources, largely in the form of eyewitness accounts and personal opinions, thus not challenging existing workplace routines and standards. Twitter enables a kind of individualized and professionalized empiricism, which journalists comfortably accommodate as a supplement to traditional reporting, a move that preserves their status without critically reflecting on the practices that drive and perpetuate the crisis of credibility.

The chapter also argued that liberal democratic media theory is ill-equipped to wrestle with the complexities of Twitter and its role in journalism. Among its inadequacies is the inability to distinguish between different kinds of sources and different forms that public participation can take. It conceives of participation generically as a wholly good outcome, which stifles its ability to adequately consider the reasons why just having participation is not sufficient for addressing the crisis in credibility. This chapter lends further support to the conclusion that the crisis of credibility is a crisis of epistemology. As with Wikipedia, journalists' adoption of Twitter has not bridged the gap between the contradictory values of deliberation and verification.

In sum, this dissertation suggests that the Internet's potential for addressing the crisis of credibility has largely been accommodated by journalistic routines, professional norms, and reigning conceptions of producing credible knowledge. The current use of online sources and non-professional contributions perpetuates the epistemological conflicts at the heart of journalism.

More generally speaking, this dissertation suggests that there is no simple, isolated technological fix to the crisis of credibility, because the crisis is not one of technology where a new online tool will ameliorate the contradictions and bridge the credibility gap, nor simply deliver information faster or enable a broader range of views. Instead, the crisis of credibility is a cultural one that confronts the inadequacy of liberal democratic media theory. Thus, an effective response to journalism's crisis of credibility must be broader, cultural, and practical in the sense of moving beyond simply providing ideas and actually addressing the epistemological inconsistencies within journalism practice.

## The Inadequacy of Liberal Democratic Media Theory

One of the primary reasons liberal democratic media theory is inadequate to this new-media environment is because of the irreconcilability of the two contradictory values at its core, the values of deliberation and verification. This limitation is apparent in liberal democratic media theory's inability to adequately theorize a complex or "prismatic" concept of truth. According to Dahlgren:

> A prismatic notion of truth is anchored in what we might call an emerging 'multi-epistemic order,' where it becomes generally understood and accepted that all storytelling is situated, all perspectives on society are contingent. . .[2]

Dahlgren argues that within the present context of globalization, as well as within "national societies divided by political horizons, ethnicity, and culture," there is a growing understanding of "the plural nature of social reality."[3] This increasing recognition of the plural or "prismatic" nature of social reality represents an epistemological challenge to liberal democratic media theory as hybrid forms (like infotainment), non-professional accounts and non-traditional sources produce varying accounts of the facts, which confront singular or unified versions of truth, such as those aspired to by liberal democratic theory.

Liberal democratic media theory's inability to theorize complexity and difference is also evident in its inability to recognize different modes of participation, some of which are not necessarily positive. As elaborated in Chapter Four, this blind spot stems from its philosophical roots in liberalism, which not only separates the individual from society, but also views the individual as the pre-existing building block of society. It is thus unable to account for how exactly a collective, social process of communication takes place (beyond a vague concept of a "marketplace of ideas"), what citizen participation actually looks like, or how to evaluate the effectiveness of this participation.

In addition to its inability to deal with complexity, liberal democratic media theory is also inadequate because it was developed within a very different historical context as the standard for journalism at a particular time. Liberal democratic media theory is based on the Libertarian tradition of generally 1500–1800. As such, it emerged within a particular historical context to address particular cultural concerns. Christians and his colleagues support this notion of historically contingent standards.[4]

Pushing further the questionable application of such views today, Zelizer argues that today we can't even agree on what journalism is.[5] As such, how could we possibly expect a normative theory developed centuries ago to pertain to the cultural and historical conditions of today?

The unavoidable conclusion is that liberal democratic media theory's value as a guiding vision has passed, if it was ever adequate. Today, we confront "a largely new set of questions and circumstances" than those of just twenty years ago, let alone several centuries.[6] In addition to the aforementioned changes in conceptions of truth as "prismatic," the socio-cultural landscape is changing in response to the current postmodern, increasingly globalized condition, the characteristics of which include the loss of certainty, increasing multiplicity, heightened fragmentation and polarization across all kinds of fields, as Dahlgren and others note.[7] Today, enabled largely by technological changes, audiences have more control over the media they access and are more "nomadic" and "mobile" in their media consumption. As a result, the very concepts of "the public" itself are changing.

> Overall the strong concept of 'the public' as the voice of the inclusive citizenry moves more toward a weak version of media spectatorship, complemented by a plethora of smaller, more exclusive and often interactive, online publics.[8]

For these fragmented, (often) online publics, traditional journalism's role as an information source has been "downsized" as competing non-professional, niche outlets like political blogs and social media networks become increasingly popular. Dahlgren argues that because of its reduced role in the information diet of many, journalism's role in democracy is being reduced. [9]

Concerning the role of technology in journalism, Dahlgren argues that while it is not always the case that such practices "push traditional journalistic values even further to the margins," these new pressures underscore the argument that "'better' technology does not always automatically lead to 'better' journalism."[10] The findings of this dissertation corroborate this assertion by demonstrating that 'better technology' is not the solution to journalism's present crisis of credibility. As a result of and a response to the competition posed by these niche outlets, journalism institutions themselves are also changing to maintain market share and profitability. Arguments against the Comcast/NBC Universal merger suggest the concerns many have about the potentially negative implications such consolidation can have on democracy. Along with the commercial pressures of consolidation, the phenomenon of "multimedia convergence" is also changing journalist practices, responsibilities and behaviors as journalists are often expected to develop content for more platforms with fewer resources.[11]

## Where Do We Go From Here?

Recognizing the inadequacies of liberal democratic media theory provides an opportunity to consider some of the ways this crisis might begin to be addressed. One way to move beyond the limitations of liberal democratic media theory is to approach the crisis from perspectives that recognize contingency and the importance of historical context.

Philosophical pragmatism as developed and articulated by people as varied as John Dewey, Richard Rorty, James Carey, and Bruno Latour has great potential for grounding an alternative theory of media.[12] While there are important differences among pragmatist philosophers, there are also "areas of shared concern" that comprise a generally conceived pragmatist approach that could prove fruitful.[13] For example, pragmatism generally supports the notion of fallibilism, a view that contends that all knowledge is "open to revision and critical examination."[14] Such a view supports the need for questioning the journalistic norms and for revising these norms based on this critical evaluation. Another contention generally supported by pragmatists is that concepts, understandings, and beliefs are "shaped by historical circumstances" and that “norms and canons of rationality together with moral and political ideas change over time.”[15] This understanding speaks directly to the issue that liberal democratic media theory was developed within a different historical context and influenced norms that addressed a very different set of professional, political and social needs. In addition to the utility of such propositions, the concept of “truth” held by Dewey and other pragmatists is more attuned to a prismatic conception of truth. According to Dewey, truth is not based on the accuracy of a statement or idea, but in the ability of an idea to “guide thinkers toward a successful or satisfactory resolution of problematic situations.”[16] Based on this conception, there is not one truth, but many possibilities for truths because truth is not some independently existing constant to be found, but one of many potential resolutions made. Understanding truth in this way, in terms of the validity of knowledge being established by whether it works, enables the development of new concrete solutions that do not necessarily assume that truth is singular or can be presented in only one way.

Building on the insights provided by pragmatism, some concrete suggestions for improving journalism practices are possible. One suggestion would be to incorporate the accounts of two or three widely different news organizations within single reports (such as international, activist, citizen journalism organizations, etc.). For example, a newspaper could run several articles from a wide array of journalism outlets on the same page, or a cable news program could present multiple reports on the same topic from a variety of news organizations. Such a robust use of the reports of other news organizations, not just the reliance on a wire service or left-right partisan views, simultaneously acknowledges the prismatic nature of truth while letting the audience decide which (if any) representation of truth works for them. Another concrete suggestion would be to open traditional news organizations more fully to those who are not necessarily professional journalists. In terms of practice, newspapers could add a section that is wholly assigned, edited, reported and written by various communities of readers. Similarly, broadcast news programs could feature news segments produced and edited entirely by “outsiders,” a practice akin to CNN’s iReports, but much more widely distributed. Doing so would further pierce conceptions of a singular truth while also challenging the journalistic practices that contribute to the present crisis of credibility.

## Directions for Future Research

While this dissertation yields insights about the crisis of credibility as a cultural, epistemological crisis rather than technological one, additional avenues exist for study.

Directions for future research include exploring perceptions and uses of online sources within additional genres of online, non-traditional "news" content; as well as exploring the perceptions and uses of non-professional content of a wider range of journalists. Additional, valuable studies can be done of the textual and technical features of these sites and their implications for credibility, usability, interactivity or participation.

Additional directions for future research include the democratic and participatory implications of user-generated content on YouTube, a distribution channel with a political economy distinct from traditional television networks. This research could yield insights into concrete forms of participation and the new forms of distribution, such as the viral distribution that stems from social syndication. Another direction would be to focus on activist groups that operate outside professional norms and industries, to see whether the same uses and perceptions exist there as with the professional journalism industry, and with what implications.

Since search-engine operations also govern the way users access and organize information online, additional studies could consider their democratic implications. Such research could add to our understandings of the limitations and opportunities produced by an index that rewards relevance over credibility. It can also provide insight into ways audiences can participate in the creation, distribution and promotion of information outside the boundaries set by traditional journalism organizations.

## Notes

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[8] Dahlgren, "The Troubling Evolution of Journalism," 149.

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