

**Clash of Cultures:
The Effects of Hypercompetition on
Journalistic Ethics and Professional Values**

**C. Ann Hollifield
Lee B. Becker
University of Georgia
Athens, GA USA**

annaholli@uga.edu
lbbecker@uga.edu

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Abstract

This study examines how the decline in financial stability caused by the massive disruption of media markets is affecting news quality and journalism ethics. The project uses theories from economics, management, and organizational sociology and data drawn from in-depth interviews with media executives from four continents and a longitudinal study of journalism education and hiring to explore these questions.

The study finds that in the face of hypercompetition, media organizations have adopted common strategies that have negatively affected the quality of their news products, undercut the stature of journalism as a profession, and created conditions that increase the likelihood that journalism ethics will be violated at both the organizational and individual levels. Longitudinal data about job placement suggest that these trends are likely to continue. In recent years, more broadly educated, less professionally defined communication workers have been more likely to find employment than those whose education has been more rigidly focused on specific professional training. Thus, the data suggest that, in the future, citizen journalists, bloggers and other communicators who lack formal education in journalism and communication ethics will play an increasingly important role in the communication of news and information.

Introduction

The first decade of the 21st century has been a period of historical disruption for traditional mass media industries and companies. Major shifts in the global political and regulatory landscapes in the 1980s and '90s, combined with equally significant developments on the frontiers of computing, network technologies, and mobile communications during those same decades, set the stage for the upheaval that has rocked the media world since the millennium. The development of truly global media companies, the technological innovations that have enabled distribution on an ever-expanding number of channels, and the nearly universal access individuals now have to low-cost technologies of content production and distribution have fed an exponential expansion in the number of content providers – and therefore, competitors -- in media markets. By the end of the decade, so thoroughly had traditional news media business models been upended that media experts and executives alike were openly questioning the long-term survival of the traditional news industry and discussing the effects the loss of institutionalized news reporting were likely to have on governments and societies around the world (Jones, 2009).

Although patterns of media industry disruption vary widely from country to country, media experts have observed two related but distinct phenomena becoming common to nations with private commercial media systems. The first is the fragmentation of audience and advertiser markets across the ever-increasing number of content channels, with the consequent erosion of market share and financial strength and stability in traditional media companies. The second and related phenomenon is the widespread entrance into content markets of non-institutional providers: citizen

journalists, bloggers, and video producers, many of whom have never had formal professional education in the fields of journalism and communications.

This study examines how the combination of these two factors -- the sharp decline in revenue and financial stability among media corporations in recent years and the entrance of citizen reporters into content markets -- is affecting the traditional news media's performance. The study draws upon economic and organizational culture theory, interviews with media executives around the world, and data from surveys of journalism education programs in the United States to examine how the ongoing disruption in the media industries, particularly the news media industries, is affecting the journalism profession, news quality, and media ethics.¹

Background

During the first decade of the 21st century, traditional media companies around the globe found themselves facing massive industrial disruption. The disruption affected almost all aspects of the business, including content production and distribution. But it had the greatest and most measurable effects on demand in audience and advertiser markets, particularly in news media markets.

The massive and seemingly sudden disruption of traditional media markets resulted from a complex set of factors that had evolved over the previous quarter century (Hollifield, Alexander, & Owers, 2003). Those factors included widespread deregulation of national and international media industries, the lowering of international trade barriers through global trade agreements, the opening of the Internet to worldwide public access in the early 1990s, and the introduction of low-cost digital production and distribution

¹ The specifics of the ethical standards to which professional journalists adhere vary widely from country to country. However, the overall effects of hypercompetition and deprofessionalization on maintenance of a country's standards for journalism ethics appears to be similar regardless of the specific guidelines in use

technologies that allowed the public to enter the content production business. Taken together, these variables resulted in explosive growth worldwide in the number of institutional and individual content producers competing with traditional media channels for audience attention and advertising revenues. As a result, audience and revenue shares for individual channels fell sharply during the decade.

In the United States, the fragmentation of audience, advertiser, and subscriber markets hit critical mass in 2005, the year advertising revenues in traditional media sectors reached their zenith. Although individual U.S. media outlets had recorded steady circulation and ratings declines for decades, total advertising revenues in all traditional media sectors except radio had continued to climb. In 2006, however, total annual advertising revenues in all three traditional media sectors fell, with only online media showing increases in advertising revenue and market share. By 2008, the U.S. television industry had, for the first time in history, supplanted the newspaper industry as the sector controlling the largest share of advertising revenue, and online media had surpassed radio in total advertising market share and revenue. With the onset of the “Great Recession” of 2008, traditional media companies in all sectors found themselves facing the perfect storm of financial and competitive upheaval, for which it is still too early to begin reckoning the final toll in industry destruction. At least 13 media companies declared bankruptcy or shut down major operations in the U.S. between 2008 and 2009 (Liedtke, M. 2009, Sept. 1), while a number of others were kept alive mainly by the grace of creditors’ reluctance to take ownership in a struggling industry. By one estimate, 5,900 full-time jobs were cut in U.S. newspaper newsrooms in 2008 alone (Project for

Excellence in Journalism, 2009), while television, radio and magazines also steadily cut staff positions.

Nor was the U.S. alone in experiencing such market disruption. Declining audience shares, particularly in news media markets, were reported in most developed nations (BDZV, 2008; Bodeen, 2009; European Journalism Centre, 2009). In emerging countries -- those undergoing political and economic transformations such as in central and eastern Europe and some African, Middle Eastern and Asian countries -- a different phenomenon produced similar effects. In transitional nations, the move in the 1980s and 1990s from government-controlled media to private commercial media systems produced an explosion of media companies, creating conditions of *hypercompetition* (Becker, Hollifield, Jacobsson, Jacobsson, & Vlad, 2009; Hollifield, 2006). The number of traditional media companies competing for audience and advertising revenue reached levels never seen in developed countries relative to population size (Gross, 2002) and available advertising revenue. In Belgrade, Serbia, for example, there were 11 daily general information newspapers in 2009, a city of 1.6 million people.

Hypercompetition is defined as a market in which supply substantially exceeds demand so that a large percentage of the producers in the market operate at a financial loss. A hypercompetitive market is one where combined revenues from advertising and subscriptions are insufficient to cover operating costs for many of the news media companies in the market, which survive by receiving subsidies from sources other than advertising and subscription fees. Research has shown that in many transitional nations, media companies are heavily subsidized by Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political, ethnic or religious organizations, owners with other profitable

businesses, and other enterprises (SEEMO, 2005). By some estimates, up to one-third of total news media-industry operating costs in some developing countries come from external subsidies rather than operating revenues (T. Vlad, personal communication, COST A30 Action Conference, Sarajevo, June 5-6, 2008).

These developments contradict classic economic theory, which holds that hypercompetition cannot exist. Economic theory argues that, first, competition is a positive response to consumer demand that maximizes consumer welfare by giving consumers the widest range of product choices at the lowest prices. Thus, hypercompetition – or too much competition -- cannot exist, because more competition produces greater consumer welfare. Secondly, economic theory holds that where competition exceeds available demand to the point where producers operate at a loss, unsuccessful competitors will exit the market until a balance between demand, supply, and price is re-established, and producers can operate at a profit level sufficient to make it worthwhile to continue producing.

Recent research on media markets has argued, however, that the unique economic characteristics of media products cause market failure in ways that violate traditional economic assumptions (Becker, Hollifield, Jacobsson, Jacobsson, & Vlad, 2009; Hollifield, 2006). Media products are experience goods and credence goods (Reca, 2006). An experience good is one where consumers cannot judge whether the product actually will meet their needs until after they already have invested the time and money required to consume it. A credence good is one that requires consumers to take the quality of the product on faith. News audiences, for example, have no idea whether a story has been

accurately reported unless they attended the event or meeting themselves. Thus, news quality is a matter of credence, or the audience's faith in its accuracy.

Other key economic characteristics of information that undermine traditional economic assumptions include the fact that media products have significant economic externality value and a high intrinsic relationship to human welfare (Priest, 1994). Consequently, many individuals produce content not for direct pecuniary rewards but rather because owning media companies or producing content helps them achieve other goals. Those goals may include contributing to social welfare, expressing personal opinions or creative visions, achieving fame or notoriety, or furthering personal political, economic, or ideological agendas (Priest, 1994; SEEMO, 2005). Thus, scientists produce journal articles without direct payment, citizen journalists blog, submit articles to Wikipedia, and produce videos for YouTube without compensation, and NGOs and individual media owners continue to subsidize unprofitable media companies in emerging nations. Contrary to traditional economic theory, 20 years after market liberalization, hypercompetitive markets in transitional nations show few signs of rationalizing (Becker, Hollifield, Jacobsson, Jacobsson, & Vlad, 2009; Hollifield, Vlad, & Becker, 2004; Open Society Institute, 2005), while amateur journalists and producers around the world are producing an increasing percentage of the available content and absorbing a growing share of the audience's attention in competition with for-profit media companies (Donato, 2009; Wakschlag, 2009).

While the urge to express oneself publicly has long been a human motivation, it has been only in the last decade that low-cost digital production technologies and widespread diffusion of broadband Internet access have combined to make it possible for

the majority of people in developed nations to become global media content providers at will. So dramatic has been the growth in the phenomenon of amateur information providers that today the number of Web pages available far exceeds the global population, and in January 2009 alone, U.S. Internet users accessed more than 14.8 billion videos online, of which 43% were on YouTube (Comscore, 2009).

Many traditional media executives have argued that the audience would soon discern the difference between the quality of content produced by professional journalists as compared to amateur providers and would choose professionally produced content (The Economist, 2006). Others have argued that the “cult of the amateur” is “transforming culture into cacophony,” a place where “citizen journalists have no formal training or expertise, yet they routinely offer up opinions as fact, rumor as reportage, and innuendo as information,” leading to a Darwinian online world based on “the survival of the loudest and most opinionated” (Keen, 2007, pp. 14-15; 47).

The data, however, belie the optimistic arguments that 21st century audiences would quickly tire of the amateur and return to the professional. Audience shares for amateur content have grown steadily (Comscore, 2009; Technorati, 2008). Although the numbers vary across different metrics companies, most estimates place the number of blogs worldwide at more than 100 million, with some estimates at nearly twice that (Technorati, 2008). A 2008 survey by Technorati estimated that close to 1 million new blog posts are uploaded each day, while the Pew Survey of the Internet and American Life found that 33% of Internet users reported reading someone’s blog (Pew, 2008). Moreover, Technorati found that the majority of bloggers offered personal, rather than professional blogs, and more than 50% reported having advertising on their blog sites.

Those selling advertising on their blogs reported mean annual revenue of \$6,000 for blogs with fewer than 100,000 unique visitors per month and \$75,000 for those with more than 100,000 unique visitors (Technorati, 2008). Online video offering both news and entertainment also has shown rapid growth, with YouTube recording 100 million online video views during January 2009 alone (Comscore, 2009).

These manifestations of market “failure” – the long-term existence of media organizations that survive only through subsidies, and the growth in the amount of content produced and distributed with no financial compensation for the producers -- have placed enormous financial stress on traditional media companies and radically altered the context in which news and information that reaches the public is produced and disseminated. Until the digital and Internet revolutions, the costs of producing and widely disseminating news and information ensured that the vast majority of information was produced through organizations. Those organizations employed teams of workers whose assignment was to produce the news.

As media industries in the U.S. grew in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the demand of these organizations for a competent, consistent, and predictable labor pool led to the creation of formal university-based journalism education programs (Becker, Fruit & Caudill, 1987). Wilensky’s (1964) classic study of the sociology of occupations found that occupations go through four key, defining steps in the process of becoming a profession. First, the occupation establishes training schools for admission. Second, the occupation forms professional associations. Next, it attempts to regulate the practice of the profession through legal protection. Finally, it adopts a formal code of ethics.

Those factors -- particularly formal education, professional associations, and formal codes of ethics -- are necessary for an occupation to be defined as a profession. Specifically, professions are distinguished by specialized professional knowledge, the provision of an exclusive and essential service that involves the discretionary application of that specialized knowledge in unforeseen and changing situations, members' primary control over their own work, basic standards for professional education or training, an established code of ethics, membership in professional associations, and a reliance on other members of the professional subgroup as the primary reference group (Bloor & Dawson, 1994; Bourdieu, 1988; Forsyth & Danisiewicz, 1985; Toren, 1969). In addition, professions have been viewed as occupations with a special service orientation toward society.

Media experts around the world have begun to question the impact these related developments of the growing role of amateur information providers and the simultaneous financial erosion in traditional news organizations will have on the quality of the news and information available to society. This study seeks to answer this question by examining how both economic and technological forces are changing the organizational contexts in which news is produced and thus, the type of content that is being produced. Specifically, the study examines how current trends are disrupting not only the business models of the media industry but also the structural framework of the journalism profession, including the ethical frameworks that guide professional behavior.

Nature of the Data

This research draws upon two sources of data for insight into these questions. The first is a dataset of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 22 media executives in 12 different nations on three continents. The interview data were gathered between 2002 and 2005 using a convenience sample and were analyzed using a comparative case-study

design. Each interview lasted 2-3 hours and, where necessary, translators were used. The media companies included radio, television, and newspapers organizations. Additionally, data from the formal interviews were supplemented by discussions with literally hundreds of journalists and media executives from transitional nations who have participated in professionally journalism continuing education workshops with the authors in Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific Islands. The challenges described by journalism professionals in these rapidly changing nations were remarkably consistent across time and place.

The second source of data used in this study was the *Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Graduates*, which is designed to monitor the employment rates and salaries of graduates of journalism and mass communication programs in the United States, including Puerto Rico, in the year after graduation (Becker, Vlad, Olin, Hanisak & Wilcox, 2009). The survey also tracks the curricular activities of those graduates while in college, examines their job-seeking strategies, and provides measures of the professional attitudes and behaviors of the graduates upon completion of their college studies.

Each year a sample of schools is drawn from those listed in the *Journalism and Mass Communication Directory*, published annually by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and *The Journalist's Road to Success: A Career Guide*, formerly published and printed by the Dow Jones Newspaper Fund, Inc., and now available on the web. In 2008, 86 schools were drawn from the 480 unique entries of four-year programs in the U.S. (including Puerto Rico) in the two directories.

Administrators at the selected schools are asked to provide the names and addresses of their spring bachelor's and master's degree recipients as well as a cover letter

endorsing the project to be mailed with the questionnaire. Graduates were contacted three times in the following year and asked to complete the survey. In 2008, the survey was mailed to 9,526 individuals and a total of 2,840 returned the questionnaires by the middle of June of 2009. Return rate, computed as the number of questionnaires returned divided by the number mailed, was 29.8%. Return rate, computed as the number returned divided by the number mailed minus bad addresses, was 31.9%.

Of the 2,542 usable questionnaires, 2,360 (92.8%) were from bachelor's degree recipients and 182 were from those who received a master's degree. The findings reported for the *Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Graduates* are projectable to the estimated 50,560 students who earned bachelor's degrees and the 4,270 students who earned master's degrees in academic year 2007-2008 from the 480 colleges and universities across the United States and Puerto Rico offering programs in journalism and mass communication.

Findings and Insights

The in-depth interviews with media executives in emerging nations were particularly valuable in providing insights into how media market failures are affecting the quality of journalism and journalism ethics worldwide. Many, perhaps most, media executives in transitional nations have been operating in conditions of hypercompetition from the moment the media systems in their countries were liberalized and privatized. The interviews were conducted before the tipping point in the U.S. media market was reached in 2005, and the issues raised in those interviews now appear prescient for U.S. media companies.

Previous research on media competition has found that low-to-moderate competition increases the quality of media content by encouraging media companies to invest more money in more reporters, more news production equipment, and more high-cost reporting such as

investigative journalism and specialized reporting such as health and medical journalism, business reporting, and in-depth political reporting (Hollifield, 2006). Based upon the data from the interviews, the authors have previously argued that at the point where competition begins reducing a media organization's financial resources, the company will begin cutting news production expenses (Becker et al, 2009; Hollifield, 2006). Staff sizes are reduced and work loads increase, leaving reporters less time for in-depth and enterprise reporting. Older, more experienced reporters are let go and replaced by younger journalists who earn lower salaries. Original news is replaced by wire service content and the news organization begins producing low-cost content with high audience appeal: sex, sports, celebrity, sensationalism, and opinion journalism in the form of "news" that advocates for political, religious, or ethnic viewpoints.

In the past few years, media critics have been arguing that the same phenomena are now appearing in the news products produced by even well-established global media corporations.

I think when we look at the way cable news has set itself up to debate even important issues like healthcare, it is almost always with people who may or may not have the facts at hand or have fact to back up their positions arguing with each other. And so we tend to, I believe, embrace the view that we already have and are not able to be persuaded because we don't really have very much confidence in the other side because it's not based on a belief that they are willing to tell both sides of the story. That's where the persuasive part comes in (Jones, 2009, Aug. 18).

In summary, then, a growing body of empirical and anecdotal evidence supports the Media Hypercompetition model (Hollifield, 2006). That model predicted that, contrary to traditional economic theory, there can be hypercompetition in media markets such that the quality of the news content available to the public erodes in ways that decrease the positive externality value of media products and increases the negative externality value of media in society.

Economic modeling also has suggested other ways that hypercompetition may negatively affect media consumers. Economists have previously predicted based upon economic modeling that the erosion of financial stability in media companies also would presage the erosion of ethical behavior (Jacobsson & Jacobsson, 2003). Jacobsson and Jacobsson argued that as media organizations' financial strength eroded in the face of rising competition, those organizations

would become more susceptible to accepting bribes and subsidies from parties seeking to influence news content or to engaging in such practices as directly trading advertising buys for positive news coverage.

Data from the interviews from media executives in transitional nations support Jacobsson and Jacobsson's (2003) predictions. Media executives in transitional nations reported that many of their competitors were guilty of ethical violations such as accepting bribes from interest groups or trading positive reporting for advertising. Independent media observers also have reported such events among media companies in transitional nations (T. Vlad, personal communication, COST A30 Action Conference, Sarajevo, June 5-6, 2008). Previous research in the United States has suggested that at least in the national broadcast media, such organizational-level corruption has been rare, but not unknown (Price, 2003). However that research was conducted before media profitability went into freefall. There is no current research that addresses the question of whether organizational-level ethical violations have increased among media organizations in developed countries since competition began so sharply eroding profitability.

Data from the interviews with media executives and workshop participants also suggested that financial instability in media organizations encourages corruption among journalists at the individual level. As media organizations seek to cut costs by lowering wages, individual reporter may be more tempted to accept bribes or engage in other acts of corruption as a means of supplementing their personal finances. Further increasingly the likelihood of such individual-level corruption were other organizational strategies that respondents reported, which served to undercut the ethical standards of the media for which they worked. Media executives and journalists from some countries reported that, in circumstances of extreme financial exigency, it had become increasingly common for media organizations to replace professionally educated journalists with individuals who lacked formal education in journalism and, in some extreme cases, formal post-secondary education of any kind. Thus, media

institutions were consciously turning to a low-cost amateur labor force as a substitute for higher-cost professional journalists.

This trend, to the extent that it continues, has significant implications for journalism as a profession and for the role of media in society. As professionally educated journalists become rarer in the field, journalism's stature as a profession will be eroded, which inevitably will make it more acceptable for media organizations to hire reporters without professional education. Given the central role ethics plays in professional education in all professions, one of the consequences of loss of professional education as a necessary qualification for being hired into media organizations will be to reduce the number of journalists in the media labor force with a strong sense of the ethics that should govern media behavior and a strong personal commitment to upholding those ethics. That in turn will erode the place of ethics as a critical standard by which media performance is judged. It also will make it easier for media organizations to make the strategic decision to act unethically by doing things such as trading positive coverage for advertising because there will be fewer professionals inside the organization to oppose those actions. Finally, of course, as the number of journalists without professional education in the media labor force rises, the likelihood of ethical violations at the individual level also increases because ethical standards are imperfectly understood and the need for personal commitment to those standards has not been instilled.

Data from the 1994 and 2004 *Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Graduates* provide evidence to support this concern. Becker and Vlad (2007) found that young communication professionals hold different attitudes about the role of media in society based on their curricular specializations while at the university. When asked about the rights of media organizations and of working journalists, journalism and mass communication graduates were more supportive of media rights than the general population. However, even among communication graduates differences in commitment

to media ethics were evident. Those graduates who had completed a course of study leading to a traditional job as a journalist were more supportive of media rights, such as the right to report classified materials and to protect sources from exposure, than were students in other curricular specializations, such as public relations and advertising. These findings support the prediction that the disappearance of professionally educated journalists from the news production process will lead to the erosion of traditional journalistic ethics. In developed countries such as the United States, the deprofessionalization of journalism also has emerged as a significant issue, although the sources of the phenomenon are somewhat different. In an attempt to both appeal to audiences and cut production costs, newspapers and electronic media increasingly are turning to user-generated content produced not by professional journalists but by audience members. Additionally, as noted previously, the audience itself increasingly is turning to content and opinion produced and distributed by “amateur” – or at least unknown – producers. This suggests that a significant segment of the population no longer believes that news and information produced by professional journalists and media organizations provides significant value as compared to that produced by amateurs.

The shift to use of more non-professionally produced content by news organizations in the United States had not, as of the middle of the decade, triggered a shift to the hiring of non-professional journalists. In 2005, according to Becker, Vlad, Pelton and Papper (2006), 85% of the entry-level news employees in daily newspapers came from university journalism and communication programs, while the figure was 92% for television newsrooms. The former was an increase from five years earlier, while the latter was down just slightly.

Changes in the labor market for journalism and mass communication graduates in 2008 suggested the economic collapse of 2008 may have changed that picture. By almost all indications, the 2008 graduates of the nation’s journalism and mass communications programs found themselves in a disastrous job market. Job offers on graduation were

down. Opportunities of job interviews had declined. The level of full-time employment at the benchmark Oct. 31 reference point was eight percentage points lower than a year earlier. Full-time employment based on a second measure—when the respondents returned the survey instrument—was at its lowest point going back at least to 1986, and the drop from a year earlier was unprecedented.

Salary data also suggest that the professional stature of U.S. journalists is eroding. Salaries were stagnant at best. Those graduates who found full-time employment outside the field had a higher median annual salary than those who found work in the field. Even graduates who were lucky enough to find a job working for a web publishing company had an annual salary significantly below the annual salary of those who found similar jobs a year earlier. And the news in terms of benefits was even more discouraging.

Across nine different comparisons, graduates in 2008 reported fewer benefits, and fewer of those were fully employer paid. Long-term continuation of these trends does not bode well either for the ability of the industry to continue attracting highly educated and professionally educated individuals, or for the ability of journalists to resist seeking external sources of income. Indeed respondents among the graduates reported that they were not very optimistic about the future of many of the traditional media or about their long-term job prospects. Many said they regretted their career choice.

Not all communication graduates faced a professional picture as dreary as the one journalism and mass communication graduates, who had an unemployment rate higher than for the 20-24 year-old cohort of which they are a part. The traditional mass media jobs including advertising. Those students who studied

public relations at the university found the job market in 2008 to be considerably less hostile than did those who studied for print media job, for telecommunications jobs, or even for advertising jobs. Of the public relations graduates, nearly 71% had a full-time job when they returned the survey instrument, compared with 65% of the advertising graduates, 59% of the print journalism graduates, and 57% of the telecommunications graduates. The public relations students also earned above average salaries for their cohort, instead of below-average salaries for those in traditional mass media professions who were lucky enough to have a job at all/. Public relations graduates are different from others in a key way. They don't necessarily seek and find jobs in public relations, being more likely than other communication majors to report they were working in communications of some sort outside traditional employment circles. In fact, in 2008, only 17% of them took a job in traditional public relations., while 38% said they found "communications" work that was not with a public relations department or agency, not with an advertising department or agency, not with a newspaper or wire service, and not with a telecommunications company. Thus public relations students appear to be more entrepreneurial, less tied to traditional definitions of what is communication work, and more flexible about what kinds of work they actually do. They did better in the job market in 2008, and that may say a lot about the future for graduates in traditional mass media professional education programs.

Concluding Comments

The data that provided the basis for this study strongly suggests that the emergence of hypercompetition in global and local media markets poses a significant threat to the ability of traditional mass media organizations to continue to produce the type of in-depth reporting, public affairs reporting and investigative reporting that, in most countries, represents "quality" news

among professional journalists. Additionally, hypercompetition from both professional and amateur content producers is eroding both the structures and stature of professionalism in the field of journalism.

Given the evidence on which this study is grounded, it would be difficult to argue that the effects of hypercompetition on news quality are positive. Only if one takes the position that achieving minimal satisfaction for the largest number of consumers is a higher good than achieving an informed citizenry that is empowered by knowledge with the ability to safeguard its own interests against encroachment by government and the powerful. However, the advantages and disadvantages of the deprofessionalization of the journalism profession are less clear. Certainly the deprofessionalization of journalism is becoming a topic of significant discussion among media experts worldwide, with the consequences of the trend for society a subject of significant debate.

Specifically, deprofessionalization raises significant issues for the likelihood that the ethical standards that have governed professional journalists in the past will be widely maintained across the medley of individuals now serving as reporters and commentators in the public sphere. But it does not necessarily follow that all consequences of the deprofessionalization of news will be negative.

Professionalism by definition implies a separation of those in the professional occupation from their clients. The common defense of journalists that they know what news is and the subjects of the news do not—often voiced when challenges arise over coverage—is an illustration of this professional stance. Journalists are to be detached in the way a doctor or lawyer is supposed to be detached, relying respectively on the science of medicine or the law in providing diagnoses and offering advice. If a person finds herself or himself thrust into the news for whatever reason, the person is expected to understand that the journalist is merely acting as a professional in making the person a subject of news coverage.

The professionalization of journalism also has led to a separation of the journalists from the topics they cover. Journalists are not expected to be—or even allowed to be—active in their communities because it might adversely affect their professional neutrality—or objectivity. This sets the “professional” journalist off from the “citizen” journalist, who often is involved in journalism as an outgrowth of her or his civic engagement. It may well be that what journalism has lost through this detachment is an understanding of what really is important to the community itself. The journalist may not understand the importance of a zoning decision to put a gas station near a residential neighborhood because the journalist does not live there and does not know the people. The journalist is much more likely to know the proponents of the zoning change—the governmental officials, the planning staff, and the developers—than the citizens affected. This has led to a journalism of detachment, and a loss of connectedness with the audience members the professional is supposed to be serving.

Finally, the entrance of “amateurs” into the content market has made it increasingly clear in recent years that while media may have served as watchdogs of the government, there is a serious need for someone to watch the watchers. Citizen journalists have uncovered major factual errors in mainstream media stories and have reported on critically important stories such as the politically motivated firings of numerous U.S. Department of Justice attorneys across the United States that had been either completely missed or completely ignored by the mainstream news media.

As hypercompetition continues to erode the resources mainstream media devote to quality news coverage, this watchdog role of citizen journalists on the watchdogs of mainstream media is likely to become increasingly important. However, that almost inevitably will lead to an increasingly steep downward spiral for news industries. As media quality declines, citizen journalists will point out ever more numerous errors of both commission and omission on the part of the traditional media. That, in turn, will further erode the professional standing of, and consumer confidence in, the traditional media, further undercutting its financial stability. Almost

inevitably the role of the citizen journalist will become more central to national and international communication processes. But as some observers have pointed out, few citizens have the financial resources or time to devote to truly in-depth stories, stories that require extensive research or that might trigger the need for legal protection from threatened legal action (Jones, 2009). Indeed, already there are signs in the United States that the erosion of financial strength among media companies is emboldening government agencies and others the media are investigating to fight back with stonewalling or threats of legal action. It appears that some targets of media investigations may believe it is becoming less likely that media firms will incur the costs necessary to pursue a story that has generated costly backlash. If major media corporations are becoming less able or willing to fight such battles, how much less likely is it that citizen journalists will pursue such stories. Thus, hypercompetition clearly has clouded even further the questions of news quality and professional ethics that have long challenged society.

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