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The Batten Lecture  
Davidson College  
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## **Democracy and the Democratization of News**

*A Question Hangs in the Balance: Will both be Well-Served?*

This evening is a highlight of a very special time for me.

I have been blessed since August with the opportunity to both teach and learn in the classroom. My sincere thanks to Dean Clark Ross and President Tom Ross for extending an opportunity that has been both challenging and fulfilling.

Each day on campus has underlined for me the strength and power behind Davidson College's commitment to its purpose of preparing students for lives of leadership and service.

It is easy to see why James K. Batten loved and believed in this place so deeply. For me it has been especially meaningful to serve in a professorship that honors him.

Jim Batten was revered by those of us who served as editors in Knight Ridder. Many, like me, felt his hand guiding our careers. We cherished his belief in and support of quality journalism. He cared about the civic, social mission of newspapers. He cared deeply about all who worked for and with him.

When I think of Jim Batten I often think of the moment, 16 years ago tomorrow, when the editors of his company summoned him, with the aid of Jean Batten, from cancer treatment to a meeting on Key Biscayne. There, they surprised and honored him by endowing an award in his name. Each year, the Batten Medal – I am quoting from the description – “celebrates a body of work that represents the journalistic values of compassion, courage, humanity and a deep concern for the underdog.”

Words have meaning. And the words attached to the award summed up, in short but poignant form, how the editors felt about Jim and how they characterized the values he stood for.

The opportunity to reflect on those words and Jim's work – and, for my wife Carol and me, the chance to re-connect with Jean Batten has made this fall at Davidson very gratifying.

Jim Batten's deep commitment to civic life and journalism provides a frame for our discussion this evening.

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James Madison, were he here with us, might find our times perplexing.

As the drafter of the First Amendment, his strong belief in a free press as a check on government and governors has been embraced and embellished.

Madison would likely be pleased by the vitality of press freedoms. Supreme Court decisions have effectively eliminated the barrier on prior restraint of publication. The idea of seditious libel finally melted away with the Court's 1964 decision in the *New York Times vs. Sullivan*.

But Madison, who we will presume would have been an early adapter of new technology, might be less sanguine about journalism and democracy beyond 2010. Or, at least, his vision would be blurred.

Let's put his 18<sup>th</sup> century vision in our frame: He believed in the social, or public service mission of journalism. People are the ultimate sovereigns and it is the role of the press to serve their need for information. The success of our democracy relies on this virtuous circle.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Madison would find this picture:

- The pamphleteers of colonial times have given way to Internet bloggers. One can be as scurrilous as the other.
- Newspaper journalism, after enjoying what some call its "golden age" in the final decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, is in decline. Fewer journalists are reporting fewer stories. Fewer pages of news are being printed. Print newsrooms, while remaining the largest engines of journalism, are simultaneously working at transitioning to the Internet. Advertising revenue, historically the largest lifeline for newspaper journalism, is shrinking.
- Television, where survey research indicates most people get their news, only very sparingly covers local and state government. Audience for national news on major networks is continuing its decades-long descent and the number of correspondents is declining.
- Local radio is mostly bereft of news coverage, though heavily populated by talk shows with a political point of view. National Public Radio addresses national news in a meaningful way; its audience is, relatively, elitist and small.
- Cable television is growing and, with it, what some call the "journalism of affirmation." Advocacy channels and programs lead in audience share and

collect money from both advertisers and cable subscription fees, an advantage over broadcast and its heavy reliance on advertising revenue alone. Most advocacy/pseudo news programs also have relatively low production costs, making cable news a bit of a win-win. Programming on cable is built around commentary and argument and relies very much on the declining volume of journalism produced by the professional journalists at newspapers and major networks.

- There is a crisis in confidence on all fronts. Gallup found in September that 57 percent of Americans have little or no trust in the media.
- The Internet is full of promise. However, there are many unanswered questions about online revenue. Advertising may never cover the 80 percent or so of costs it once did for newspapers. The majority of citizens believe “information wants to be free.” News organizations that nurtured the no-fee model are struggling to find a way to be paid for content.

Given that brief picture of the media landscape, where are we now and where might we be headed?

We are in a time when information is omnipresent. It is coming at us, still, on paper and through the commercial airwaves. It is flying into our Web worlds, answering our queries on a variety of new devices, and re-making our phones into home offices.

There is more information to process than ever, enough to stress our brain function. The gathering and distribution of news and information has been revolutionized and streamlined by Internet-spurred technologies. Access has been democratized. We can choose the news and information we want. We can get it wherever and whenever we want it. No guidance necessary from Big Media.

There is less journalism, at least of the kind that met Madison’s premise for the press in our society. As he put it, the press must be free to “canvas the merits and measures of public men.”

That would mean “watchdog” reporting, which encompasses long-term -- and expensive, time-consuming -- investigative reporting and the everyday surveillance of government and business. By the reality of numbers this important reporting is severely threatened. The American Society of News Editors employment survey charts the decline in reporting capacity -- 15,000 fewer newspaper newsroom jobs from 2000 through 2009, a drop approaching 30 percent. So far, it doesn’t appear the brakes have been applied; cutbacks continue.

Clay Shirky, who has studied and written widely about the effects of Internet technology, perhaps put legacy media's challenge best. He says, "The old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place."

For some who worry about such things, and I think Madison would join me here, there is an important question about the short and long-term effect on our democracy of journalism's unsettling journey through the democratization of media.

Will journalism be shattered along with its longtime print business model? Or will it re-emerge more vibrantly in digital form?

No one has the answer to those two questions.

But perhaps we can learn from understanding what's happened to media during these last 10 to 20 years and exploring what we can discern from the work done so far on the frontier of the technological revolution.

A good portion of what happened in the past 20 years to so-called Mainstream Media was its own fault. That differs from the view of those who see digital technology as a lone villain. I can see this more clearly now that I am removed from the business of journalism after more than a 40-year run. And I confess that my own experiences color my lens.

To some extent, newspapers were for a long period beginning in the late 60s and early 70s able to operate like the guy who was born on third base and thought he hit a triple.

The great threat of local television's mass advertising appeal waned as multiple stations entered each market and as cable channels mushroomed.

Newspapers were left alone as mass-market vehicles in near-monopoly situations. They had not been noticeably disturbed by a downward march in circulation penetration that began in the 1920s. And they were able to ignore the reality that, post-television, newspapers were getting a smaller share of the total advertising pie. Because the overall pie was growing, smaller was still larger for newspapers most years in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Technology enabled huge savings in efficiency as linotype machines, proofreaders, and printers disappeared. Inserting equipment for ad supplements replaced fulltime and casual labor. Presses became more efficient and faster. Page widths were shrunk frequently, decreasing newsprint costs.

Many newspaper companies went public and, for a sweet long run that lasted deep into the 90s, convinced Wall Street that they were a growth business. All those technological savings, pricing power leveraged as the only mass medium in town,

and cost management enabled the newly public companies to grow margins and overcome their reputations as mature, heavy-iron businesses.

Some of those technological savings were spent in newsrooms, which grew as some companies spent money on new specialized sections and zoning. Journalism got better and journalists more professional.

Circulation weakness ultimately became a serious issue for advertisers as more opportunities for their messages – direct mail, cable and nascent Web advertising – appeared. It became more difficult to grow profit margins. Companies began cutting costs. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century opened, the ax most prominently fell in newsrooms of some public companies that felt pressure from large shareholders. Then came the 2001-02 recession and the economic collapse of late 2008.

Advertising revenue in the newspaper industry, which had been \$48.7 billion in the first year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century dropped to \$34.7 billion in 2008 and further to \$24.8 billion in 2009. The decline continues, albeit at a slower pace. Assimilating to its shrinking size, the industry shed huge numbers of employees.

In this decade, some major companies have been sold under the weight of pressure from investors and/or debt burdens from acquisitions made at the loftier prices of good times. A number are unwinding in bankruptcy.

I've mostly ignored, to now, that there was another issue that was a significant weight on newspaper operations. That would be the Internet and its effect beginning in the mid-1990s and more so as the new century began. Newspaper managers were not blind-sided. They saw the Web coming. By the early 90s it was a significant concern. Most prominently at stake was the huge classified advertising pie that had grown to nearly 40 percent of revenue at many newspapers. Attention – considerable research and development effort – was focused on the employment, auto and real estate advertising categories.

As the march of Craigslist, Monster.com and others demonstrated, the worries were well founded.

Yes, too much thinking at newspapers was likely concentrated on protecting the core print product – where the money was. But frankly, this was new territory and answers, even good ideas, were scarce. Many say we are still no more than midway, if that, through the technological revolution being spun by the Web. Another revolution is sure to follow.

The disintermediation is now in full flight. In American cities where large regional papers once thrived, newsroom staffs are in many cases half the size they were only few short years ago. Or less than that.

Two caveats to this tale of destruction:

- First, the decline in journalism is not as severe in many small towns and cities where there never was a bubble to burst and where Craigslist is not -- at least yet -- a threat. Also, in many but not all of these small cities owners of newspapers had financed most of their operations and growth with cash and avoided the burden of crushing debt.
- Secondly, it is fair to say that, though they are not without issues and have been bruised by the country's deep recession, the large national news organizations -- the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and USA TODAY -- are not as threatened as the large regional newspapers. For now, they operate with different advertising and circulation structures than traditional newspaper models. They have not relied heavily on significant classified advertising revenue. They appear to have sufficient pricing power at the newsstand and for individual subscriptions. And they have larger Web opportunities already being exploited.

Those two caveats don't erase the issue that concerns me. With few exceptions, in the top 150 metro markets, the large engines of journalism -- remember those job losses at 15,000 and counting -- have been laid low and their future is uncertain. Our society, and democracy, have a huge stake in how, when and how much quality journalism emerges.

So what is it about this journalism that is so important? I'm avoiding a broad definition and going to the heart of what we don't want to slip away. Leonard Downie Jr. and Michael Schudson in their report, done at Columbia University, called it **independent news reporting** -- independent, original, credible reporting. By that, Downie and Schudson mean reporting that, they say, "not only reveals what government or private interests are doing but also what lies behind their actions."

For news organizations, distributing information that enables citizens in an evermore complex and busy society to discern truth for themselves is not merely an idealistic goal. It is the reason for existence. And though not every story is popular or profitable, independent news reporting is the route to both building trust and to commercial success.

Tim McGuire, who as president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors was one of my former bosses, has -- as he customarily does -- put the fundamental mission of the news business simply and straightforwardly. He says it this way: "We've got to tell people stuff they don't know."

Before discussing prospects for the future of journalism and democracy, it is appropriate to acknowledge some other forces that have been at work in the diminution of print journalism.

Jack Fuller, who some years ago crystallized the essence of what journalists do in an important book titled “News Values,” has made another contribution with a deep look at the crisis in journalism amidst the information explosion. Researching his new book, “What is Happening to News,” Fuller spent time with research and researchers exploring brain function and recent dramatic breakthroughs in neuroscience.

He found our brains, wired by the experiences and threats dealt with by our ancient ancestors, were not well prepared to handle the onslaught of information now bombarding us.

Neuroscience defines one of four factors Fuller identifies that, he says, “at the close of the century came together to reshape the way people take in news.” His study also arrived at a plausible rationale for journalism to capture audiences amid the clatter of technology and the clutter of news. More about that soon.

Fuller saw these three additional factors that joined neuroscience to undermine traditional journalism’s appeal:

- First, a deep current in American history that made us ready to rebel against experts, including traditional journalists. Think about where experts had led us: Vietnam, assassinations, urban riots, Watergate, Iraq, an economic recession or depression, depending on your own situation. And 9/11 happened despite our supposed military and counter-intelligence superiority.
- Second, a separate current in Western intellectual history promoted deep skepticism about how humans could know reality and understand one another. How could anyone be seen as “neutral?” Whose so-called expert opinion do you trust? Any complicated statement is value-laden. Very often these days people say, “it all depends on your point of view” or “you are where you sit.”
- Third, an information technology appeared that facilitated rebellion and embodied skepticism. The technology also presented the human mind with unprecedented cognitive and attention challenges. The democratization of media put readers and viewers in control. Anti-elitism is in vogue.

Now here is more, and admittedly in very short form, about what neuroscience offers in the battle for audience. Remember, as Fuller says at the outset of his book, “Attention is the prize, which becomes more valuable as demand for it grows.”

Remember that our brains are programmed by the experiences of our ancestors. Know also that a small, almond shaped structure in the brain – the amygdala – is centrally involved in human response and is important in the emotions of fear and anxiety.

As Fuller writes: “Emotions are able to take command of the information processing power of the brain in the moment and focus it on something important. Emotions play the central role in determining what is important.”

In the interest of time and at some risk at not doing Fuller’s work justice, for purposes of now we just need to understand this: emotion is an essential key to getting attention or, as journalism needs, a larger audience.

Look where the audience has gone: Reality television, argumentative talking heads, Fox and MSNBC, YouTube, Oprah, John Stewart’s fake news, and celebrity, squared. Then there’s the Internet, pulsating as it does through laptops, PDAs, telephones. That’s only a short list. But all are getting attention – with emotion as a driving element.

Print journalism has not been noted for capturing emotion. In the earlier referenced “golden age” recently ended, journalists distrusted emotion. It could get in the way of the objective process.

That was a problem unrecognized by many for too long.

Jim Batten, however, was among those unashamed to point out the importance of newspapers to deeply engage as well as inform their readers.

He saw the need to communicate and connect with readers as urgent and imperative. In the Press-Enterprise lecture at Riverside, California, in 1989, he made this clear. “The journalistic messages in which we take such pride,” he said, “are meaningless unless they are received and digested.”

He admitted that as one of the many who was drawn to journalism by an intense interest in public service, he had believed early in his career that newspapers should not aspire to be loved. As he put it, “I thought newspapers should aspire to respect, and nothing warmer than that. I no longer feel that way.”

He explained that respect alone was not enough, that respect and nothing more could be cold and devoid of emotional attachment.

Listen to his important and prescient words on the subject:

“These days,” Jim said, “in addition to respect, I shamelessly covet affection for our newspapers. I want them to be warm and caring and funny and insightful and human, not just honest, professional and informative.”

There are lessons in Jim Batten’s words for what will yet win the day as journalism’s future emerges.

In the search for attention, we are left with the question of how to utilize emotion without being manipulative. But utilize it journalism must while it finds the formula that will earn readers interest and trust as the 21<sup>st</sup> century briskly moves the quest for news away from print. Unlike the more formidable barriers of rejection of experts and deep skepticism, it is quite possible to creatively address and surmount the challenge that emotion has presented. Whither that we had all started earlier.

Accomplishing this would be a welcome assist in legacy newsrooms and among entrepreneurs in the search for a business model to grow and sustain independent reporting.

It is not important what forms a solution takes. We can't envision all the possibilities for delivery platforms as they multiply at a dizzying pace. It is critical, however, that the journalistic function survives and is enhanced.

Can those large journalism engines be saved before they atrophy to extinction? Perhaps.

Or will new engines take shape, build scale and gain force? Perhaps.

It's not an either or matter, actually. Any combination of successful ventures would be a good thing for the preservation and enhancement of the independent news reporting so essential to our democracy.

What is needed is scale enough to support independence of journalistic pursuits and uphold ethical standards. Any successful journalism business model will also offer the news judgment, or sense-making, function that helps its audience sort through important issues in a time-efficient way.

I've just described in short-form what legacy newsrooms have historically done. It is not a simple or inexpensive process. In those newsrooms now, the challenges are many and the stress is high in the struggle to find the future.

Amid the empty desks of the departed, smaller staffs are furiously searching for a financial model that will support print in the near-term and online journalism for the long-term.

Reporters and editors are doing more with less. The print product continues to be processed, but with fewer stories and fewer eyes to edit and proofread. If you are still reading on newsprint, you may have noticed less news and a rise in typographical errors. You would be in the majority.

Grim reality has reshaped ambitions, generally peeling staff away from all but the local news mission. National, international and even state government news have gone away or been relegated, as possible, to brief wire service coverage. Editors are juggling personnel to hold onto coverage that makes them distinctive. They are

forming alliances, sometimes with former competitors, to provide coverage they can no longer produce independently.

Many editors are also signing up volunteers – call them citizen-journalists or pro-am partners. These folks have time, expertise and care deeply about their society. Already, they have helped news organizations piece together investigations, capture trends and cover elections. Often, they have provided the first words, voice, photos and video from major news stories. They will do more.

Fortunately, for now many editors are protecting “watchdog” or investigative reporting, the heart of journalism’s public service mission. Also, public-spirited foundations and individuals have recognized the deficit in investigative reporting and are offering assistance. They have come together to fund teams of reporters, nationally and regionally, to help fill the void. Their work is now being shared on the Internet and in print.

Amidst all of this change, the combined print and online audiences have delivered more eyeballs than ever to the journalism of those diminished large engines. However, significant advertising revenue has so far not followed the increased audience online.

Newspaper operators continue to experiment with various advertising initiatives and are becoming more aggressive with subscription or metered models of charging for online content.

It is not clear when or if these online revenue models will be successful.

The future of print is not clear, either. How long will it make financial sense to produce newspapers seven days a week? Is there a select niche audience willing to pay more of the cost of content, printing and distribution?

We are left with two more unanswered questions:

First: Will the slow, upward trajectory of online revenue speed up soon enough to keep sizeable existing newsrooms for independent news reporting from dying?

Second: In what time frame will robust new engines of independent news reporting emerge from entrepreneurial, online roots?

We have no choice but to hope for positive answers sooner rather than later.

In the meantime, too many engines of journalism have already been diminished. It is not just a problem for journalism. It is a problem for democracy. Our society depends on independent news reporting as the basis for rigorous debate to chart its course.

The troubling reality is that the continuum of quality journalism and independent news reporting remains uncertain in much of the United States. Depending on where you live, perhaps with 50 percent or fewer journalists than covered your community two or three years ago, the deficit of information is real.

It appears democracy already has some catching up to do.

Although it may not sound so amid the negative notes, like Madison I'm a bit of a romantic about the value and necessity of a strong free press. And I believe ultimately that in this country journalists will find a way to live up to Madison's vision.

Thank you very much.