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# A Short History of Journalism for Journalists: A Proposal and Essay

*James W. Carey*

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James W. Carey was a Shorenstein Center Fellow on leave from his faculty position at Columbia University when he wrote this article in 2003. Carey, who died on May 23, 2006, was a preeminent journalism theorist. He is noted for his “ritual theory” of journalism, which posits that journalism is a type of drama as opposed simply to a means of public communication. Carey joined the Columbia Journalism School’s faculty in 1992 after having been professor and dean of the College of Communication at the University of Illinois. Few scholars could match his writing skills and fewer still could match his intellect. All that was combined in a thoroughly decent man who, though teaching in New York City, held tight to a lifelong devotion to the Boston Red Sox. The Shorenstein Center is fortunate to have had him as one of its fellows, and through its *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, to have the honor of publishing one of the last articles he wrote.

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Journalists generally do not know much about the history of their craft. Like most professionals, they think the craft was always practiced pretty much as they do it today, except that a generation back was a golden age before Rupert Murdoch invaded North America, cost accountants took over the newsroom, and Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity began peddling ideology while calling it journalism and reportage. Journalists are hardly alone in their indifference to the past. Doctors know little of the history of medicine; lawyers know little of the history of law. In truth, one only need master contemporary practice to successfully pursue any of the professions. Alfred North Whitehead turned this into an axiom when he argued that a discipline (he was thinking of physics) that hasn’t forgotten its founders is immature. Journalists, like other professionals, master practice without raising too many disturbing questions about how things were done in the past or might be done in the future. Nonetheless, journalists would benefit from a more systematic understanding of the past of the craft.

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The materials to do that are not easily available, however. Journalism history, with a few notable exceptions, takes the form of 1,000-page comprehensive surveys that are only read under the forced discipline of the classroom or specialized monographs so arcane as to be interesting solely to the already initiated.

This proposal, a promissory note really, is to make available a brief history of the important events and issues, shorn of the apparatus of scholarship, that have not only shaped the past of journalism but live on as problems in the present. The issues and problems are of my own choosing. Still, it is hoped that the book that eventually emerges will illuminate the past in an interesting way to provide some comfort and solace to those perpetually unhappy with the craft and to convince those who do nothing but defend journalism that current American journalism is not the last word on how journalism should be practiced but one attempt, at once successful and flawed, at rendering the world comprehensible. The essay that follows principally highlights some of the preconditions of journalism and sets up the background by which contemporary practice can be judged.

### **Local Knowledge**

“Like sailing, gardening, politics and poetry,” journalism is a craft of place; it works by the light of local knowledge. What journalists know and how they know it, what journalists write and how they write it, what stories interest journalists and the form that interest takes, is pretty much governed by the here and now, a “to know a city is to know its streets approach to things.” Journalists are rarely interested in what is general and universal, concentrating instead on what happens in this time and this place, which is one of the factors that make it difficult to write a history of the craft. This localism, even ethnocentrism, can be variously rendered. *We* can mean we members of a congregation, practitioners of a craft, possessors of a common race, gender, ethnicity, but most often, it refers to “we fellow citizens” of a country, state, or region. As David Nord (2001) has argued, journalism is the means by which “a variety of public communities have been constructed, including religious elites, political factions, reform associations, ethnic groups, cultural interest groups, people who live in cities and people who form a nation. Journalism is by nature public—publication means to make public” (pp. 2–3).

The principal task and consequence of journalism is to form and sustain particular communities. Journalism forms them not only in space but also in time, within a particular temporal horizon: today, this week, this month, or this year but always in the now, the immediate. While tentative and perishable, journalism also forms a permanent public record, and as a result, other forms of writing—fiction, history, and drama—are parasitic off journalism. Journalism may not produce a reliable record at every turn, but it is the record we share in common.

Readers, viewers, listeners bring expectations to journalism about what a story is or should be, what they need to have in such a narrative, and these expectations form a conceptual aura or presentational context surrounding the story. This is the prestructure of the story and varies widely across journalistic communities.<sup>2</sup> Despite the national particularity of journalism, there are some similarities in the ways journalism is practiced around the world and how the craft itself evolved. Journalism seems to move through relatively fixed stages of development, as described, for example, by catchphrases such as *revolutionary*, *public*, *commercial*, *partisan*, or *independent*. Such words name the prestructure of the stories journalists tell. These stages vary widely in length and detail among cultures, and the only commonality may be their sequence. In this essay, I want to describe some of the preconditions of journalism to pave the way for a longer examination of the tradition of independent journalism that has dominated American news media for the past hundred years or more. This tradition is under extreme pressure at the moment from forces that are political, economic, and cultural. Indeed, the age of independent journalism may be over after a successful hundred-year run. It is the hope of this monograph that a better understanding of the relevant history might help journalists grasp the significance of this moment and perhaps to see directions of growth and reform in the practice of this valuable craft.

## In the Beginning . . . A Prehistory

A few years back, a minor academic skirmish broke out between historians Mitchell Stephens and Michael Schudson over the question of whether news (and reporting) was eternal or temporal, whether it be traced to the origins of humankind (Stephens) or was a two-part invention of the nineteenth century: the first part being the appearance of the news worker who plied a full-time craft and the second the invention of the modern industrial organization, late in the nineteenth century, to systematically gather and mass produce a product known as news (Schudson). Neither said much about journalism, which was taken to be simply a synonym for news and reporting, nor was anything said about narrative or stories, the form in which news and reporting are generally made available. As a result and as is usual in such conflicts, the protagonists pretty much argued-by one another, and the discussion faded away without resolution (Schudson and Stephens 1997).

However, we can agree with both Stephens and Schudson: News and reporting are eternal, for no sentient creature, let alone a society, can survive without some kind of a monitoring and signaling system, however primitive, whereby threatening changes in the ambient world are recorded and disseminated. One cannot imagine a people surviving if they failed to report and take account of earthquakes and other natural disasters, war and other approaching mayhems, successes and failures in the economic struggle for survival, and to

be less utilitarian about it all, the exchange of gossip and social trivia, which are the grooming rituals of daily life.<sup>3</sup> If one hunts through the ancient record, one can find something that looks like a primitive means of recording disturbing changes in the environment and spreading the information about, often by archaic signaling systems and ordinary speech and in storytelling forms we today find primordial or merely curious: fable and legend, parable and song. We also have sufficient examples of extinct communities that failed to adapt to changing environments or became enamored of practices that cut down on their ability to monitor and respond to critical shifts in the world around them. Something is to be said, then, for looking for long continuities in human practices and experience, even in the area of news and reporting, if only to guard against what Harold Rosenberg called “the tradition of the new,” the belief that we or our near ancestors invented everything of importance.

Yet, Michael Schudson is surely right that something significant happened in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one of those epistemic discontinuities Michael Foucault made fashionable, a discontinuity that Rosenberg’s (1959) phrase, the invention of a “tradition of the new,” best describes: In cultural terms, this was a move away from what was predictable, archetypal, traditional, epic, heroic (*Everyman*, *Don Quixote*) toward that which was individual (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Louis XIV*), common, useful, unique, original, novel, new—in a word, news. The failure to fully appreciate those changes, to lose them in an “it’s just one damn thing after another” view of history, has contributed to a thin and truncated understanding of news and reporting just as assuredly as a blinkered view of what came before the modern world produces a deficit of understanding. News and reporting may not have been invented in the eighteenth century, but certainly, journalism was. Moreover, news and reporting in a meaningful conceptual or historical sense represent a particular and particularly modern hunger for experience—for the new rather than the old, the surprising and original rather than the unexpected and unpredictable, the novel and original rather than the reproduction of the past. As Schudson argued, an apparatus grew up in the nineteenth century to satisfy that hunger as the acquisition of information became systematic and cumulative (if not always reliable), the recording of events and occurrences more or less fixed as practices, and the records themselves made permanent, and relatively speaking, protected against common calamities such as failing memory and natural disaster.

The new class of merchants, bankers, and tradesmen were most in need of the new, the latest, the quickest, the most reliable, for their fortunes rose and fell with conditions in markets, and as for politics, they needed to know the likely actions of royal authorities that determined opportunities within markets. But the hunger for the new and latest and most reliable, for veridical records of happenings, was not limited to one group but took over as a dominant cultural appetite.

Words are important in such a discussion, and using *news*, *reporting*, and *journalism* as synonyms for one another produces much confusion. The word *journalism* comes from the French word for *day* and refers to the practice of keeping a daily journal or diary. For this practice to emerge on a significant scale, at least three conditions were necessary: The ability to read and write had to be widespread, cheap paper and writing instruments had to be easily and cheaply available, and a belief had to emerge that the life of the individual was important enough that it was worthwhile for someone to record the events, moods, happenings, and emotions—the passing details of one’s own life. But keeping a journal is not the same as keeping a newspaper.

In the first hundred years following the invention of the printing press (the period known as the incunabula), the manuscripts on parchment—the inheritance of the ancient world—were committed to type along with much of the oral tradition such as nursery rhymes, the lore of the crafts, and existing forms of drama and epic. In book form, these collections showed up on the shelf of printers and created new juxtapositions of knowledge—the art of lens grinding next to a book of natural philosophy. From these juxtapositions, new forms of writing sprang, which at the outset could not be easily distinguished from one another. What kind of book is this that mixes and scrambles genres from the past into a new configuration? Long before the Dewey decimal system, the question of where to shelve these news books—of what went with what—arose. Was this a work of history, a romance, a treatise on philosophy, or to speak of two of the newer inventions, was it a novel or journalism? Readers could not quite tell to which category Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* or *A Journal of the Plague Years* (1927) belonged. Both were stories, and both declared they were true. Eventually, it became established custom that the novel recorded imagined happenings in the lives of imagined individuals living in identifiable societies of the near present, whereas journalism recorded the verifiable happenings in the lives of particular individuals and specific communities. Still, readers could not always tell if they were reading, to coin a phrase, a factual fiction or fictional factual (Davis 1983: 24), whether they were reading a novel or a nouvelle, whether they were reading history or fiction or journalism. In fact, it took a considerable period and the intersection of a goodly amount of law, particularly libel law, to distinguish reliability between the novel and journalism on one hand and the epic, legend, myth, romance, and rumor on the other (Davis 1983). The fact that the French term *nouvelle* encompasses both the novel and journalism, that both are “new” in the sense of being contemporary, is evidence of the confusion. But the problem the printing press initiated has never gone away. The problem of where fiction ends and journalism begins is still with us, attested to by categories such as the nonfiction novel, roman à clef, and docudrama.

When the new habit or disposition to keep a personal diary in fictional forms—telling stories to oneself—or a journal recording the significant

events of the day in one's own life, a fixing of personal memory as serial biography, was socialized, made collective, the result was stories shared by a community. Journalism is the keeping of a serial biography of a community in a more or less fixed and regular way (monthly, weekly, daily, now hourly or moment by moment; as one radio station has it, "you give us twenty-two minutes and we'll give you the world"). Journalism transfers a private habit onto the community: the keeping of a collective record of the facts and events, important or merely interesting, in the collective life of a community: weather, disasters, prices, odd and baffling occurrences, comings and goings at court or congress, threatening events (war, famine, crop failure), gossip, and rumor. Journalism fixed social memory in a new form and depended, consequently, not only on accessible writing systems and inexpensive paper but new means of production (printing presses and easily made manuscripts), new means of storage or archive (widely dispersed libraries and government offices), and new means of distribution (public post offices, roads, and other fixed routes of delivery). Many of these elements had been available for some time, but they formed a new conjuncture in the eighteenth century with altered modes of politics and social organization that proved decisive.

The second precondition for journalism is vividly revealed by Robert Darnton's (2000) research into French history, drawing particularly on the files of the Paris police. Darnton has given us a remarkable description, however schematic, of a social group necessary for a journalistic tradition to form, namely, the appearance of the "the public." He tells a story that I paraphrase with some license and some additions that goes about as follows. In the first part of the eighteenth century, particularly in Paris, a new social formation began to emerge that at the outset did not have a name. It consisted of gatherings of people involved in a somewhat shady enterprise at certain predictable places throughout the city: squares, parks, boulevards, gardens, and coffee houses. For economy, he identifies this formation with one gathering place, the tree of Cracow. Here is how he describes the spot:

It was a large, leafy chestnut tree, which stood at the heart of Paris in the gardens of the Palais-Royal. It probably had acquired its name from heated discussions that took place around it during the War of the Polish Succession (1733–1735), although the name also suggested rumor-mongering (*craquer*: to tell dubious stories). Like a mighty magnet, the tree attracted . . . news mongers, who spread information about current events by word of mouth. They claimed to know from private sources (a letter, an indiscreet servant, a remark overheard in an antechamber of Versailles), what was really happening in the corridors of power; foreign diplomats allegedly sent agents to pick up news or to plant it at the foot of the tree. There were several other nerve centers for transmitting "public noises" . . . as this variety of news was known . . . where news bulletins were bawled out by peddlers of . . . facetious broadsides or

sung by hurdy-gurdy players. To tune in on the news, you could simply stand in the street and cock your ear.” (p. 2)

Darnton at one point calls the tree of Cracow a vegetable newspaper to signal the mixing of media, for in public places, talk and discussion, rumor and gossip, song and fable, the oral and written intermingled. As stories were told, they were written down and carried to other places, traded like currency, and some of the newsmongers started to eke out a living selling what was picked up in public squares. Of particular importance in staunching the appetite for information were the salons of the city, where the “public noises” were sifted to distinguish mere rumor from what was really happening. When “the parishioners” entered the salon, “they reportedly found two large registers on a desk near the door. One contained news, reputed to be reliable, the other gossip. Together, they constituted the menu for the day’s discussion, which was prepared by one of the [salon’s] servants, who may qualify as the first ‘reporter’ in the history of France” (p. 3). In a characterization from 1790, the “reporter” was described as going house to house asking, in the name of his mistress, “What’s new?” (p. 4). The parishioners read through the news so assembled, “adding whatever other information they had gathered, and after a general vetting, the reports were copied and sent to select friends” (pp. 3–4). The enterprising among the friends receiving the news later began to make money copying the letters by hand and selling them to people in the provinces who wished to keep up with the latest news from Paris. Via such a process, a new, modern circulatory system for political talk was born as *nouvelles à la bouche* was converted into *nouvelles à la main*, and subsequently, as technology and demand allowed, converted into printed pamphlets, journals, and books.

Darnton summarizes, emphasizing the role of discussion: “The communication process took place by several modes in many settings. It always involved discussion and sociability, so it was not simply a matter of messages transmitted down a line of diffusion to passive recipients but rather a process of assimilating and reworking information in groups—that is, the creation of collective consciousness or public opinion” (p. 26). What made this a shady enterprise was that all such activity was, strictly speaking, illegal because it infringed on the prerogatives of the crown. Talk of politics was a monopoly—“*les secrets du roi*”—a secret art restricted to sovereigns and their advisers. Strenuous efforts were made to control public talk by direct suppression, and subsequently, to control publishing in all forms by means direct or indirect: licensing, monopolies of printing, and punishment for seditious libel. To this end, the police and the apparatus of the state were deployed to contain all forms of domestic communication. As a result, printing gravitated elsewhere and was illegally imported, thereby necessitating other forms of state control of the commerce in news. Darnton tells how the monarch, disturbed because people were discussing



the king's business, dispatched spies to infiltrate and find out what was being said and by whom, resulting in long chains of arrests (pp. 23–25). Not surprisingly, a major subject of talk was the king himself, the royal bedroom, and royal affairs. Such talk and writing was neither idle nor harmless, because it had the effect, if not always the motivation, of delegitimizing royal authority, of reducing the monarchy to human dimensions and robbing it of the royal touch.

These practices of speaking, listening, writing, printing, and disseminating, new as a constellation if not in every case as individual items, required certain conditions if they were to be secured, perpetuated, and made effective. Darnton does not describe these factors as such, nor does he name the new group that gathered at the tree of Cracow and other Paris locations. They were, at the outset, a group without a name. The formation, new to the eighteenth century, came to be known as “the public,” for they fit none of the established categories or estates of society. They were often strangers to one another, but more importantly, they were diverse in background and occupation: artisans, diplomats or their agents, merchants and craftsmen, lower members of the court, servants who worked the salons or embassies of the city, people one did not normally see in congregation. It was the mixing of estates, the assembly of diverse people who were strangers to one another, that gave the public a distinct identity. The public was, in Robert Park's happy phrase, a group of people who gathered to discuss the news. The space the public occupied, geographically and politically, was understood ultimately and figuratively as the public sphere.

Darnton has some doubts about the usefulness of a notion such as a public sphere, but he acknowledges that the circulation of news and gossip had the effect of desacralization or delegitimation. He tells us that “after 1744, Louis never set foot in Paris again, except for a few unavoidable ceremonies” (p. 15); that reportage presented the inside story of politics in Versailles as power struggles pictured as what-the-butler-saw, reduced complex affairs of state to backstairs intrigue and the royal sex life. Still, it was a crucial ingredient in the collapse of the Old Regime. The overthrow of the Bourbon kings resulted from “a complex process that did not occur all at once but rather by fits and starts over a long time span” (p. 15). Fair enough, but Darnton has described in vivid detail the conditions of public life, the long and tortuous and hardly linear process by which democracies or republics emerged from monarchy in the eighteenth century.

The public sphere, symbolized by the gatherings at the tree of Cracow, is a space or region between the state and private life, between the apparatus of governance and the family, or the intimate sphere of emotional and financial support. It is, to modify Robert Park, a place where strangers gathered not only to read the news but also to create it and gather it. Individuals, emancipated at least momentarily from political control, could exchange opinions on

matters of common concern and interest. For a public sphere to form, urban life had to develop sufficiently for strangers to be regularly thrown into contact with one another and for common interests to be shared among people otherwise not linked by family, occupation, religion, or other established categories of social life. Moreover, there had to be newspapers, journals, and pamphlets—a record however unreliable—to provide a common focus of discussion and conversation among strangers. The public then was, by the standards of the eighteenth century, an open gathering of conversationalists, a debating society that acquired a political force as a representative of public opinion, despite the fact that it was limited by class and gender.

This public sphere originally formed around interests in literary matters when the arts partially escaped the patronage of the court and artists were forced to make their way in the market. In public, the meaning and significance of art were established by discussion and argument and not by the dictates and patronage of the court. The literary public sphere was transformed into a political sphere when economic production by the rising bourgeois class came out from under exclusive royal control as the licensing system failed to keep pace with the needs of society.

There were other conditions necessary to form a public sphere. For the public to gather, there had to be a public space: places where strangers could gather to discuss the news free from royal control. These spaces often had to be deliberately wrestled away from such control. Public space, in turn, depended on public habits, manners, and talents: the ability to welcome strangers, to avoid intimacy, to wear a public masque, to shun the personal, to clamp some control on affect, and in general, to achieve some psychological distance from the self. This is the key to the belief that public space was an arena in which there were expectations, however imperfectly realized, of rational, critical discourse in the ordinary sense that nothing in public was to be taken for granted, that efforts were undertaken to separate out rumor and gossip and trivia from established fact via argument and evidence, and that the speakers were responsible for giving reasons for believing in any assertion; there was no intrinsic appeal to authority. *Critical* and *rational* are terms that in our day have gone transcendental, to be debated as abstract and essential qualities, present or absent in the self. Darnton's description corrects, though not explicitly, this attempt to essentialize rationality. Rationality does not exclude emotion, passion, error, stupidity, congenital prejudice, or political purpose. Rationality refers to a set of ordinary human practices rather than a state of mind: a requirement to answer questions about any assertion, to be forthright, to disclose hidden motives, and to avoid dragging in notions such as God or Science to save an argument when it begins to go badly.

Looked at from another angle, the public was more than a group of people or a mode of discourse; it was a location, a sphere, and a sector of society. The

public sphere was a seat of political power. With the emergence of the public, power was no longer exclusively located in the state or its representatives or in the private sector—the household and company. Power was located, as well, in the world between the state and the private sector: in the public and in public discourse. And it was only in this sphere that power could wear the face of rationality, for it was the only sphere in which private interest might, could even in principle, be transcended.

Journalism emerges, first, through a long and complex process, particular to each society, in which fact and fiction need to be separated and reporting and social commentary distinguished from other forms of writing. Second, journalism develops as a device for calling into existence an actual social arrangement, a form of discourse and a sphere of independent political influence: to provide one mode in which public opinion might form and express itself. Journalism did not so much inform or educate the public or serve as a vehicle of publicity or as a watchdog on the state—the roles it would assume in later periods; rather, it reflected and animated public conversation and argument, furnished material to be discussed, clarified and interpreted, and kept a public record. The value of journalism was predicated on the existence of the public and not the reverse. For that reason, the “public” is the god term of journalism, the final term, the term without which nothing counts, and journalists justify their actions, defend the craft, plead their case in terms of the public’s right to know, their role as the representative of the public, and their capacity to speak both to and for the public.

If journalism and the public emerged in tandem in roughly the eighteenth century, if journalism was the daily diary of a community, what was the community and what was the context of emergence? If journalism was an agent of community formation, what was the nature and locus of the community thus formed in the eighteenth century? Journalism emerged most systematically where its development was harnessed to the growth of the nation-state and the spirit of nationalism. The most influential work on nations and nationalism in recent times has been Benedict Anderson’s (1983) analysis of print capitalism as the agent creating “the imaginary community of the nation.” Printing, Anderson suggests, defined the nation as a uniform reading space that hooked together small knots of speaking citizens. In his analysis, nations are defined as people who in the main never meet, never know one another in any ordinary sense, but who nonetheless identify with one another, assume they possess outlooks in common, and whose lives flow, by and large, in steady harmony and uncoordinated coordination. As Anderson puts it,

an American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous,

simultaneous activity. Each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half daily intervals throughout the calendar. What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned? At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world [the world imagined in the newspapers] is visibly rooted in everyday life. . . . creating the remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. (Anderson 1983: 39–40, bracketed material added)

I place this emphasis on the reflexive creation of journalism, the public sphere, and the nation-state to sustain a simple but basic point: The origins of journalism are the same as the origins of republican or democratic forms of governance—no journalism, no democracy. But it is equally true that without democracy, there can be no journalism. When democracy falters, journalism falters, and when journalism goes awry, democracy goes awry. The fate of journalism, the nation-state, and the public sphere are intimately intertwined and cannot be easily separated. In the modern world, in an age of independent journalism, this is a controversial assumption, for it seems to commit journalists to the defense of something, to compromise their valued nonpartisanship. It claims that journalists can be independent or objective about everything but democracy, for to do so is to abandon the craft. About democratic institutions, about the way of life of democracy, journalists are not permitted to be indifferent, nonpartisan, or objective. It is their one compulsory passion, for it forms the ground condition of their practice. Without the institutions or spirit of democracy, journalists are reduced to propagandists or entertainers. The passion for democracy is the one necessary bond journalists must have with the public, for they are mutually constitutive institutions. There are societies with newspapers and broadcasting stations that have no journalism. There are media everywhere, and all nations have a press—that is one of the things that defines a nation. But few nations have journalism or journalists. There are societies with people who call themselves reporters who do nothing but put forth party propaganda or represent the state. While independent journalists often, and often unconsciously, act as propagandists for the state, at least it is recognized as a corruption, a deviation from the real role of journalists and the real meaning of journalism.

A second reason for emphasizing the intersection of the formation of journalism, the public, and the nation-state is that the revolutionary moment, the moment of the creation of a public sphere in which illegitimate royal authority could be unmasked and protested against in the name of a new principal of

politics, remains the journalistic lodestar, and as such, is central to the ideology of journalism. Even more, at each journalistic crisis, the image and ideals, indeed, the language of the eighteenth century is the point from which all movements of reform begin. Just as each crisis in Western civilization has featured a return to classical Greece for inspiration, rejuvenation, and legitimization, journalists, like homing pigeons, retreat to the language of public rife and democracy to justify the remaking of the press. This is truer in the United States than elsewhere, for the eighteenth century is the moment of founding of both journalism and a new kind of nation, one that did not emerge from a previously existing people, and the legitimacy of both journalism and the nation are sutured together. While there were no salons in colonial or revolutionary America, there were public houses, the principal places of “public noises” and revolutionary activity. They were presided over by publicans who became publishers, forming the central node in the political communication system. These ground conditions were subsequently codified in the Bill of Rights, a fact that becomes clearer if we render the Constitution rather differently than is typical of the courts and lawyers, render it not as law but literally as a constitution, something that forms and creates not only a people but a people organized around a public sphere.

Today, we generally read the First Amendment as a loose collection of clauses: religion, assembly, speech, and press. These clauses in turn contain separable rights exemplified by Supreme Court decisions that we can understand as free-speech cases or free-press cases and so on. When read against the background of public life, however, the First Amendment is not a loose collection of separate clauses but a compact description of a desirable political society. In other words, the amendment is not a casual and loose collection of separate clauses or high-minded principles, and it does not award freedom of the press as a property right to journalists or any particular group (Carey 1992). On this reading, the First Amendment describes the public and the ground conditions of public debate rather than merely enumerating rights possessed by groups. It was only in the modern period that we developed the notion that the First Amendment protected rights and that the doctrine of rights could be used as a trump card to depress debate. Under my reading, the First Amendment was an attempt to define the nature of public life as it existed at the time or as the Founders hoped it would exist. To put it in an artlessly simple way, the First Amendment says that people are free to gather together, to have public spaces, free of the intrusion of the state or its representatives, and once gathered, they are free to speak to one another, to carry on public discourse freely and openly. They are further free to write down what they have to say and to share it beyond the immediate place of utterance. The religion clause, which might seem to be a rather odd inclusion, is at the heart of the interpretation. Religion was the fundamental social divide and division of

the eighteenth century. In a society that still spoke a religious language in public and private, heresy was the major sin, as is clear, for example, from Milton's *Aeropaqitica*, and therefore, the major reason for exclusion from the public realm and excommunication from public life. The religion clause merely says that people may not be excluded from public space and discussion even on the basis of religion. Today, religion is less problematic, and the vexing exclusions of recent years have been based on race, property, and gender. However, it was the religion clause that established the dynamic for further dismantling the boundaries and exclusions of public life. While journalism can be used to establish and promote religious communities, the overwhelming force of the new form in the eighteenth century was to transfer power from religion to politics, from a sacred to a secular or profane sphere. In a celebrated passage, Hegel underscored the reflexive relationship between the development of the nation-state, the newspaper, and secular societies.

Reading the newspaper in the early morning is a kind of realistic Morning Prayer. One orients one's attitude against the world and toward God [in one case], or toward the world [in the other]. The former gives the same security as the latter in that one knows where one stands (Rosenkranz 1977).

The modern, secular world was born when people began their day not by attending to God through prayer but to the nation through the newspaper. To preserve the distinction between the sacred and secular, even while recognizing how sacred ideas and beliefs underpin the secular world, is to insist there is both a realm of citizenship and a realm of orthodoxy, which is another way of stating the distinction between public and private.

## Notes

1. The quotation and paraphrase is from the first lines of Clifford Geertz's essay "Local Knowledge" (1981), though he was referring to the law and ethnography rather than journalism.
2. An illustration: In a conversation with the publisher of the most radical though independent newspaper in Italy, himself an extreme conservative, I asked how he could publish a left-wing paper given his own politics. His answer: "It makes me a lot of money." To American ears, the fact that a publisher actively promotes political views contrary to his own is radically improbable. The point is, the prestructure of Italian journalism is different than American journalism.
3. Indeed, gossip is a key, for it is, at least in the eyes of one biologist, Robin Dunbar (1996), central to understanding human evolution itself.

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