Salon.com and New-Media Professional Journalism Culture by Adrienne Russell
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Introduction: The Challenge to Traditional Journalism

The emergence of participatory journalism, journalism that includes readers into the editorial process, has prompted much discussion recently about the ongoing role of professional editors and reporters, as news, like all cultural industries, has been deeply challenged by the proliferation of new media. This new genre of journalism has been spurred in part by the development of web publishing tools and powerful mobile devices, combined with an increasing skepticism toward mainstream media, which have prompted readers to become active participants in the creation and dissemination of news. Video- and text-bloggers, do-it-yourself media activists, and professional journalists are vying for the attention of the public, struggling over the right to define the truth, and attempting to discover what form and practice of news production yields the most viable products.

This chapter explores these changes through ethnographic study of Salon.com, one of the longest-running and most widely trafficked independent journalistic outlets online. According to Scott Rosenberg, one of the site founders, Salon is "old new media" because since its inception most of its staff has been culled from the world of traditional journalism, either from mainstream outlets or from journalism schools. The site straddles old and new journalism categories as those categories have been elaborated in much contemporary analysis. Although emerging participatory journalism projects such as Indymedia (http://www.indymedia.org/en/index.shtml), Ourmedia (http://www.ourmedia.org/), and Associated Content (http://www.associatedcontent.com/) seem to be doing away with the need for professional editors and reporters, there are also emerging genres of online news that aim

to be non-traditionally professional. The cultural norms and practices that have developed at Salon over the past 12 years are significantly and consciously different from those that have guided magazine and newspaper journalists for decades. Nevertheless, although Salon staffers aim to disrupt the norms of traditional journalism, they are concerned with and constrained by many of the same basic variables that have long defined journalism — economic viability, accuracy, timeliness, quality and the desire to serve the public interest. By looking closely and more ethnographically at the norms and practices that are emerging in response to these age-old pressures, we can move beyond exaggerations about the death of professional journalism, and begin to better understand the ways new rules and traditions have evolved and are evolving from within the field.

News and the Culture of Journalism

Related approaches to studying news have developed based on the premise that the best way to understand the field is to look at what news and news work mean within the culture of journalism, and the larger cultures within which it exists, rather than attempting to study it from the outside as product or institution. Carey (1989) famously calls for a departure from the transmission view of journalism to a ritual view, which understands communication as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed." (23) Drawing on the work of Clifford Geertz, he suggests studying communication as culture in order "to understand the meanings that others have placed on experience, to build up the vertical record of what has been said at other times, in other places, and in other ways." (62) Along these same lines, Zelizer (1992) argues that journalism should be considered not only a profession but also an interpretive community, where

members are united by a shared discourse and by collective interpretation of key public events. In her analysis of coverage of President John F. Kennedy's assassination, she demonstrates the process by which journalists interpreted events in a way that argued for their legitimacy as storytellers. Ettema and Glasser (1998) approach investigative journalism as a form of social and moral inquiry and use interviews with journalists to explore the tensions and contradictions that characterize professional mainstream American journalism. More theoretically, sociologist Bourdieu (2005), in his analysis of what he called the journalistic field, argued that journalistic product is primarily shaped by the ways its members negotiate among themselves. Don't look to the readers, he said: "the essential part of what is presented in [the newspapers] *L' Express* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*, is determined by the relationship between *L' Express* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*." (45)

Journalism scholars, however, have focused their attention almost exclusively on the culture and products of mainstream professional outlets, which is only a small and shrinking dimension of contemporary journalism (Zelizer 2004). Dahlgren (1992) calls this the "metonymic character" of journalism scholarship, that is, the tendency to define journalism based on the study of only a small portion of news products and producers. "Consider the repertoire," writes Zelizer, "of candidates that would not currently merit membership under the narrowed definition of journalism: *A Current Affair*, MTV's *Week in Rock*, internet listservs, Jon Stewart, nakednews.com, reporters for the Weather Channel, and rap music are a few that come to mind (6) Although scholars are opening their perspective as alternative forms proliferate and increasingly capture public attention, an artificial

division remains separating the study of mainstream and alternative journalism forms and is manifest in the way scholars still mostly treat anything but traditional news practices as only tangentially related to news discourse (Russell 2007). As the practices, forms and technologies for creating and distributing news increase and become more diverse, such journalism scholarship becomes less and less relevant.

The failure to integrate emerging forms of news fully into the study of journalism is reflected in popular characterizations of the news media environment as either doomed or saved by new digital tools. Several recent books have been published that lament the detrimental effects on journalism of emerging technologies and alternative practices, arguing, for example, that the internet is the most recent in a series of information technologies that have worked to break up the mass audience for newspapers (Meyer 2004) and spurred young people to "tune out," creating a generation of the uninformed and thereby threatening "democracy itself" (Mindich 2004). On the other hand, books such as Dan Gillmor's *We the Media* (2004) celebrate new technologies for providing grassroots journalists with the means to challenge the corporate monopoly on journalism, transforming news from lecture to conversation, and news consumers into producers. Similarly, recent works on blogging[1] see the emergence of a whole new structure of politics and news driven by personal digital publishing and broadcasting tools and by the networks in which they circulate. These exaltations of new journalistic forms and practices are

[1] See for example *Crashing the Gates: Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics* (2006) by Jerome Armstrong and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga and *Blog!: How the Newest Media Revolution is Changing Politics, Business, and Culture* (2005) edited by David Kline, Dan Burstein, Arne J. De Keijzer, and Paul Berger and *An Army of Davids: How Markets and Technology Empower Ordinary People to Beat Big Media, Big Government*, and *Other Goliaths* by Glenn Reynolds

based on often compelling anecdotal evidence but by and large overlook the offline structures and power dynamics reflected in online communication.

My analysis draws on research on journalism undertaken by scholars such as Boczkowski (2005) and Allan (2006), work that avoids either utopian or distopian discourses by looking at social infrastructures when considering how new technical capabilities may be influencing cultures of producers (and consumers). During 2006, I conducted in-depth interviews with more than 20 Salon writers, editors and website architects at both the New York office and the San Francisco headquarters, a large portion of the site's relatively small staff. Drawing on these interviews[2] and on the site content, this chapter examines the approaches taken by the staff toward readership, sourcing, and the vaunted norm of objectivity—three foundational or central components of professional journalism as it has been defined over roughly the past 100 years. Positions toward these key components, I think, have been significantly adapted and in some cases reinvented within the journalistic culture at Salon.

Salon as a Distinctive form of Journalism

Salon was founded in 1995 by David Talbot—former arts, features and Sunday magazine editor for the *San Francisco Examiner*—along with a group of *Examiner* journalists. The group received funding from Adobe, Apple, and Hambrecht & Quist. Talbot (2001) describes Salon as an extension of *Image,* the *Examiner*'s Sunday magazine*:*

I always thought that, not to be boastful, the work Gary Kamiya and I were doing

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[2] All quoted material from Salon staff members is taken from interviews with the author unless otherwise noted.

and the kind of writers we were drawing on here in the Bay Area were of a

national caliber. But we didn't get much national attention. The internet, of course

allowed us to show the world what we can do. It was a way to have a national if

not international platform. All of these people who were a part of our posse [at the

magazine] are now with us, including Scott Rosenberg, who is Salon's managing

editor, and Joan Walsh who is our news editor, and was a freelancer at *Image*.

Laura Miller, our New York editor, was also a freelancer at *Image*.

Salon also has ties to the *Whole Earth Catalogue,* launched in San Francisco in 1968 by

Stewart Brand and a group of likeminded sixties-era artists and thinkers. Brand has

argued, like many, that *Whole Earth*-style countercultural ideals regarding

decentralization, personalization and the power of free information shaped the internet

and much of the early information age. In the words of Fred Turner (2006), these

activist-philosophers—Brand, and later Kevin Kelly, Howard Rheingold, John Perry

Barlow and others— turned digital media "into the emblems of their own shared way of

living and the evidence of their individual credibility…, giving voice to the era's techno-

social visions." (7) One of these emblems is The Well, one of the oldest and most

respected online communities, a combination of the Whole Earth community, computer

nerds, intellectuals, hippies and journalists. The Well was bought by Salon in 1999.

Rheingold, whose experiences on the Well inspired his book *Virtual Communities*, wrote

of his enthusiasm for the Well-Salon partnership in *Wired* magazine: "I have known

Salon staffers Scott Rosenberg and Andrew Leonard as Well regulars. Cliff Figallo, the

storied Well manager from the 1980s, and longtime Wellite Mary Elizabeth Williams are

in charge of Salon's virtual community… Salon couldn't be much savvier about what

works for the Well." (1999)

Salon has always been an interactive site to some degree, but the "salon" concept has always played out separately from the site's editorial content. In addition to the Well, the site supports a reader forum, Table Talk, and since 2005 maintains a section called Open Letters, where readers comment on articles and blogs posted by Salon writers. Since 1995 Salon has evolved from a bi-weekly magazine to a daily magazine with emphasis on U.S. politics and culture and with a left-leaning bent. The site is renowned, perhaps, as much for its content as for its longevity, riding as it has each wave of the web era and managing despite the odds to poke its head up time and again. As Scott Rosenberg, now vice president of new projects put it, "Salon's struggle to survive is the stuff of legends."[i]

When it went public in 1999, the performance of its stock offering was mediocre. In 2001 Salon launched Salon Premium, a pay-to-view content subscription, which signed more than 130,000 subscribers. Despite the money raised from subscriptions, the company announced in 2002 that it had accumulated $80 million in losses. In 2003 it made an appeal for donations to keep the company running. With the help of donations, an increase in subscriptions, and a resurgence in the online ad market, Salon managed to turn things around and, as of Spring 2007, was making small quarterly profits (OTC BB 2007). Throughout, Salon has had no difficulty attracting talented journalists and columnists, a feat Talbot ascribes to the increasingly marketing-driven mainstream news environment and its constraints on journalists. "One of the reasons why Salon and other websites have been so successful at attracting talent despite how risky it is -- particularly nowadays to go to work for a dotcom -- is because journalists were at the end of their

ropes. They felt they were completely stifled creatively because newspapers and

magazines and television had become so formulaic and marketing-driven" (Talbot 2001).

Salon features controversial and high profile columnists, such as Camille Paglia, whose

writing on contemporary feminism and academic theory have drawn heated criticism;

"politically incorrect" comedian Bill Maher; and torture expert military instructor

Malcolm W. Nance. Several of the site's writers teach at New York University's Cultural

Reporting and Criticism program, which has turned into a sort of feeder program for

Salon. Scott Lamb, graduate and former Salon editor, describes the program as offering a

form of highbrow alternative journalism training that combines journalistic skills with

the individual writer's voice, and focuses on a broad understanding of contemporary

culture, and the ability to analyze, criticize, and build an argument. Kerry Lauerman,

New York Editorial Director, contrasts the organizational structure at Salon with those of

offline outlets at which he has worked, describing it as a "flat company." Unlike

traditional magazines, where editors assign stories, at Salon editors create what Lauerman

calls "coverage spots," leaving particular story topic and content up to the writer. "The

whole purpose of Salon is to be bottom up," he says.

Salon dramatically entered the mainstream news agenda in 1998 by breaking the

story that Henry Hyde, then-House Judiciary Committee chairman and adamant supporter

of impeaching President Bill Clinton for his affair with Monica Lewinsky, had himself

conducted a four-year extramarital affair. When asked what aspect of Salon he is most

proud of, founding editor in chief David Talbot, responded:

I think we've broken story after story that the rest of the media refused to break, even when they had the story, because they were scared of the story, or they just didn't think it was appropriate. Conventional media is pretty narrow when it considers what is newsworthy—and worthy of their attention. I could mention a lot of stories; Henry Hyde would be one. I think that was important for the American people to know. I think that had an impact on sort of the impeachment bandwagon that was building for Clinton. I think it slowed it down. (Talbot 2001)

Another founding member of Salon, Douglas Cruickshank, echoed this sentiment when he described Salon as a "conventional news room with an unconventional willingness to take on stories that mainstream journalism will not." Perhaps most famously, in 2004, nearly two years after the initial images of detainees emerged from Abu Ghraib in Iraq, Salon obtained and published files and other electronic documents from a leaked report from the U.S. Army's internal investigation of the scandal. According to Jeanne Carstensen, Salon's managing editor:

The Abu Ghraib package was a journalistic opportunity that comes along very rarely, and it was a perfect marriage of an extremely important journalistic story that had to be told, and the right medium to tell it in. It was perfect because creating galleries of those photos on the web was the best way that you could ever hope to present such an archive and we were able to build it in such a way that now exists as the definitive record of the Abu Ghraib scandal.

The Hyde and Abu Ghraib stories form an important part of the collective memory of the Salon staff, notable for not only including material the mainstream media would not publish but also for the editorial reasoning behind the argument for running them. One or

both of these stories were mentioned as important moments in Salon's development by all but a few of the Salon staff members I interviewed. In repeated conversations , Salon writers and reporters articulate norms that have emerged in their newsroom as a response not only to new technologies but also to perceived new economic and political realities.

Salon and Readers

Salon caters to a distinct and loyal readership made up of what Rosenberg describes as "educated and intelligent people in both coastal and isolated places." The latter, he says, become the most avid readers, using Salon to connect with fellow-readers across the country. Unlike online news outlets now experimenting with participation by anointing readers *de facto* reporters, Salon maintains that good journalism depends on more careful management of reader contribution. So while Salon makes considerable effort to foster community among its readers, reader discourse largely takes place outside the realm of staff- and freelancer-produced content.

Lauerman says Salon "begins with the assumption that our readers are smart. I remember taking journalism courses as a university student and being told to write for a third grade reading level… At Salon we are not pandering. We're interested and we create content that we think smart readers would want to read." There is admitted tension at Salon between the desire to attract intelligent and vocal readers on the one hand and having to contend with their opinions on the other. At its inception, the Open Letters section, which allows readers to post comments at the end of each story, for example, drew readers in closer to the content but also spurred disagreement among the staff. According to Lauerman, the motivation for creating Open Letters was to give readers the opportunity to participate in the publication and to harness their intelligence. Instead, he

said, in many case "it just empowered people to say mean things." Indeed, letter authors often attack writers whose views don't match their own. "Lauren Sandler is a liar (I use the term advisedly)," reads one such letter on a piece written by Salon's Life editor. "Her reporting is bogus to the extreme. Salon has zero credibility if they keep her on staff." (Colorado Boy 2006)

Staff ambivalence about this kind of participation is shared by Salon readers. A poll taken around the time Open Letters was launched demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of readers did not want readers "to take over site content." Rosenberg, drawing on his pre-internet news experience, explained that "it's the same as it was at the *San Francisco Examiner*, when any type of change sparked an uproar among readers. Readers always hate change." Salon readers are now given the option of viewing all letters or a pared-down selection tagged "only editors' choices." Salon writers and editors have responded to letters directly for years, a contrast to the barriers that have long existed at traditional outlets. According to Scott Lamb, former Salon editor, "there is intentionally not a big wall between Salon readers and writers and editors."

A general understanding that responsiveness to readers is an integral part of the Salon product butts up against consensus that "editorial shouldn't pay too much attention to reader criticism," as Sandler put it. "The conversations that spin out of Salon stories can be great but we never let readers shape coverage, ever. We don't cater to readers or advertisers.... And that's something that's really different compared to glossies. I've had tons of articles killed [at offline publications] because they just didn't cater to the reader." There is a feeling among the staff that, as the curtain is increasingly pulled back on the

digital-era newsroom, journalists can as easily find themselves producing content to please involved reader-subscribers as they can to please involved corporate bosses.

Indeed, readers have come to expect Salon stories to reflect a certain ideological point of view and they have often resisted what Rosenberg describes as "Salon's commitment to accuracy" when it goes against the grain. He elaborates on his blog:

> At Salon, we don't make any claims to nonpartisanship but do maintain our own tradition of journalistic pride, and a commitment to fairness and giving the "other side" a say, and a belief in telling the story as you find it, not as your political preferences might dictate it. This has regularly placed us at odds with at least some of the readers who are funding our stories with their subscription dollars. (Rosenberg, 2006)

He gives the example of an investigation into 2004 election irregularities by Salon writer Farhad Manjoo, which asserted that Bush's victory wasn't a result of voter fraud. Although the story was well documented and argued, according to Rosenberg "it wasn't what many of our readers wanted to hear."

> Ever since, Salon has had a steady trickle of disgruntled subscribers cancel on us, citing these stories as a factor. It's never been enough to make any difference to our business, and it certainly won't stop us from doing further reporting on the subject, and presenting our findings accurately. But it's disheartening. (Rosenberg, 2006)

This awareness of reader preferences is heightened by the fact that Salon staff have access to statistics on traffic to each story. Many of the staff confess that they became

obsessed with tracking traffic to their stories when the data first became available, but they say that now that the novelty has worn off they pay less attention. Carstensen, Lauerman and others say they realize that not everything that should be covered is going to be wildly popular among readers. Yet the availability of such statistics adds layers to editorial discussion. According to Lamb, "the official line from [Executive Editor] Joan Walsh is that, if we think a story is important, we go with it, even if it's not going to get a lot of hits. She doesn't weight things toward the part of the publication that gets the most hits."

Salon journalists speak about readers in remarkably similar terms—as intelligent, opinionated, sometimes invasive, and always as an essential element to the Salon brand. At Salon there is no blurring line between reader and journalist. There is however an online dance, a controlled, wary and constantly evolving interaction. Readers are neither viewed as the passive consumers of the past (Carey 1986, 1989; Schudson 1978, 2003) nor as the expanded staff of a new-era populist pastiche-style journalism (Gillmor 2006; Rosen 2004).

Salon and Sources

Several Salon journalists describe one of the strength of Salon stories as born from their frequent use of sources that fall outside the realm of what is considered by more traditional news organizations as bureaucratically credible. Salon has its own distinct set of criteria to determine the desirability of writers and the acceptability of sources. Sandler says that she looks for writers with "a unique voice and something to say." She says, "Those sort of writers are what make Salon. That's the sort of writer that I am and as a freelancer I got very tired of seeing my pieces killed or sanitized or stripped of any voice

or point-of-view by editors." Lauerman says "sources used to inform Salon stories are broadened by the types of people we choose to write for us." Rather than looking at whether or not a source is authoritative, he says, "we look at whether or not the source will stand up over time, whether he or she is being accurate." Sandler explains that there is a concerted effort not to echo the point of view of the official sources typically used in traditional new stories. "We have a skeptical eye but probably in the opposite way that mainstream media does. We are most skeptical of anything coming from official sources, the [government]."

This strategy famously went wrong when in 2002 Salon ran a story by Jason Leopold that implicated Bush administration official Thomas White in the Enron scandal. The story turned out to be both plagiarized and unverifiable. The Jason Leopold scandal was mentioned over and over again in interviews with Salon staff members as a sort of cautionary tale about the need to be vigilant about the accuracy of writers and their sources. Soon after the story ran, Lauerman, the story editor, was contacted by the *Financial Times* to say that a large portion of the story was plagiarized from an article that had appeared in their publication. Then, as Lauerman puts it, "we fell down the rabbit hole." They discovered that they could not authenticate an email that said White was aware of the financial machinations of the division he ran. Salon retracted the story but not before *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman and several other national news outlets had picked it up, making Leopold's piece and Salon's error a national news story.

To Lauerman, Leopold's enduring popularity on the web despite the widespread coverage of this and subsequent incidents of fraudulent reporting represents a significant problem of some web-based journalism:

Leopold definitely represents the dark side of the web. There are so many positives to the internet and the ways it can equalize the playing field. But on the other hand people cling to places that just validate their worldview and the truth really takes a seat behind that. He could never get published after that scandal at an established news organization. Yet he became this sort of hero for throngs of people online. He capitalizes on the heavily partisan echo chamber aspect of the web.

The Leopold scandal looms large in the history of Salon because its journalists and editors work hard to maintain accuracy, without filtering out the point-of-view of the reporters. Indeed, in opposition to traditional aspirations toward objectivity in reporting, Salon strives to demonstrate that accuracy and opinion can coexist. "Salon is sort of a civilized filter," Lauerman says, and if Salon editors fail to filter out the likes of Leopold, then they have failed to do their job according to the standards they have set for themselves.

The Question of Objectivity

Although Salon has an Opinion section specifically reserved for editorial-style pieces that assert a particular argument, the classification of stories as either news or opinion is often ambiguous. "If it is a reporting-driven piece," Lauerman explains, "even if it has a point of view, we put it in the news. It's an opinion piece if it is clearly a rhetorical argument based on the writer's opinion." A separate opinion section was originally established by a former editor with a background in newspaper journalism who was bothered by mixing the two types of stories. Lauerman thinks the distinction is artificial and unnecessary.

"Our readers get the post-impartial or the post-objective thing," he says, echoing a sentiment voiced in many of my interviews with the staff.

Carstensen sees Salon content as more like that of magazines than newspapers. "There is a healthy tension between the enterprise of reporting—trying to tell a full and balanced and fair story—and allowing point of view to also come through in reported stories. I don't think the goal here is to be entirely neutral. And rather than pretend that's not there, which is what newspaper stories often do, you can allow that in magazine stories there's a sort of thesis that a writer testing out and do your best through your skills as a reporter. You also have to sell the reader on your reporting."

This view of objectivity as an outdated concept is articulated in journalist and editor conversations about what they do and also in the work they produce, which combines serious reporting and unabashed engagement with the issues and ideas raised by the reporting. Two weeks after Salon broke the story of Henry Hyde's affair with Cherie Snodgrass, it ran an editorial explaining their decision to do so. After verifying the story with sources that included Hyde himself, Salon decided to run the story, which came to them on a tip from Norm Sommer, a friend of Snodgrass's x-husband, who had been trying to "leak" the story for months to various publications including the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Miami Herald*. The editorial's tone reflected the controversial nature of the story and the heated politics of its context:

> Ugly times call for ugly tactics. When a pack of sanctimonious thugs beats you
> and your country upside the head with a tire-iron, you can withdraw to the
> sideline and meditate, or you can grab it out of their hands and fight back.

We hope by publishing today's article to bring this entire sordid conflict to a head and expose its utter absurdity. Does the fact that Henry Hyde engaged in an adulterous affair and tried to keep it hidden from his family and constituents mean he is not fit to hold public office? Absolutely not. And the same is true of President Clinton. It's time to put an end to the confusion of the personal and the political, this moralistic furor that has wreaked utter havoc with our system of governance. (Salon 1998)

Scott Rosenberg sees the Hyde story as "a defining moment that made Salon known as a sort of partisan outlet for progressive politics." He says that there is a "push and pull between general contrarian journalism and fairness and balance. While we are clearly identified with certain politics, we are serious journalists."

Salon staff points to its coverage of Abu Ghraib as another example of its post-objective professionalism. The site was leaked photos from an internal U.S. Army investigation. The resulting story and images generated a lot of controversy and drew a lot of readers. The photos spurred editorial discussion about the possibilities the story afforded Salon as a news site that could run hundreds of images without concern for space, versus traditional editorial sensibilities that gave the story's editors pause. Managing Editor Carstensen remembers the deliberations, how the editors played devil's advocate with themselves:

I think it took vision on the part of Salon to be able to put that many resources into that kind of a project and take the risk of publishing it. We had to think about it long and hard. Some people of course feel that it's an insult to our country, to our soldiers, that it's endangering national security. But we believe that the public

deserves to know the truth of what was done in our name. We spent a long time

researching everything, and to the best of our ability, presenting it without any

kind of distortion. That meant that by the time we really published it, the work we

did had a lot of integrity and we really did not get very much hate mail. I mean

the praise and appreciation far outweighed the criticism.

Both the Hyde and Abu Ghraib stories and the discussion surrounding them illustrate

Salon's particular brand of post-objective era journalism where the political value of

information is fully acknowledged and exploited. Lauerman says "at Salon there has

always been a perspective that most serious news organizations operate under this phony

guise of being objective and being free of any point of view, like robots, bloodless."

Discussion and Conclusion

Salon has been staking out ground in online journalism for more than a decade. Where it

once seemed brash in its bending of traditional norms—flouting objectivity in favor of

authenticity, working unofficial sources, encouraging writerly liberties, drawing on

reader reaction—it now seems brash for carving out a suddenly more traditional seeming

space, where a certain genre of first-wave online news professionalism is being defended,

advanced and updated, the audience both encouraged to participate and held at bay. The

shared understanding among staffers is that Salon offers a viable professional genre of

news, that the formula worked out at Salon over the years that newspapers and magazines

resisted any real change will prove increasingly a model of the professional journalism of

the future. On the one hand, Salon seems to have freed itself from the norms and

practices shaped by the "tyranny of authoritative facts" that communication scholars have

long suggested tends to serve officialdom and corporate interests (Schiller 1981,

Schudson 1978) and also to have moved instinctively, on the foundation laid perhaps by

the Whole Earth Community, toward the journalistic storytelling model that Carey, for

instance, called for long before the dawn of the world wide web, and for similar reasons:

"The public will begin to reawaken," Carey (1987) wrote, "when they are addressed as a

conversational partner and are encouraged to join the talk rather than sit passively as

spectators before a discussion conducted by experts." (14)

On the other hand, in an era when news blogs multiply faster than anyone can

count, and technologies appear that can exponentially increase "network effects" wherein

digitized words and images from every corner of the world and beyond link with each

other to tell us the stories of our realities,[3] Salon's evolution in its relationship with its

readers—those nonprofessional contributors looking for "excuses to be mean" or to resist

change—may prove most significant. Columns such as Salon writer Glen Greenwald's,

where a writer with much knowledge in a certain area produces in near realtime copious

original material based on likeminded reader tips and links, suggest at least one of the

ways journalism beat reporting may be evolving to include network-era readers and

technologies without "catering" to them.

As opportunities have increased for amateur cultural production, news audiences

have called into question the procedures and values of professional journalism that have

dominated news culture for the past century, increasingly resisting the content and

practices of mainstream news by creating alternatives and by using professional

journalism products as mere launching points to offer contesting points of view. What is

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[3] A recent example would be Microsoft's Photosynth software based on Seadragon
technology presented at the May 2007 annual TED (Technology Entertainment Design)
Conference. (http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/view/id/129)

noteworthy about Salon is its position on the threshold; the fact that it offers a measured

departure, replacing mass-media-era norms and practices with an updated but strongly

rooted journalistic culture and fairly distinct standards and practices. The surprising

consistency with which the Salon staff across the board, from executive and founding

editors to reporters and interns, can articulate the mission and culture of Salon-style news

writing is another nod, to me at least, to the transitional nature of contemporary news.

Nothing, in other words, about the Salon approach to news is taken for granted. There is

no reliance on any "received knowledge" about what constitutes journalism today. The

way Salon has re-negotiated and is re-negotiating the professional journalism norms and

practices developed over the past century is distinct to Salon as an institution and

recognized as such. The staff has seemed to internalize those negotiated norms and the

work they produce as a result is Salon-style news more than it is what in a recently

passed era might have simply been accepted as "news." Seen from this perspective, it

seems now that in studying journalism-communication, scholars must approach news

outlets and newsroom cultures distinctly, letting preconceptions about generalized

journalism culture fall away, including the obsolete but lasting theoretical dichotomy that

posits the continuing existence of a "traditional" journalism on one side and a "new-

media" journalism on the other. Further, if newsroom cultures are to be seen as especially

particular and distinct in this transitional era, where each one is on some advanced level

negotiating its culture and product, then it makes sense that an anthropological approach

to their study, which begins at direct observation, would be a most productive avenue of

inquiry.

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