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# News with Views: Postobjectivism and Emergent Alternative Journalistic Practices in America's Corporate News Media

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# News with Views: Postobjectivism and Emergent Alternative Journalistic Practices in America's Corporate News Media

Farooq A. Kperogi

*One of the inchoate yet defining features of journalism in the twenty-first century has been the profession's unannounced but nonetheless consequential repudiation of the time-honored journalistic ethos of "objectivity." In this paper, I argue that the gradual renunciation of the ideals of objectivity in contemporary journalistic practice, especially in the United States which birthed the concept, is both a return to journalism's roots and a back-handed, if profit-inspired, embrace of certain hallmarks of "alternative journalism," which emerged as a counterfoil to nineteenth-century notions of "objective journalism." I demonstrate my thesis by historicizing "objective journalism" and linking its emergence to multiple impulses: industrial capitalism's desire to capture as many eyeballs to consumer goods as possible using the instrumentality of the mass media; the seduction of nineteenth-century positivism, which conduced to the uncritical valorization of epistemic precision, measurability, the "scientific method," detachment, and other manifestations of naïve empiricism; and the turn-of-of-century delinking of political parties from newspaper business. I also argue that the progressive abandonment of the tenets of "objective journalism" by the legacy media is an artful hegemonic containment of alternative journalism's age-old ideals and singularities. This, I point out, is actuated by the imperatives of survival in an increasingly uncertain and fragmented media market, made even more so by the unexampled discursive democracy and diversity that the Internet has enabled, which has contributed to the flourishing of citizen and alternative journalism.*

*Keywords: News; Views; Postobjectivism; Alternative Journalistic Practices; Corporate; News Media; Mainstream Media; Citizen Journalism*

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One of the inchoate yet defining features of journalism in the 21st century has been the profession's unannounced but nonetheless consequential move away from the time-honored journalistic ethos of "objectivity." With the growth and flowering of "niche journalism" and the reality of audience fragmentation—encapsulated in phenomena variously characterized as "microcasting" or "narrow-casting"—the ideals of demonstrating apolitical, deadpan, and vulgar empiricist sensitivity to the viewpoints of a broad, diverse spectrum of the mass audience—which many have argued are, in reality, illusory and unrealizable ideals—are diminishing in salience and professional prestige.<sup>1</sup> This is evident in the fact that in America's corporate media universe, the most popular media outlets are now, for the most part, those that are unabashedly partisan and that, in essence, if not in name, disclaim pretenses to "objectivity," "fairness," and "balance" in news reportage and commentary. It is no accident that Fox News Network and MSNBC have a core of aggressively loyal viewers in ways other American cable news networks have not.

In this paper, I argue that the gradual renunciation of the ideals of objectivity in much of contemporary journalistic practice in the United States, which birthed the concept, is both a return to journalism's roots and a back-handed, if profit-inspired, embrace of certain hallmarks of "alternative journalism," which emerged as a counterfoil to 19th-century notions of "objective journalism." I demonstrate my thesis by historicizing "objective journalism" and linking its emergence to multiple impulses: industrial capitalism's desire to capture as many eyeballs to consumer goods as possible using the instrumentality of the mass media; the seduction of 19th-century positivism, which conduced to the uncritical valorization of epistemic precision, measurability, the "scientific method," detachment, and other manifestations of naïve empiricism; and the turn-of-century delinking of political parties from newspaper business. I also show how "objective journalism" activated the evolvment of "alternative" notions of journalistic practice and show specific instances of the adoption of alternative media practices by the corporate media. Finally, I argue that the progressive abandonment of the tenets of "objective journalism" by the corporate media is an artful hegemonic cooptation of alternative journalism's age-old ideals and singularities. This, I further point out, is actuated by the imperatives of survival in an increasingly uncertain and fragmented media market, made even more so by the unexampled discursive democracy and diversity that the Internet has enabled, which has contributed to the flourishing of citizen journalism.

### **Traditional Journalism Returns to its Roots**

In bemoaning the putative decline in the quality of modern journalistic output, it is now fashionable in popular commentaries to invoke the death or dearth of "objective journalism" as evidence of journalism's atrophy.<sup>2</sup> In the popular imagination, "objectivity," however conceived, has been constructed as an intrinsic, ever-present, and non-negotiable attribute of journalism. Deviation from it is considered a tragic betrayal of journalism's most inviolable article of faith. As Ryan put it, "If the media

enforce objectivity as a standard, they will flourish; if not, they will not . . .”<sup>3</sup> However, if indeed American journalism—and other journalistic models it has inspired in other parts of the world—is abandoning the precept of “objectivity,” it is not betraying journalism’s heritage. On the contrary, the move toward partisan journalism, especially of the kind typified by such cable news channels as Fox News and MSNBC, is actually a return to American journalism’s roots. Until the latter half of the 19th century, newspapers in America were established solely as the propaganda arms of political parties. Newspapers’ reportorial temperaments were therefore unapologetically partisan. They made no claims to being anything other than instruments for the vigorous espousal of viewpoints that were congenial to the interests, goals, and aspirations of their political patrons. They were, as Porwancher stated, “an integral component of political party machinery.”<sup>4</sup> Embrace of the notions of objectivity, fairness, and balance by the conventional mass media occurred much later in American journalism history.

Although in colonial American journalism printers venerated the virtues of neutrality and fairness, they were not journalists, nor did they conceive themselves as such.<sup>5</sup> They were tradesmen who understood their duties as nothing more than serving as disinterested vessels through which information passed to the general public. Their notion of neutrality consisted in a commitment to providing professional services to people from all political persuasions. In any case, because colonial newspapers avoided national controversies and merely reproduced news reports from the London press, they did not play a significant role in American national discourse at the time. A poignant illustration of the marginality of colonial newspapers in American public life can be gleaned from Clark and Wetherell’s insightful study, which revealed that of 1,900 stories published in Benjamin Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette* from 1728 to 1765, only 34 concerned events in Philadelphia or Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup> Thus, printers’ neutrality or lack thereof had no consequence.

However, when conflict with England intensified in 1765, American journalism began to play a more central role in galvanizing and mobilizing popular sentiments in support of nationalist causes. At precisely the time that newspapers became consequential in American public discourse—which can legitimately be historicized as their time of birth—they adopted a fiercely partisan advocatorial editorial temperament.<sup>7</sup> As many media historians have noted, up to the 1890s and even beyond, coverage of presidential elections was often heavily colored by party allegiances, and often consisted in the willful denigration and distortion of the viewpoints of opposing political parties. Self-consciously extravagant exaggeration of the strengths and merits of favored parties was also a defining characteristic of the journalism of the period. As Schudson pointed out:

[W]hen a standard Republican paper covered a presidential election, it not only deplored and derided Democratic candidates in editorials but often just neglected to mention them in the news. In the days before public opinion polling, the size of partisan rallies was taken as a proxy for likely electoral results. Republican

rallies would be described as ‘monster meetings’ while Democratic rallies were often not covered at all. And in the Democratic papers, of course, it was just the reverse.<sup>8</sup>

This portrait of the editorial character of 19th-century American newspapers is consistent with the recorded observations of many 19th-century European visitors to America. For instance, Charles Dickens, whose 1842 visit to America generated tremendous excitement on the pages of American newspapers,<sup>9</sup> described the American press as corrupt, unreliable, licentious, and as collectively representing a “monster of depravity.”<sup>10</sup> For Dickens, American newspapers and journalists were mere instruments of politicians, whom he accused of “cowardly attacks upon opponents, with scurrilous newspapers for shields, and hired pens for daggers.”<sup>11</sup> So, open political partisanship in reportage and commentary was as normative then as the ideals of “objectivity,” “fairness,” and “balance” have been to varying degrees in America’s journalistic landscape since the early 20th century. Journalists did not conceive of their roles as watchdogs of the society or, to paraphrase Chicago journalist and humorist Finley Peter Dunne, as comforters of the afflicted and afflictors of the comfortable; they were instruments of politicians and political parties.<sup>12</sup> As Kaplan noted, the social basis of newspapers’ social legitimacy derived from their association with political parties.<sup>13</sup> “The *New York Tribune*, for instance,” Kaplan pointed out, “gained national prominence during 1876–1910 as the quasi-authorized organ of the Republican Party’s reform wing. The line between journalist and politician blurred as the *Tribune*’s staff often advised the president and its publisher was nominated for vice-president in 1892.”<sup>14</sup>

This state of affairs continued until much later in the century when a new journalistic ethic, which later became known as “objective journalism,” emerged. Objective journalism came to encapsulate a broad range of ideals, prominent among which are accuracy, fairness, impartiality, authorial and reportorial detachment, independence, and responsibility to the public welfare.<sup>15</sup> Media scholars have attributed many influences to the evolution of the U.S. media from passionate, partisan defenders of narrow political loyalties to more inclusive discursive arenas. These influences ranged from the 1830s Jacksonian Revolution, which was characterized by a profusion of mass political parties and the expansion of market economy; the 1870s Mugwump rebellion against unthinking political party allegiances; industrial capitalism’s desire to deploy the mass media to access the huge, emergent pool of mass, heterogeneous consumer base that had sprouted; the news media’s appreciation of the economic benefit of attracting advertising dollars from all political parties by jettisoning partisanship; the influence of positivism and “value-free” scientific inquiry; the emergence of a corps of college-educated journalists who wanted to confer respectability and distinct professional identity on their craft in the early 1900s; and the imperatives of brevity that the emergence of the telegraph as the central technology for sending news inspired.<sup>16</sup> Whatever it is, from the early 19th century, “objectivity” came to define the core of American journalistic practice. It entails or attempts to entail such reportorial rituals as detachment, avoidance of adjectives in straight news reports, writing in the third

person, attributing opinions to news sources, attempting to reflect the perspectives of different sides to an issue, disengagement from ideological associations, political neutrality, etc.<sup>17</sup> An important component of this shift was the emergence of advertising, rather than subsidies from political parties, as the main source of revenue for newspapers. With this shift in source of funding, objectivity became the “lifeblood of the US press.”<sup>18</sup> Previously existing or emergent alternative models of journalistic practice were rhetorically marginalized as deviant and worthy only of contempt.

### **Criticism of Objectivity**

Although objective journalism became the canon of journalistic practice—and one of America’s most prized intellectual and cultural exports to the rest of the world—it has attracted criticism from several scholars since at least the 1960s.<sup>19</sup> For instance, Nanda posited that to the extent that journalists are always already inserted into gender, racial, and other social relational categories, it is impossible for them to suspend these sorts of baggage in their evaluation of the truth.<sup>20</sup> Objective journalism is also criticized for sometimes obscuring the truth through its mechanical, unproblematized juxtaposition of the “two sides” of an issue. As Durham put it, “The reportorial canon of presenting all perspectives without engagement with the political valences of such perspectives effectively prevents any progressive or emancipatory politics from developing out of journalism.”<sup>21</sup>

Other scholars argue that, in spite of pretenses to the contrary, commercialized journalism, by its very nature, privileges and naturalizes the dominant classes in the society. Although the canons of objective journalism impose on journalists the burden to reflect all sides to an issue, dissenting and oppositional views do not often fit very easily into the prevailing frameworks of imagery and expression, and are therefore heard and read by the mass audience as deviant, and as no more than crackles of background noise, which further pushes their points of view to the fringes and perpetrates the ruling classes’ interests.<sup>22</sup> The media, in spite of claims to practice objective journalism, in the final analysis, serve “to reinforce a consensual viewpoint by using public idioms and by claiming to voice public opinion.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, in place of objective journalism, which Merrill and Lowenstein have characterized as “too staid, dull, pallid, and noncommitted for the new generation of audience members being raised in a climate of instant confrontation, dissent, and permissiveness,”<sup>24</sup> critics have advocated the embrace of our lived subjectivities through alternative models of journalistic practice. This consideration has led alternative journalistic practices to luxuriate on the fringes of mainstream media practices. But what is alternative journalism? What singularities of alternative journalism are now being adopted by the mainline institutional media formation?

### **Conceptualizing Alternative Journalism**

Relative to traditional, mainstream “professional” journalism, alternative journalism has historically attracted little scholarly attention from both critical and administrative

researchers.<sup>25</sup> The last ten years, however, have witnessed a profusion of scholarly interest in alternative journalism.<sup>26</sup> This is certainly partly a consequence of the popularity and ubiquity of the Internet and the expansion of the discursive space that it enables, evidenced in the unexampled blossoming of several web-based citizen and alternative media, and the progressive decline in the centrality of “objectivity” in the news business, what Hackett has called “the significant erosion of the regime of objectivity” in mainstream news media practice.<sup>27</sup> But although many critical media scholars have robustly and carefully captured the emergence, constraints, motives, practices, prospects, singularities, and dominant thematic preoccupations of alternative media, there is no universally agreed upon conception of what alternative journalism is.<sup>28</sup>

As Atton has noted,<sup>29</sup> until relatively recently, the only definitive scholarly study of alternative journalism was John Downing’s influential book on the subject.<sup>30</sup> For Downing, the distinctiveness of alternative journalism lied in its self-conscious subversion of the elaborate hierarchies typical of professional news organizations and in its explicitly nonconformist and counterhegemonic political agenda. Downing drew clear contrasts between alternative media and the mainstream media and maintained that the operations of the mainstream media are animated by crass profit motive, are organized according to predetermined, exclusive professional and routinized standards, and are hallmarked by entrenched hierarchies. In other words, as Atton observed, Downing’s conception of alternative media privileges “media that are written and run by nonprofessionals, by groups that are primarily activists for progressive social change.”<sup>31</sup>

As more critical media scholars became interested in the systematic study of alternative media, however, conceptions of what constitutes alternative journalism became much more complicated than Downing’s simplistic, if historically contingent, binaries. Since the publication of Downing’s book, at least five other notable scholarly books, among them another book by Downing that revises his earlier approach, have been published, all of which have sought to more carefully capture the complexity of alternative journalism.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, at least five journal issues have devoted exclusive attention to the subject of alternative journalism.<sup>33</sup>

As Gibbs and Hamilton have pointed out, part of the difficulty of providing an all-encompassing definition of alternative journalism is that the term is often merely a convenient label that encapsulates—or seeks to encapsulate—a variety of nonhegemonic media practices that are vastly diverse in aims, goals, and specificities, and that replace or supplant “more specific designations such as the ‘labor press,’ ‘feminist press,’ or ‘underground media.’”<sup>34</sup> Campbell agreed that terms like “alternative press” tend to be used as “broad-brush collective terms for a disparate body of practices,” although common themes can often be isolated from these practices.<sup>35</sup> Scholars who want to remain faithful to the differential motivations that actuate the practices of alternative media formations often distinguish between “oppositional” alternative media and “advocacy” alternative media to take account of the dominant concerns that inform several different alternative media practices.<sup>36</sup> While advocacy alternative media often function as the mouthpieces of organized social movements, oppositional alternative media are usually not wedded to any definite political cause or social movement.



However, even though the term “alternative media” would appear to dissolve the singularities that characterize a wide variety of counterhegemonic, insurgent media practices, Gibbs and Hamilton insist that “it is extremely useful to see them together because such a move emphasizes their collective resistance to increasingly monolithic commercialized media systems and products.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, Downing, in his later work on alternative media, agreed with Campbell<sup>38</sup> that in spite of what might seem like the vastly divergent goals of various categories of alternative media, they are actually united by the dual functions they all perform: as “counterinformation institutions” and as “agents of developmental power.”<sup>39</sup> It is because of this dual function that some scholars have broadly characterized this genre of journalism as “insurgent journalism”<sup>40</sup> or “counterhegemonic journalism.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, alternative journalism’s meaning can only be realized in opposition to the established, mainstream media.

Such a discursive delineation provides the conceptual justification for the customary practice in media studies to conceive of “alternative” media in binary opposition to the “mainstream” media, with “mainstream” seen as maximizing audiences by appealing to safe, conventional formulas and ‘alternative’ foregoing the comfortable, depoliticizing formulas to advocate programs of social change.<sup>42</sup> In other words, while the mainline media embrace “objectivity” because of its capacity to attract eyeballs to the consumer goods advertised in their space and airtime, alternative media jettison it for its tendency to stifle progressive social change. It is in the same vein that Haas conceived of alternative media as “media devoted to providing representations of issues and events which oppose those offered in the mainstream media and to advocating social and political reform.”<sup>43</sup>

This means, in essence, that alternative media define themselves—or are defined—only in contradistinction to the mainstream media. Where the mainstream media are impersonal and professionally managed, alternative media are “self-managed.”<sup>44</sup> Where the mainstream media are formally structured, alternative media are “non-hierarchical.”<sup>45</sup> Where the practices of the mainstream media are motivated by profit motive, those of the alternative media are motivated by “collectivist-democratic” ideals.<sup>46</sup> By being radically different from the mainstream media in structure and content, alternative media seek to comfort a broad range of subaltern populations either that are pushed to the margins of the mainstream media or that are completely excluded from them.<sup>47</sup>

Most importantly, according to scholars of alternative media, while the mainstream media impose on themselves the responsibility to create and nurture an “informed” citizenry, alternative media practitioners have as their goal the desire to inspire a “mobilized” citizenry.<sup>48</sup> As Tomaselli and Louw put it, alternative media practitioners perceive their role more as “facilitators of social communication” than as “sources of information.”<sup>49</sup> This explains why scholars of alternative media variously characterize the unequivocally political content of alternative journalism as “mobilizing information,”<sup>50</sup> “information for action,”<sup>51</sup> “action on action,”<sup>52</sup> or simply “useful information.”<sup>53</sup>

Other scholars locate the difference between alternative media and mainstream media in terms of their differential conventions of news sourcing. While the

routinized professional practices of the mainstream media often predispose them to take recourse to “the systematic accessing of powerful, resource-rich institutions and their definition of events—and to the marginalization of resource-poor social groups and interests,”<sup>54</sup> alternative media actively seek a “different cast of accessed ‘officials’ and other voices.”<sup>55</sup> They adopt a newsgathering practice that has been dubbed “native reporting,” which Atton defined as an alternative newsgathering practice “where social actors, instead of being subjects of the news, become their own correspondents, reporting on their own experiences, struggles and ideas.”<sup>56</sup> This nonconformist alternative media reportorial practice finds its most sophisticated expression in what Couldry calls “active witnessing,”<sup>57</sup> which Peters described elsewhere as a situation in which “one is a privileged possessor and producer of knowledge in an extraordinary, often forensic, setting in which speech and truth are policed in multiple ways.”<sup>58</sup>

In other words, for the mainstream media, the primary definers of news are people who occupy the upper end of the social scale, while for the alternative media the voices of the voiceless take precedence. Predictably, this makes most “professional” news hardly more than the concerns, interpretations, and the cultural biases of the privileged few in the society. The concerns of the lower rung of the social order are highlighted only under special circumstances, only when “news hooks present themselves.”<sup>59</sup> An additional consequence of this demotion of the concerns of subalterns to the fringes and the elevation of the concerns of the upper classes to the forefront is that the society is often burdened with a media formation in which “consumerism, the market, class inequality, and individualism tend to be taken as natural and often benevolent, whereas political activity, civic values, and antimarket activities tend to be marginalized or denounced.”<sup>60</sup> It is this media practice that liberatory alternative media seeks to reverse and, in its place, inaugurate a media system

where working people, sexual minorities, trade unions, protest groups—people of low status in terms of their relationship to elite groups of owners, managers and senior professionals—could make their own news, whether by appearing in it as significant actors or by creating news relevant to their situation.<sup>61</sup>

This is possible because many people involved with alternative journalism, Harcup reminded us, “see their journalism as ‘political activity’ . . . , a perspective that appears to be far from the norm among journalists in the wider industry.”<sup>62</sup>

### **Problematizing the Binary Opposition of Alternative and Mainstream Media**

It is obvious from the foregoing that the germinal conceptions of alternative journalism, which are still influential today, locate it in binary opposition to what has been understood as the mainstream media. Perhaps this is not altogether surprising. After all, the very notion of “alternativeness” presupposes not just an opposition to something but, in fact, mutual exclusivity with the thing.

Lately, however, a few scholars of alternative media have begun to question the ontological utility of this dualist conception of alternative media. In his later works,

Downing<sup>63</sup> has conceded that the dualism of his earlier typology imposed definitional and discursive burdens on the notion of alternative journalism. He has identified two fundamental flaws with his earlier approach. He terms the first flaw “anti-binarism” and the second “binarism.” Downing has acknowledged that these flaws prevented him from appreciating the subtleties and continuums that exist between alternative media and mainstream media, and he ended up with an account that “seriously simplified both.”<sup>64</sup>

Many other scholars are recognizing the futility of an “either or” approach to understanding alternative media. Atton for instance, following Downing’s self-criticism, has argued that it is more useful to talk of the “hybridity” of reportorial practices within “the contemporary media landscape,” and has pointed to “the complex, hybrid nature of alternative media in relation to its mainstream counterparts.”<sup>65</sup> Harcup has also called attention to what he termed the “crossover grouping,” that is, current mainstream media practitioners who were previously alternative journalists and vice versa.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, the mainstream media have increasingly incorporated into their professional repertoire media practices that were thought to be exclusive to alternative media formations. Such mainstream media practices as public or civic journalism,<sup>67</sup> which are becoming more and more fashionable, especially with the popularity of online media, are borrowed from alternative media practices, as will be shown in the next section of this paper. There are also many respects in which alternative media practices borrow from the mainstream media.

### **Alternative Media Practices in Contemporary Mainstream Media**

In the last few years, as I have prefigured in previous pages, the corporate media, confronted by loss of credibility, the reality of increasing migration of advertising dollars to the plethora of emergent Web-based news platforms, and an uncertain future in view of the kaleidoscopic changes in the media landscape, have been abandoning traditional conceptions of objectivity and adopting nonconventional news practices that would have been dismissed as “unprofessional” generations ago. In other words, the corporate media, for largely commercial reasons, have been increasingly co-opting the time-honored reportorial practices of the alternative media formation, broadly conceived.

For example, mainstream media organizations now maintain and support vibrant, largely uncensored online citizen media that, in fact, provide more untrammelled avenues to ventilate strong opinions than many forms of alternative media. A recent “State of the News Media” report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that, paradoxically, the mainstream media provide greater mechanisms for feedback and critiques than do most citizen media, challenging the high ground on which alternative journalism stood for a long time.<sup>68</sup> This trend did not begin with the emergence of the Internet, however. Since 1993, according to Rosen, sections of the corporate media birthed the notion of “public journalism” or “civic journalism,” which actively seeks the input of ordinary people in decisions about news gathering

and reporting.<sup>69</sup> It emerged as a reaction to “the deepening chasm between journalism and the citizens it professes to serve on the one hand and between the quotidian concerns of ordinary people and public life in general on the other.”<sup>70</sup> As Nip pointed out,

Town hall meetings, citizen panels, and polls are common techniques used to tap the concerns of the community, which would then form the reporting agenda for the journalists. During the news-gathering process, professional journalists often report back to the citizens what they have found for generating discussion in search of solutions to the problems . . . . There have been cases where the citizens even partnered with the professionals in gathering the news.<sup>71</sup>

This reportorial model, which attracted withering criticisms from many professional journalists when it first emerged, is clearly a cooptation of alternative journalism’s age-old “native reporting” concept, “where social actors, instead of being subjects of the news, become their own correspondents, reporting on their own experiences, struggles and ideas.”<sup>72</sup> However, unlike alternative journalism’s active witnessing, the corporate media’s civic journalism is not inspired by progressive, emancipatory ideals. Profit is its main motive force and, while it does empower ordinary people in ways traditional reporting did not, it actually retains the ultimate narrative power and agenda setting advantage in the hands of professional journalists. As Woodstock pointed out, “traditional and public journalism adopt similar narrative strategies to effect essentially the same ends: placing the power of telling society’s stories in the hands of journalists.”<sup>73</sup>

Over the last few years, the commercialized media have conceded more of their professional authority to ordinary citizens. Corporate media-enabled citizen journalism projects have been sprouting luxuriantly since the emergence of Web 2.0. A perfect instantiation of this move is CNN’s popular iReport.com, a “citizen journalism experiment that gives ordinary people from everywhere in the world the opportunity to contribute unedited, unfiltered, and uncensored user-generated video and text-based news reports.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, it allows the people Rosen has called “the people formerly known as the audience”<sup>75</sup> to perform what Lasica called “random acts of journalism.”<sup>76</sup> The project’s popularity has compelled other big media organizations to adopt that model of corporate-sponsored citizen journalism. ABC News, for instance, has its own “i-Caught.com,” Fox News has “uReport.com,” MSNBC created “FirstPerson.com,” and so on. So it is catching on. This model of journalism is clearly a repudiation of the ideal of “objectivity.” Ordinary citizens, unencumbered by professional journalistic requirements of “objectivity,” “fairness,” and “balance” report the news from their own perspectives. In many cases, citizen reports submitted to these sites end up in the main telecasts of the corporate media. The CNN iReport model is obviously an alternative media reportorial practice, which Couldry called “active witnessing.”<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, almost all the major corporate media organizations in the United States have inaugurated participatory, “crowdsourcing” platforms on their sites. The term “crowdsourcing” was neologized by Jeff Howe who defined it as “the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and

outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call.”<sup>78</sup> In a journalistic context, crowdsourcing entails the solicitation of news, video, photos, and audio clips from people who are not affiliated with any news organization and who may not be professional journalists. For instance, in 2006, *USA Today*, America’s most widely circulated newspaper, embraced the principle of “crowdsourcing of in-depth investigations into government malfeasance.”<sup>79</sup> Its embrace of the newfangled practice—from the point of view of traditional journalism, that is—was inspired by the success that *The News-Press* in Fort Myers, Florida, recorded with it. When citizens in the paper’s reader catchment area complained to the newspaper’s editors about the suspicious and inexplicable hike in the cost of connecting newly constructed homes to water and sewer lines, the assignment editors did not assign the story to their investigative reporters; they instead solicited the participation of citizens in the investigation of the story. As a result, community members organized themselves into small citizen investigative units: “Retired engineers analyzed blueprints, accountants pored over balance sheets, and an inside whistle-blower leaked documents showing evidence of bid-rigging.”<sup>80</sup> The crowdsourced reportorial effort succeeded in reducing the exorbitant utility fees by more than 30%, caused one official to resign, and contributed to making utility fee the main issue in a city-council special election. This model of journalistic practice, which borrows from the concept of “native reporting” and “active witnessing” in alternative journalism, is now being mainstreamed in much of the corporate media formation in the United States. Ten years ago, this would have been unthinkable.

What would have also been unthinkable in traditional journalism until a few years ago is the mainstreaming of what Bell has called “the journalism of attachment”—the idea that journalists can have impassioned and vigorous personal opinions about the issues they cover; that they can give expression to their quotidian, experiential, and emotional subjectivities in news—in contravention of the expectation of detachment that “objective journalism” imposes on them.<sup>81</sup> In the early days of the Internet, traditional news organizations sanctioned journalists who had blogs or who blogged about the news they covered. As Friend and Singer noted,

The list of reporters who have found themselves in trouble for expressing their opinion in blogs is fairly long. It includes, among others, a CNN correspondent whose bosses told him to stop blogging about his experiences covering the war in Iraq; a *Hartford Courant* columnist who lost his column along with his blog after editors declared the latter a conflict of interest; a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporter who resigned after being criticized for writing a blog in which he lambasted the paper; a *Houston Chronicle* bureau chief fired after using his blog to assess politicians he covered for the paper.<sup>82</sup>

The gatekeepers in corporate news organizations had feared that the expressive spontaneity that blogging permits and the blurring of the boundaries of news and views it entails—precisely the reportorial rituals of alternative and other nondominant forms of journalism—endangered the age-old strategic, procedural formalities of objective journalism. Interestingly, at the time journalists were being fired in corporate news organization for imprinting their personal signatures in news

narratives, alternative media sites such as Indymedia (a network of alternative media practitioners that grew out of the 1999 global protests against the World Trade Organization) had institutionalized this reportorial practice, which invites what Mikhail Bakhtin would call an “emotional-volitional tone” in news and commentary.

Today, “j-blogging,” which inscribes journalists’ personal signatures in news and commentary, has rapidly become an integral part of the news operations of most American news organizations. “Hundreds of American news organizations,” Friend and Singer tell us, “are turning their journalists loose to blog.”<sup>83</sup> News reporters not only write the news but also blog about it both in their personal spaces and in the blogging platforms provided for them on their companies’ news websites. This model of personalized journalism was the exclusive preserve of nondominant, marginal news media concerns. To be sure, though, news and opinion have always coexisted in traditional news practices. As Mark Deuze points out, “When journalists blog, they do more of what they did when, for example, they were writing op-eds in newspapers, doing columns on the radio, or providing interpretation and analysis as a correspondent on television.”<sup>84</sup> However, explicitly opinion-driven, personalized journalism of the sort that was pioneered and popularized by such news sites as Indymedia is novel to the corporate news media. Its embrace is inspired by at least two factors. The first is the growing thirst for expressive journalism by young people. Cunningham, for instance, tells us that “In the January/February issue of [*Columbia Journalism Review*] young journalists asked to create their dream newspaper wanted more point-of-view writing in news columns.”<sup>85</sup> A whole generation of Americans who came of age in the age of the Internet and fed on the staples of talk radio and “shout TV” on cable wanted more.

The emergence of “fact-checking” as a subgenre of journalism is also a testament to the influence of alternative journalistic practice in the performance of corporate media organizations. Fact-checking politicians—and the news media—was once the exclusive preserve of reportorial practices that fell outside the orbit of “objective” journalism: alternative journalism, right-wing blogging, and the news practices of a whole host of nonconformist groups who have found themselves on the margins of mainstream journalism. However, with the rising reach and importance of the blogosphere and the shame it has put the mainstream media to (such as during the Trent Lott affair and the Dan Rather scandal, among others) the corporate news media, especially cable TV news, have jettisoned the traditional neutrality that objective journalism demanded of journalists. This move started with the rise of such corporate media reportorial practices as investigative journalism, interpretive journalism, and precision journalism, but has found full realization in the proliferation of “truth squads,” “truth-o-meters,” “Pinocchio trackers,” etc. in news organizations where journalists are no longer mere detached, disinterested vessels through which news passed or, as Ryan put it, people who present “only two sides of an issue or event without assessing the veracity of each side,”<sup>86</sup> but engaged commentators who call out distortions and intentional falsehoods by politicians.

In the same vein, many commercialized news media concerns, increasingly, now make little effort to conceal their ideological biases in both news coverage and

commentary. For instance, like early 19th-century American newspapers, the Fox News Network has transmuted, for all practical purposes, into the unofficial media organ of the Republican Party. The Republican Party sets the network's agenda as much as it sets the agenda of the party. David Frum, former President George W. Bush's one-time speechwriter, captured it best when he said, "Republicans originally thought that Fox worked for us and now we're discovering we work for Fox."<sup>87</sup> Fox News also actively promoted, supported, and recruited for the rightwing Tea Party Movement and even called out other media organizations for not following in its footsteps. The organization clearly stepped outside the bounds of merely "informing" its viewers to "mobilizing" them, from being a mere "source of information" to being a "facilitator of social communication," and from being a detached conduit for the dissemination of information to being purveyors of "mobilizing information," "information for action," or "action on action"—all hitherto the exclusive reportorial singularities of the alternative media formation. Many media critics have also noted that MSNBC has positioned itself since 2007 as the antithesis of Fox News and has been accused of being "an organ of the Democratic National Committee."<sup>88</sup> So in more ways than one, the mainstream media are returning to their partisan roots while adopting key features of alternative media practice in the process.

However, as I have pointed out earlier, the mimicking of alternative media counterhegemonic reportorial practices by the corporate media is often actuated not by benevolent, progressive motives but by the imperatives of hegemonic cooptation of potentially threatening citizen media and by profit motive. The larger implication of all this is that the relationship between alternative media and the mainstream media in the age of the Internet will increasingly be one of symbiosis rather than mutual exclusivity. Most online alternative media liberally use material from the mainstream media (mostly for subversive purposes), just as the mainstream media now increasingly utilize information from alternative citizen media for its profit-driven broadcasts.<sup>89</sup> This signals the birth of postobjectivism in mainstream reportorial practices and the erasure of the distinctiveness of alternative media practices. Thus, we may very well be witnessing the most effective hegemonic containment of the alternative media formation in history. This development has real consequences for the role, conception, and future of journalism and for the nature, contours, and strategic rituals of emancipatory politics.

With the increasing cooptation of the voices and wisdom of the crowd in the newsgathering business—propelled in large part by the growth of a surfeit of citizen media outlets, the emergence of crowd-powered "social stories" and "social news wires," the progressive loss of the agenda-setting power of the traditional media to social media actors and to communities of "intelligent contributors" to news sites—we may be witnessing the permanent reconfiguration of the role of the traditional journalist. Journalism will no longer just be a record of the chaos of occurrences around us; it will now increasingly be a conversation between the sources of news and the audiences for news, but our habitual notion of "source" and "audience" will be dislocated to take account of the progressively massive citizen input in newsgathering

and the blurring of the boundaries between the witness of the news and the reporters of the news. As Lavrusik points out, in response to these changes, traditional journalists may be reduced to being managers of news conversations or curators of news for a “time-poor audience.”<sup>90</sup> This may signal the death of the professional journalist as we know it.

Similarly, since the reportorial singularities that stood out alternative media practices are now coopted and adopted by the corporate media, which were supposed to be the antipode of alternative media, the alternative journalistic formation will gradually be rendered indistinguishable from mainstream journalism. Alternative media practitioners either have to infiltrate the increasingly more open discursive spaces provided by the corporate media and subvert them from within or devise alternative rhetorical and reportorial strategies to distinguish themselves from the mainstream. Whatever it is, the in the era of postobjectivism, the thesis of traditional journalism has merged with the antithesis of alternative journalism to produce a synthesis that is both traditional journalism and alternative journalism. It will be interesting to watch if this synthesis will constitute a new thesis that will fertilize the germination of a new antithesis.

## Notes

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