

Media Criticism: The Role of the World Wide Web and the Blogosphere

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Abstract

As A.J. Liebling of *The New Yorker*, one of the great press critics in history, once noted: "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one." Until recently, only a small number of people owned a news organization. Today, digital tools have empowered many people to own a news organization. These tools and the delivery system of the World Wide Web has created a fundamental shift in role of press criticism, which has in recent years moved from the mainstream media, or legacy media, to the World Wide Web. The Web and its companion, the blogosphere, have provided some of the most important and insightful work to watch over what the media do and what errors they make.

Introduction

Analysis and criticism of the news media have a long and memorable history. As James Boylan noted in *The Columbia Journalism Review*, Upton Sinclair's *The Brass Check* and Walter Lippman's *Liberty and the Press*—two seminal critiques of the U.S. media in 1920—underlined the importance of watchdogs watching the press watchdogs. In the 1930s and later, George Seldes uncovered many of the press's failures. A.J. Liebling wrote frequently and eloquently in *The New Yorker* in "The Wayward Press."¹ *The Columbia Journalism Review* itself began publication in 1960.

Today, serious press criticism exists mainly on the World Wide Web with the exception of a few voices in the mainstream media, including Ken Auletta of *The New Yorker*; David Carr of *The New York Times*; Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post* and *Cable News Network*, and a few others. Four distinct types of press criticism exist today. First, the mainstream, or legacy, media, such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, which routinely place their content on the World Wide Web. Second, online-only publications, such as *Slate*, *Salon*, and *POLITICO*, have created brand names that attract readers. Third, many academics, journalists, and media analysts have created online sites centered on media criticism. Fourth, the blogosphere has opened up media criticism to a wide variety of individuals who have mostly been excluded in the past from the ability to publicly analyze the media and have an audience.

This rapid expansion of media criticism has enabled a variety of important changes in the way mainstream media companies have come under scrutiny, although it is still unclear what long-term implications this trend will have. Some of the more important stories in recent years have included the resignation and dismissal of top CBS executives and the acknowledgement that *60 Minutes*, one of network television's most prominent programs, had used inadequately-vetted documents to investigate former President Bush's National Guard record.

The blogosphere also forced the resignation of CNN's Eason Jordan after it was revealed that he had made unfounded accusations that the U.S. military had specifically targeted journalists. Reuters admitted to providing digitally altered photographs after a blogger notified the agency of the doctored images.

Literature Review

Fengler provided one of the most extensive analyses of press criticism in *Journalism and Mass Media Quarterly*. At that time, Fengler noted that the U.S. media had few press critics. Specifically, she identified 69 media critics and reporters from the mainstream media, digital media, and alternative media. She selected 30 individuals for her study, and a total of 17 individuals granted interviews. She focused on three specific issues:

- How do these journalists cover peers and employers; are "blind eyes" still turned on the failings of colleagues and bosses?
- Do they address a general audience, an "insider audience" of media professionals, or both?
- To what extent do they regard media reporting and media criticism as a media accountability system?

Most of the individuals wrote for leading newspapers, magazines, or online publications that could potentially reach large audiences. Twelve interviewees described themselves as media critics or media columnists. They said their task was to comment on the content of the news media and the structure of the media industry. They offered critiques or opinions, or provided "checks and balances" on the news media. It is worth noting that only three of those interviewed still continue in prominent positions of media criticism: Ken Auletta of *The New Yorker*; Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post* and CNN; and Mark Jurkowitz, the former critic of *The Boston Globe* who now works for The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism.

Fengler concluded that "...media reporting and media criticism in the news media have emerged from the media boom of the 1990s as a promising media accountability system in the United States."²

Research Questions

- RQ1: What types of criticism occur in the mainstream and digital media?
- RQ2: How do media critics and analysts rate the quality of press critics today?

Methodology

A content analysis was done on a variety of news organizations, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The American Journalism Review*, *The Columbia Journalism Review*, *Quill*, *Cable News Network*, and several online prominent digital sites. The analysis took samples of the following:

- David Carr of *The New York Times* (December 1, 2008-March 23, 2009)
- Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post* (December 1, 2008-March 23, 2009)
- Reliable Sources on *Cable News Network* (December 1, 2008-March 22, 2009).
- Three issues of *The American Journalism Review* (October 2008-March 2009)
- Three issues of *The Columbia Journalism Review* (November 2008-April 2009)
- Three issues of *Quill* (September-December 2008)
- Jack Shafer of *Slate* (December 1, 2008-March 23, 2009)
- Michael Calderone of *POLITICO* (December 1, 2008-March 23, 2009)

Stories were ranked in the following categories: newspapers, magazines, broadcast, digital media, media criticism, errors, financial reporting and the business of journalism, politics, and other subjects. One story could be included in two categories when applicable. For example, an article about the financial problems of newspapers would be classified under newspapers and business. An analysis of President Barack Obama's television interviews would be classified under politics and television.

E-mail questionnaires were sent to 20 practitioners in the mainstream media, the World Wide Web, and the blogosphere, and to selected academics and editors. Eight of the questionnaires were completed or were finished during interviews. The participants included Ken Auletta of *The New Yorker*, Carr of *The New York Times*, Kurtz of *The Washington Post* and *CNN*, Shafer of *Slate*, Calderone of *POLITICO*, Glenn Greenwald of *Salon*, Jay Rosen of New York University and a media blogger, and Dan Kennedy of Northeastern University and a Boston media critic. Twelve individuals, including representatives of the *American Journalism Review* and the *Columbia Journalism Review*, declined to participate or did not respond to inquiries. Despite the lower than expected response rate, those involved in the survey included some of the most important analysts of the media in the United States.

Discussion

Author	Stories	Newspapers	Mags	Broadcast	Digital	Criticism	Errors	Business	Politics	Other
NY Times	17	4	1	1	3	2	0	4	1	2
Wash Post	66	8	1	11	3	4	1	21	34	2
CNN	16	0	0	3	0	5	0	6	14	0
AJR	38	12	0	8	6	4	1	14	4	6
CJR	59	4	1	1	1	4	4	12	7	10
Quill	24	1	0	0	1	3	0	3	5	14
Slate	32	3	0	2	1	19	1	5	4	1
POLITICO	33	2	2	6	2	15	0	3	14	0

Of the 285 stories and programs evaluated for this study, 56 centered on press criticism, or 20 percent. The largest categories of press analysis focused on business matters, including the financial health of the media and the economy, and politics. More than 23 percent of the material dealt with financial matters, while 29 percent focused on politics, particularly the Obama Administration and its relationship with the media. Sarah Jaffe, a graduate student at Temple University, performed the inter-coder reliability, which was determined to be 0.87.

Following are the journalists evaluated in this paper:

David Carr writes a column each Monday for the business section of *The New York Times*. His most potent criticism of the media occurred in his column of February 16, 2009, when he wrote: "Financial journalists still can't figure out how to cover the recession."³

Howard Kurtz is one of the most prolific writers and reporters about the media in the United States. He writes media criticism for *The Washington Post*, maintains a daily blog for the online edition, and hosts CNN's Reliable Sources each Sunday, one of only three national broadcast programs that focus on the media. His most focused press criticism frequently occurs on CNN, a format in which he questions guests on as many as four different topics. One theme he has repeatedly addressed is the charge that journalists covering Barack Obama wrote too many favorable stories about the president during his campaign. On February 22, 2009, for example, Kurtz spoke with Bernard Goldberg, a former television reporter who has been highly critical of what he perceives as the liberal tendencies of the mainstream media.⁴

Several publications that have focused on media analysis for many years include *The Columbia Journalism Review*, which is affiliated with Columbia University; *The American Journalism Review*, which is affiliated with the University of Maryland; and *Quill*, the official publication of the Society of Professional Journalists. These publications have faced increasing financial pressure in recent years. *CJR* and *AJR* publish bimonthly editions, while *Quill* publishes a monthly magazine. Although each included some media criticism in the time period studied, the focus of many articles centered on the financial difficulties of the media themselves rather than the

reasons the media failed to address their financial problems. One notable exception, however, appeared in *CJR*'s January/February issue, which included a biting analysis of the failure of financial reporting in recent months.

An analysis of Jack Shafer's acerbic column, "Press Box," in *Slate*, the online-only publication, demonstrates the pronounced trend toward more press criticism on the Web and in the blogosphere. Of the 32 articles analyzed between December 1, 2008, and March 23, 2009, 19 dealt almost exclusively with criticizing or analyzing the failures of the news media. He attacks news organizations for what he considers bogus trend stories, such as climate changes causing people to move to distant havens, teens using their parents' prescription drugs, and shoplifters plaguing retail outlets in staggering numbers. Also, he points his column at lofty figures, such as media maven Bill Moyers and Carlos Slim, the man who loaned *The New York Times* money to stay in business. Occasionally, he even praises the work of journalists, such as Jeffrey Gettleman, *The New York Times*'s bureau chief in East Africa.

Michael Calderone writes on the media for POLITICO, an online political publication based in Washington, D.C. Of the 33 articles analyzed between December 1, 2008, and March 23, 2009, Calderone's primary focus centers on media criticism in 15 out of 33 articles. His stories often are ones not normally discussed in the mainstream media, such as his discovery of JournoList. "For the past two years, several hundred left-leaning bloggers, political reporters, magazine writers, policy wonks and academics have talked stories and compared notes in an off-the-record online meeting space called JournoList," Calderone wrote on March 17, 2009. He also is not afraid of criticizing his own organization. In an article entitled, "How media sucks up to White House," on March 3, Calderone noted:

In a profile last month, *The Washington Post* described deputy White House chief of staff Jim Messina as a "low-profile aide" who begins "fixing President Obama's problems" before 7 a.m., works 14 hours straight and then hits the gym.

Not to be outdone, POLITICO noted the next day that White House chief legislative liaison Phil Schiliro — another "low-profile" official but one possessing "Buddha-like Zen" — is already working in the West Wing by 6 a.m.⁵

Therefore, it appears that Fengler's prediction that media criticism would expand significantly has proved accurate, but not within the mainstream media as she thought would occur. All of the eight respondents with one notable exception, Carr of *The New York Times*, rated media criticism as an either extremely important or an important endeavor. Carr said he considered media criticism as somewhat important, mainly because of the overreaching economic problems in the media. "Given the business metrics at hand, the traditional role of church lady overseeing various transgressions seems to have lost some salience," he said in an e-mail. "There is more to cover."⁶

Nearly all of those surveyed deplored the state of criticism in the mainstream media. In an interview, Kurtz of *The Washington Post* and *CNN* noted what he called "the paucity of criticism" of the press in the media today. "The media like to scrutinize other people, not themselves," he said. "The public wants to see what's behind the curtain."

Kurtz noted that the number of media critics in the mainstream media and even the alternative press has declined significantly in recent years. Kurtz and six of the eight surveyed see the digital media, including the blogosphere, as doing a good job of press criticism. Kurtz said the print media did an average job of press criticism and the broadcast media did a poor job of press criticism. In an interview, Rosen of New York University singled out the broadcast media as being particularly poor when it comes to press criticism, adding that only a few programs exist, such as *CNN's* "Reliable Sources" and *National Public Radio's* "On the Media." He characterized the broadcast media as "wimps" when it comes to press criticism.

Auletta, the media critic of *The New Yorker*, agreed with both assessments. "Reporters, unlike the people we cover, are unused to being criticized and have particularly thin skin," he said in an interview. "[Online press criticism] is not always accurate and not always fair. I welcome it. I think it is a valuable thing to have [because] journalists have enormous power." He rated digital media criticism as generally good, print as average, and broadcast media as poor.

"The news media is an institution with a lot of power and it doesn't have the accountability mechanisms that we have in other institutions," Rosen said. "There's no such thing as throw the bums out." He said he believed that the "blogosphere is extremely effective at press criticism and has taken a lot of the momentum from [mainstream media].... The entire blogosphere is a critic in a lot of ways because it examines what the press does and fills in what is missing."

Although Kurtz, Shafer, and Calderone are technically part of the blogosphere, another sector of the blogosphere—individuals not part of a legacy organization—have played significant roles in press criticism in recent years. These instances included, but were not limited to, the resignation and dismissal of several top CBS executives and the acknowledgement of inadequate reporting by CBS and its then-principal anchor Dan Rather in a 2004 story about President Bush's National Guard record; the 2005 resignation of CNN's Eason Jordan as head of that organization for comments he made about the U.S. military intentionally targeting journalists in Iraq; and the uncovering of Adnan Hajj's manipulated photographs for Reuters of Israeli attacks on Beirut in 2006.

The role of the blogosphere, or what some call the "swarm" of bloggers, in press criticism is perhaps most notably represented by what occurred after CBS aired a segment on September 8, 2004, concerning then-President Bush's service in the Texas Air National Guard. The report on *60 Minutes Wednesday*, which was entitled "For the Record," used four memoranda reported written by the late Lieutenant Colonel Jerry B. Killian, the commander of the squadron in which then-Lieutenant Bush served in 1972. The four documents allegedly ordered Bush to take a flying physical, expressed Killian's displeasure with a transfer for Bush from Texas to Alabama to participate in a political campaign, suspended Bush from flight status, and noted that political pressure was being applied to "sugar coat" Bush's military service.

An independent evaluation of the CBS segment noted the following:

Within hours after the segment aired, questions about the authenticity of the Killian documents were raised, initially in an outpouring from the so-called blogosphere on the Internet. These early questions mainly on the typography of the documents. Specifically, it was claimed... that they must be forgeries because typewriters in existence at the time the documents were purportedly written did not have the capabilities to produce these features.⁷

As a result of what the investigators described as "a raging media firestorm," several top executives and news personalities, including principal anchor and the segment's on-air presenter Dan Rather, were fired or resigned. Along these same lines, Shafer of *Slate* said he thinks that the media have become more responsive to criticism. "If you go back, *The New York Times* answered to nobody. It was the magisterium, and the magisterium did not answer its critics," he added in an interview. Today, the newspaper has instituted the public editor, has started to expand corrections, has reacted to more criticism, and opened up a dialogue with readers.

In an e-mail, Calderone said he sees a significant change in how online media criticism is done when compared the way criticism had been done in the past. "The ability to link to primary documents and quickly embed audio and video completely changes how criticism is done. Also, you have online media critics who don't have the baggage of coming from mainstream media organizations, which can be good or bad. It's good in a sense that there isn't the sort of reverence for the press corps that might develop when inside of it for a long time. But it's bad in that a lot of bloggers who write on media—and never actually worked a newspaper, magazine, or network—really have no clue how things actually function," he said.⁸ Carr of *The New York Times* said in an e-mail that he worries that political points of view often taint the quality of media criticism, particularly in the blogosphere. "Much of the press criticism online is driven by ideology and sees agenda where it often does not exist. Conspiracy theories abound and there is a scarcity of carefully reported analytics," he said. "A lot of it comes from writers on hobby horses."⁹

These analysts tended to point most frequently toward mainstream media reports as the most important done within the past five years. For example, four of those surveyed cited Michael Massing's 2004 report in *The New York Review of Books*, "Now They Tell Us: The American Press and Iraq," as the most important piece of media criticism in the past five years. Three mentioned David Barstow's 2008 critique of the television networks hiring military analysts with close ties to the U.S. Department of Defense in as one of the most important articles of media criticism. Three mentioned the blogosphere's uncovering the of the apparently-falsified CBS report on then-President Bush's military record as one of the most important examples of media criticism. One mentioned *Columbia Journalism Review's* criticism of financial reporting in its January/February 2009 edition.

Conclusions

The expansion of media criticism has moved largely to the World Wide Web and the blogosphere. Even though mainstream publications, particularly newspapers and magazines, continue to play a role. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New Yorker*, and a few other mainstream outlets continue to have media critics—as do some alternative newspapers. Television is unlikely to expand significantly beyond CNN's *Reliable Sources* and Fox's *News Watch*. But the emergence of brand-name, online publications, such as *POLITICO*, *Salon*, *Slate*, and particularly the blogosphere, have greatly expanded criticism of the media—a trend that is likely to continue.

Furthermore, the public's move to obtaining more information from the World Wide Web and the blogosphere will make these outlets more important in the immediate future. According to Pew Research Center data, as of August 2008 the percentage of Americans who went online regularly for news, which was defined as at least three times a week, had increased 19 percent from two years earlier to nearly four in ten Americans, or 37 percent. As Pew's 2009 "State of the News Media" analysis noted: "No other medium was growing as quickly. Most saw audiences flat or declining."¹⁰

During the past 24 hours, more people had read a newspaper, which stood at 34 percent, or had listened to news radio, which stood at 35 percent, than had viewed news online, which stood at 29 percent. But the Pew data showed that online news consumption stands roughly the same as those who watch cable television news and the networks' nightly news.

Nevertheless, the potential fractionalization of the World Wide Web and the blogosphere may make it difficult to determine how effective these expanding outlets will be in the years ahead. Simply put, there are likely to be more voices, but it is unclear whether the media or the public will listen attentively. Also, it remains exceedingly difficult to determine what precisely are the direct correlations between media criticism and the media criticized. In some cases, the criticism results in the firing and resignations of media members, such as those at CBS in the Bush military records case, Jason Eason at CNN, and photographer Adnan Hajj of Reuters.

Over time, as Shafer noted, *The New York Times* has changed its approach toward criticism. But it is difficult to gauge how the work of the media critic affects news organizations and whether these organizations adapt or ignore the work of these and other critics. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine whether the public attitude, which has a low opinion of U.S. media coverage in general, is significantly influenced by media critics or other elements in the public sphere.

¹James Boylan, "A Thousand Voices Bloom," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 2000, 34-35.

²Susanne Fengler, (Winter 2003). "Holding the news media accountable: A study of media reporters and media critics in the United States." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 80 (2003): 818-832.

³David Carr, "This just in: The market is still dead," *New York Times*, 19 February 2009, <<http://www.nytimes.com>> (26 March 2009).

⁴Howard Kurtz, *Cable News Network Reliable Sources*. 22 February 2009. Lexis- Nexis. (26 March 2009).

⁵Michael Calderone, "Reporters bombard Obama with questions," *POLITICO*, 3 March 2009, <<http://www.politico.com>> (26 March 2009).

⁶David Carr, personal e-mail (15 April 2009).

⁷Dick Thornburgh and Louis Boccardi, "Report of the Independent Review Panel on the September 8, 2004 60 Minutes Wednesday Segment 'For the Record' Concerning President Bush's Texas Air National Guard Service." 5 January 2005.

⁸Michael Calderone, personal e-mail (28 March 2009).

⁹David Carr, personal e-mail (15 April 2009)

¹⁰Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The state of the news media," <<http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/2009/index.htm>> (3 April 2009).

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