

The Internet can be an enormously powerful tool to find information, to collect facts, and to shine powerful lights onto dark places where bad things happen. But it shouldn't be a free-for-all without moderation. Data is not information, and raw news feeds need shaping and at least some sanity checks before they get unleashed on an unsuspecting public. That's what newspaper editors do (or did). Of course, adding human intelligence to data to make it useful information requires talent, and talent is expensive, so the Web

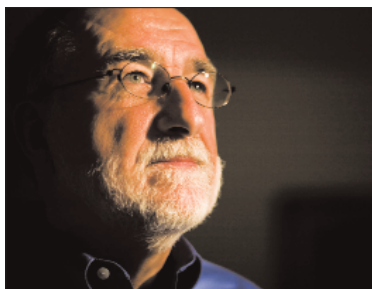
and so-called "I-Reporters." These last, encouraged by once-proud and -prudent news organizations, submit their videos and reports at little or no cost to news outlets collecting revenue from advertising. It's a cheap way to gather news, but who fact-checks this stuff?

My habit during my year in China was to wake early every morning to get the news. I didn't get the newspaper in China. My news came from the websites of CNN, Fox, the BBC, China Daily, and the remnants of what used to be decent news coverage on the decaying

some is old, regurgitated stuff, and much is a catalog of most-popular or most-viewed stories, which leaves too much to human nature and too little to disseminating what is important for people to know. Often there seems to be no quality control at all. An example: There was a story on Fox News' site about dead birds on the Mall in Washington. Forty assorted birds and ducks apparently dropped dead (perhaps tired of waiting for Congress to pass some measure supposedly good for birds). The headline read: "Front of U.S. Capitol Closed Off

Not Necessarily The News

BY E.J. HERESNIAK



There's what you should know—and then there's what the media tells you.

has been shortcutting and shortchanging and missing opportunities.

I don't think Thomas Jefferson's notion of an informed citizenry being essential to a democracy included what's happening to news online these days: voting on what's newsworthy in popularity contests, tabulating pseudo-surveys of what people think, or rounding up the flotsam and jetsam of pundits and personalities to rehash Princess Diana careening into a tunnel pillar, JFK Jr. and friends diving into the ocean off the Vineyard, or that poor Ramsey kid who got short shrift by both the press and a lousy police force. The real hard news these days seems to be from un-vetted do-it-yourselfers on YouTube, bloggers,

entity AOL. From time to time, I caught China's English-language CCTV 9, which is pretty good and lacks the cult of personality that has overtaken cable news in the States. I didn't see much bias, and the people who interviewed real newsmakers knew their stuff and weren't playing for headlines or for themselves.

Although I depended on the Web, getting any real news from the Internet these days is getting tougher and tougher. When you rely on the Web for news, you quickly realize that nobody works on the weekends—sites are pretty static from Friday until Monday morning. Nevertheless, even during the week, some of what passes for news is stupid,

After 30 Foul Found Dead." "Foul"—like foul ball rather than fowl like the birds and ducks. The error was repeated within the story, too. Where were the grownups when Fox posted this story? (Perhaps at home, reading the Saturday *New York Times*.)

Meanwhile, on the *International Herald Tribune's* site, I read a story about the arrest of local "activist" Huang Qi. Huang apparently pissed off officialdom and was picked up by the cops. Nobody was sure *what* cops exactly, but their accents weren't local. Huang's anti-corruption website promoted claims by some local dads whose kids were killed when almost all the schools collapsed in the earthquake on May 12. A grassroots

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adventures in cyberspace

effort by parents concluded that shoddy construction led to the premature loss of way too many kids. (5/12 in China has become a little like the United States' 9/11.) So this "activist" got locked up on "suspicion of illegally possessing state secrets."

It was ironic to read a balanced news story in China, where even someone being locked up for stealing state secrets is often a state secret. It turned out, according to the *Tribune*, that Huang had also exposed a prostitution ring that shanghai'd Chinese girls from the countryside with promises of modeling careers in the big cities, as well as exposing gangsters and officials who made money forcing migrant workers to undergo unnecessary appendectomies. He had enemies.

The American press has a field day with stories like this—Chinese crack-downs, dissidents arrested, human-rights violations, and the like. But bureaucracies are the same the world over. Small-town politicians, overzealous law-enforcement officials, and other wackos cause mischief everywhere—aided and abetted by news outlets, traditional and online, that rush to judgment and disseminate dubious information. Consider Wen Ho Lee, the Taiwanese-American nuclear scientist accused of espionage while working at Los Alamos National Laboratory. He spent 278 days in solitary confinement before being released with an apology from the U.S. district judge hearing the case. He got more than \$1.6 million from the federal government and five media organizations to settle allegations that government leaks violated his privacy.

And remember Steven Hatfill, former Attorney General Ashcroft's "person of interest" in the anthrax murders? He lost his job and his reputation when his government—and the press—ganged up on him. Though he recently settled his privacy-violation claims for \$5.8 million, the government (my government, using my tax money) denied any responsibility, saying: "By entering into this agreement, the United States does not

Newspapers
are giving up
the ghost
because they
thought they
were in the
newspaper
business in-
stead of in the
news business.

admit to any violation of the Privacy Act and continues to deny all liability in connection with Dr. Hatfill's claims."

What crap.

But it's not just the fault of government. Most of the "reporting" in the media in these cases consisted of passing on purposeful leaks from prejudiced sources. Not much to be proud of in any of that. The press failed miserably in getting the facts. There is more investigative digging on stories about anorexic, spoiled drug addicts who look good in front of a camera.

What passes for news now in most U.S.-based outlets, especially online, is dumbed-down, self-serving, poorly executed junk that uses sound bites, sex, and superficiality to get attention. News outlets spend as much time promoting newsroom celebrities as presenting anything people need to know. Bernard Shaw and Walter Cronkite never needed

snappy names for reporting the news, although *BS360* isn't too far off what we're getting today. "WalterLive!" has a certain ring to it. Cronkite was an always-reliable source who never injected himself into what he reported until, in exasperation, he turned against the Vietnam War.

News was always an expense and not a revenue item for TV, except perhaps for *60 Minutes*, which makes a ton of money for CBS. But now news is a dispensable expense—and news on the cheap is the rule. *Time* (in partnership with CNN) had an online piece in July lamenting the decline of newspaper reporting, claiming, "The business model is collapsing, ad dollars are disappearing . . . and the Internet is just giving news away for free."

That's simply not true. Newspapers are giving up the ghost because they thought they were in the newspaper business instead of in the *news* business. The business model isn't collapsing. What collapsed was the distribution channel in favor of a cheaper, more convenient one. The Internet uses the same advertising-based business model to pay for the news. Since websites avoid printing cost and physical distribution, they probably make more money, but instead of putting it into news and informing the citizenry, they keep it or spend it on stupid things. According to the *Time* piece, Duke University economist James T. Hamilton thinks, "Newspapers used to be owned by people who were willing to trade off profits for the notion that they were doing the right thing." I wish.

On the day of the attempt on Ronald Reagan's life in 1981, the late Frank Reynolds of ABC News got all pumped up because of erroneous initial reports on the fate of his friend James Brady and on live TV pounded his desk, demanding, "Let's get it *nailed down* . . . somebody . . . let's find out! Let's get it straight so we can report this thing accurately!" Good idea. And if you're clever and stop whining, you can probably make money doing it. 🍌