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Political observatories, databases & news in the emerging ecology of public information

The database is to the digital age what the narrative was to the modern era of the novel and the cinema, according to the oversimplified but brilliant and provocative formulation of Lev Manovich.¹ This idea implies quite a lot, I believe, about the future of news.

But the implications of the database for news do not begin with the Internet or with Google, but with the proliferation of data-gathering and data-assembling institutions in the 1970s. Even earlier, the role that data could, and should, play in journalism was considered by Walter Lippmann, a journalist and freelance intellectual. In 1920, in *Liberty and the News*, Lippmann complained (as he would do with even greater fervor in *Public Opinion* two years later) that American journalism was failing to serve the needs of modern democracy – and that it would continue to fail without help from forces beyond itself.

Why? Lippmann cited two reasons. First, journalism was in the hands of “untrained amateurs,” and though the amateur “may mean well . . . he knows not how to do well.”² Lippmann expressed some hope for expanding “a professional training in journalism in

which the ideal of objective testimony is cardinal.”³ By deepening the curricular riches of journalism schools (the few that then existed) and making them intellectually more ambitious, each crop of new recruits to journalism could, over time, raise the standards of the news.

Second, the world had simply become far too complex to be adequately reported by the conventional tools of journalism. The news from which the reporter “must pick and choose has long since become too complicated even for the most highly trained reporter,” Lippmann wrote. The problem was not simply the inadequacies of individual reporters or newspapers, but “the intricacy and unwieldiness of the subject-matter.”⁴ Lippmann, thinking only of government and not of the rest of society, observed that administration had become more important than legislation but much harder to follow. The work of administration spreads out across time, and its impact is not visible in a way that reporters are able to measure. Journalism could report the complexity of the modern world only by making use of other agencies where “a more or less expert political intelligence” provides the journalist reliable maps of the world.⁵ Lippmann referred to these agencies as “political observatories” to imply that

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they examine human affairs with scientific instruments, methods, and outlooks.⁶ He called for independent, non-partisan, scientific organizations that would be committed to an agenda of research about the political and social world and that would be able to produce it in a form accessible to the competent journalist.

In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann suggested, along the same lines, that journalism provides the services democracy requires only when an adequate “machinery of record” already exists by which the social world can be accurately described. He cited the stock market report and baseball scores as two machineries of record of the sort that made journalism a reliable representation of the world.⁷ In *Liberty and the News*, he held that growth in the number and quality of political observatories both in and out of the government (one might find observatories within government bureaus, on university campuses, and in independent nonprofit institutions) could provide the material that would allow newspapers to offer a more thorough, complete, objective, and reliable portrait of relevant public life for the citizen to digest.

In 1920, when the media industries were far less concentrated than today and when all major American cities supported multiple daily newspapers – sometimes four, five, or more – the journalistic sum was nonetheless inadequate to the needs of informed opinion in a self-governing society. And Lippmann believed that the situation was not about to improve without outside help. Lippmann’s complaint was mild and polite compared to some others. H. L. Mencken, just a few years later, recalled that when he began writing for the press in Baltimore, four of the city’s five dailies were cheap, trashy,

stupid, and corrupt (presumably excepting his own *Baltimore Sun*). “They all played politics for what there was in it, and leaped obscenely every time an advertiser blew his nose,” Mencken wrote. “Every other American city of that era was full of such papers – dreadful little rags, venal, vulnerable and vile.”⁸

Lippmann was perhaps demanding too intellectually astringent a model of journalism, and Mencken, not for the first time, was indulging in exaggeration for its shock value. But it still seems clear that U.S. journalism was far from serving self-government in the way theorists of an informed public opinion wished. Today, in contemplating the restructuring of American journalism in the digital era, Lippmann’s writings caution us not to be misled by a nostalgic belief in past glories: they were ever the exception.

A second lesson from dipping back into Lippmann is that we can see that the main solution he offered to the problem of journalism is a solution that in fact has come to pass. And much as he imagined, it has made journalism better. There are political observatories aplenty now. They began in Lippmann’s day: the Brookings Institution, founded in 1921, was among the first, and the General Accounting Office (today the Government Accountability Office) was also created in 1921. Both provided the sort of accounting and accountability that Lippmann had in mind, from viewpoints inside and outside government. Since the 1970s, the proliferation of information-generating agencies that are outside journalism has been spectacular. And while this poses a challenge to journalists – how does the reporter know which of the many agencies can be relied upon? – the political observatories have greatly enriched our best journalism.

The reliance of the media on political observatories is visible every day. For example, *The New York Times* from December 16, 2008, the day I first began taking notes for this essay, contains the story “Colonoscopies Miss Many Cancers, Study Finds,” by science reporter Gina Kolata and based on a study published that same day in *Annals of Internal Medicine*. (Obviously, Kolata was provided an advance copy of the journal.) On the same page as Kolata’s story is Charlie Savage’s “Report Finds Interference In Interior Dept. Actions,” an article based entirely on the report of Interior Department Inspector General Earl E. Devaney that found serious flaws in government decision-making on policies affecting endangered species. Also in the December 16 issue is Campbell Robertson’s story “Report Says Due Process Is Ill Served In Iraq Court,” which relays to readers a new analysis from Human Rights Watch, an independent nonprofit organization. So in one day’s newspaper are stories prompted by – stories that would not have existed without – three very different kinds of expert sources: academic research, an internal government audit, and a nonprofit advocacy group. Journalists cannot replace or substitute for these; they can and do rely on them. At the same time, these other sources – political observatories, if you will – to a large degree need journalists, to bring their specialized work into the public domain and onto the public agenda.

The future of news begins here – not so much with the Internet, although it would be foolish to deny the central role of technology in the transformation of news today. But the Internet itself, and the ways in which its possibilities have been engaged, has developed as it has in part thanks to the democratic, participatory, and rights-oriented ethos

of the 1960s. Long after “the sixties” seemed to have spent itself, it returns as aftermath, or after-shock, in the digital age. And, boring as this might seem, that after-shock also has something to do with databases, just as Manovich suggests.

There is reason to be suspicious of the notion of technological revolutions. The printing press did not usher in democracy – or, if it did, it took its good-natured time! There was no such thing as a democracy anywhere in the world for three centuries after Gutenberg. And printing, as Elizabeth Eisenstein has shown very well, assisted but did not in itself produce a scientific revolution.⁹ Most early books produced on the printing press were about religion and not a few were handbooks of magic. The printing press was largely indifferent to whether it produced works of wisdom or of folly.

Later, the telegraph was said to have been the center of a communications revolution. But at first the telegraph – that is, the electronic telegraph as we know it – was a relatively minor advance on the “optical telegraph,” versions of which had existed for two thousand years. A much-improved optical telegraph was developed in France in the 1790s and greatly impressed a young American artist visiting there, Samuel F.B. Morse, who conceived the idea of developing it further when he returned to the United States.¹⁰ After that, you know what God wrought. Even when Morse’s telegraph became technically feasible, it took a government subsidy to establish the first telegraph line. And it required the spirit of entrepreneurship at the new penny papers – cheap, news-centered, profit-oriented urban papers that in the 1830s began to change the face of American journalism – to take advantage of the telegraph for news

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transmission. The older, established newspapers had as much access to the telegraph as anyone, but they did not get the point, and they let the initiative slip entirely into the hands of the penny papers. One needs not only technologies for a revolution, but also people who can recognize their worth.¹¹

The news business is in the throes of such a moment, and it is happening very fast. *The New York Times* first published on the Web in 1996, but this was basically newspaper text available online rather than a form of news-writing with demands and possibilities of its own. The *Times* did not update its website round-the-clock until 2000.

Wikipedia began in 2000. Craigslist was a San Francisco website already in existence, but not until 2000 did it become a site for placing ads beyond San Francisco, cutting into classified advertising revenue that had long been a reliable resource for daily newspapers.

Blogging began in the mid-1990s, but bloggers had little public presence. They were not a recognized force in the political world until 2002, when several bloggers led the informational campaign that ultimately forced Senator Trent Lott to resign as majority leader in the U.S. Senate. Most of these bloggers had worked for the conventional press; soon bloggers with nothing but competence to recommend them were making names for themselves and coming into their own as sources for conventional journalists.

There was no YouTube until 2005. There was no such thing as a social networking site until Friendster in 2002, MySpace in 2003, and Facebook in 2004.

The Huffington Post began in 2005 and brought on board scores of “citizen journalists” for the 2008 campaign, one of whom (Mayhill Fowler) broke the story of Senator Obama’s remarks on “bitter”

rural and small-town citizens. Politico.com began in 2007, both online and as a thrice-weekly print publication; it broke the story about the Republican National Committee’s \$150,000 in expenditures for Governor Sarah Palin’s clothes.

At the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Google sponsored a “Big Tent” for some five hundred bloggers and other nontraditional media. *The Huffington Post* had twenty people in Denver; *Talking Points Memo*, nine; *Daily Kos*, ten; *Slate*, seven; and *Salon*, nine. At a *Huffington Post*-sponsored panel during the Convention, Illinois Representative Rahm Emanuel said that the big media fish still count, but that media coverage overall will be a “collective, intuitive consciousness” – something like a school of fish. “You won’t hear anything; you’ll just see the air bubbles and then the whole group will suddenly decide to turn at the same time.” Josh Marshall of *Talking Points Memo* also reached for a metaphor, seeing an emerging distributed consciousness as a kind of ecosystem “with lots of different sorts of news orgs playing different and sometimes complementary roles.”¹²

Did new technologies produce all of this? Not by themselves. It is hard to imagine this history without the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, Students for a Democratic Society and the ideology of participatory democracy, the emergence of hundreds of new nonprofits and advocacy organizations in Washington, aggregations of countercultural enthusiasts around the Whole Earth Catalog, and early experiments with electronic networking in the San Francisco Bay Area and what would soon be known as Silicon Valley.¹³ It is not only that the techies see themselves as part of a movement; it is that they see the technology they love as essentially

and almost by nature democratic (but in this I think they are mistaken).

In the world of public information that is emerging, journalism can no longer take for granted its lofty preeminence. There is no Walter Cronkite at the national hearth. Indeed, there is no national hearth (and it is an exaggeration to imagine that there ever truly was); there is only a set of national portals and a set of mysterious algorithms based on some kind of a democratic calculus of the popularity of different websites that generates a list of sites to examine when you type a set of words in a search engine.

Today, professional journalists have a lot of company on the stage of public information. The ensemble includes bloggers and citizen journalists and much more. Prominent, but relatively unheralded, in the new cast are the institutions Walter Lippmann longed for in 1920 – the political observatories both inside and outside government. In 1920, political observatories were few; they did not begin to mushroom until the 1970s with the rise of many Washington-based nonprofits. These organizations sponsor research, monitor governmental activity, and, as nonpartisan or as advocacy organizations, make information about the political world available to journalists and directly to citizens. Human Rights Watch, mentioned above, is just one such product of the 1970s. Founded in 1978, its researchers are quoted and its reports are cited dozens of times in leading newspapers every year.

Inside the government, too, reform legislation of the 1970s and 1980s has provided large new capacities for monitoring government through government agencies themselves, and even some public monitoring of private cor-

porations. Think of the importance of environmental impact statements and the public airing of them required by law – a law (the National Environmental Policy Act) that went into effect in 1970. Think of the public disclosure of campaign finance contributions and expenditures mandated by laws passed in 1971 and 1974. Think of the important government reports critical of the actions of federal agencies, from the FBI to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, including the one mentioned above from the Interior Department Inspector General that criticized the Department's decision-making process on endangered species. These reports are normally all available for journalists, advocacy organizations, and any member of the general public motivated enough to download them from government websites. None of them was available before the Inspector General Act of 1978.

All Cabinet-level agencies and most other major government agencies have an Inspector General (IG) who is responsible for submitting semiannual reports to Congress that cannot be altered by the agencies. In the fiscal year 2008, the IGs collectively made audit recommendations to save \$14.2 billion and conducted investigations that identified \$4.4 billion in savings from recoveries and receivables. Actions by the IGs led to more than 6,600 indictments, nearly 6,900 successful prosecutions, and close to 5,000 suspensions and debarments.¹⁴

In September 2008, the Justice Department IG issued “a blistering critique” of the political motives in the firing of U.S. attorneys but “stopped short” of urging criminal indictments of former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales or his aides.¹⁵

Also in September, the IG at the Department of Health and Human Services reported that more than 90 percent of

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nursing homes had been cited for violation of federal health and safety standards in 2007, and 17 percent of them had deficiencies that caused “actual harm or immediate jeopardy.” The problems were greater in for-profit homes than in not-for-profit homes.¹⁶

Interior Department IG Devaney’s December 2008 report found that agency officials often interfered with scientific work in order to limit protections for endangered species. Devaney found “serious flaws” in decision-making on fifteen decisions. In most of them, Julie MacDonald, deputy assistant secretary for fish and wildlife and parks, had played a role. MacDonald resigned in 2007 in the wake of an earlier IG report that concluded she had run roughshod over agency scientists and violated federal rules by providing internal documents to industry lobbyists.

Also in December, the special IG for the Reconstruction of Iraq, a Bush appointee, made available a 513-page history of the reconstruction that *The New York Times*, in its top story of December 13, reported “depicts an effort crippled before the invasion by Pentagon planners who were hostile to the idea of rebuilding a foreign country, and then molded into a \$100 billion failure by bureaucratic turf wars, spiraling violence and ignorance of the basic elements of Iraqi society and infrastructure.”¹⁷

The IGs serve a function we might call self-surveillance; they work within the executive branch of government and report on the executive branch. This sounds like the dumbest mode of accountability conceivable – a foxes guarding the hen house model. It is possible, but not easy, to so pervert the job; however, the integrity of the IGs is supported by the legislative requirement that they report not only to the agency, but also to Congress. In other words,

self-surveillance as constituted in 1978 provides an automatic trigger to Congress to keep its eyes trained on executive accountability, too. The IG reports are public and thereby invite media attention and the attention of various non-profit, advocacy, and political groups as well.

Such developments scarcely make the professional journalist obsolete. The matters of professional training, experience, and judgment are as or more important than ever. But the organizations at the institutional heart of providing that training and honing that judgment – metropolitan daily newspapers and the wire services – are in serious trouble with no general solutions in sight. The very survival of the best of the “mainstream media,” especially print, is in question.

Why? This is not the place to explore the question in depth, but a basic answer looks like this: first, young people do not read print newspapers as much as older people – or as much as younger people in times past. Even older people do not read newspapers as much as they used to. Among those over 65, the decline has been from 72 percent to 65 percent in the period 1999 – 2008. For those between 55 and 64, print readership is down from 69 percent to 57 percent. It is drifting down in every age category, but most severely in the 18 – 24 and 24 – 34 groups: down from 42 percent to 31 percent and 44 percent to 32 percent, respectively, during the 1999 – 2008 period.¹⁸ Some of this is surely a drift away from news altogether. Some of it is a shift to news online. Some of it is the greater availability of news through quasi-news outlets – *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Jay Leno’s monologue, and so forth. Whatever the cause, the trend is unmistakable and unforgiving.

Second, newspaper companies took on a lot of debt in the past decade at exactly the wrong time. Newspapers were still a lucrative enterprise five years ago. Newspaper ad income hit a record high of \$49.4 billion in 2005.¹⁹ By 2008, ad revenue was down to \$38 billion, a 25 percent decline. Newspapers had been maintaining a hefty 25 percent operating profit – exactly what they counted on to deal with their debt – but profit was in rapid decline, too. This has to do with a third factor: the Internet was stealing both readership and advertising. Why pay for a classified ad to sell your vintage LPs, your baseball cards, or your grandparents’ china when you can just go straight to eBay? Why sell your bike or rent your apartment in the newspaper when you can turn to Craigslist for free? And why pay the now rapidly increasing cost of a newspaper at the newsstand when you can access it from the comfort of your home or office for free; follow whatever links you wish; enhance your understanding of a story in which you have special interest with audio and visual sidebars; and quickly respond to the writer and perhaps have your response posted on the website? More and more newspaper readers now go online for their news in addition to or instead of attending to print editions, but so far online advertising has provided only a small increment for news organizations, a small fraction of their print-based advertising income.²⁰

Fourth, to complete the perfect storm, the 2008 – 2009 economic recession brought things for newspapers from very bad to much worse.

One need not idealize the newspaper press of yore to recognize that, to this day, television, radio, and online news feeds off of the basic reporting that to an overwhelming extent comes from organizations whose economic surviv-

al no one knows how to guarantee. Alex Jones, director of the Harvard Kennedy School’s Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, judges that 85 percent of all of our news originates in the work of newspapers (whether they produce it in print or online).²¹ If those newspapers go under, or even if they continue cutting editorial staff and reporting budgets to the bone to reduce costs, where will news come from – especially, where will local “accountability” news come from? There would seem to be a marketplace among various elites for national news (and a certain amount of foreign news) so that those areas of news coverage may well survive without heroic measures. That online technology makes it possible to start and maintain a small news organization without the heavy investment in paper, ink, printing press, and delivery trucks is very encouraging. New news organizations staffed by professional journalists and quickly making a name for themselves with substantial, hard-hitting news stories have already emerged.²² Whether they can survive and maintain themselves in local news markets in the long run is yet to be seen.

The population of news organizations in 2012 or 2020 will likely have many newspapers, but with smaller, leaner staffs than today. It will have many new, online-only organizations run by a handful or a couple dozen journalists, perhaps with a significantly larger set of loyal readers who also serve as scouts, correspondents, or citizen journalists. It may have enhanced reporting capacity in public radio and television. It will surely be assisted by the large number of political observatories that we can think of as institutions of adjunct journalism. And without abandoning narrative in the least,

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they will make growing use of databases. Databases have become part of the lives of anyone who searches for information online. Our own transactions online make us part of databases ourselves; databases ‘r’ us. We even write the narratives of our own lives through databases. Think of the 33-year-old medical intern, a healthy woman profiled in a Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* series in 2007 who made the painful choice to have a “preventive” mastectomy. She did not have cancer. She had never had cancer. But because her mother had had breast cancer, she chose to do DNA testing and learned that she carried a gene that raised her risk of breast cancer from 60 percent to 90 percent. About a third of the women in a similar situation opt, as she did, for the mastectomy. It is not just the DNA testing that changed her life; it is the database that gave the testing its predictive meaning.²³

Some databases are resisted. Although members of Congress often praise transparency in government – especially executive transparency – they are not so quick to make their own records available. Neither of the two houses of Congress nor any city council of the twenty-five largest American cities nor eighty-nine of the ninety-nine state legislative houses make legislators’ roll-call votes available in simple, downloadable form by legislator. This information is now available for a fee from three different Congress-watching news organizations and available free from OpenCongress.org (begun in 2004), GovTrack.us (also started in 2004), and WashingtonPost.org.

This is just the beginning. Data on “ear-marking” in Congress has been painstakingly gathered by an NGO, Taxpayers for Common Sense (founded in 1995), and these data are the basic starting point for Washington reporters who cover the top-

ic.²⁴ The Sunlight Foundation, an open government nonprofit, and ProPublica, an investigative journalism nonprofit that partners with traditional news organizations in many of its investigations, have created a downloadable database comprised of federal filings for 2007 – 2008 from three hundred foreign agents. The website www.foreignlobbying.org allows citizens to explore which countries’ representatives have spent how much money lobbying in Washington and which members of Congress they have contacted how many times over which legislative issues. Meanwhile, Princeton’s Center for Information Technology Policy is going online with RECAP, a database of the records of the federal courts. (RECAP is PACER spelled backward, PACER being the database the courts themselves maintain that, thus far, is not keyword searchable.) A database is not journalism, but, increasingly, sophisticated journalism depends on quality downloadable, searchable databases.

The growth of political observatories, the advancement of monitors of government (and monitors of other key power centers in the United States and around the world) both outside (“civil society”) and inside government itself, and the new availability of databases for public-interest research: together, these developments represent just one feature of the future for news. Yet it is a vital feature, and so far it has received little general notice. Political observatories do not replace journalists, nor do databases shove narratives aside. But the observatories are increasingly valuable partners for journalists, and databases lay new foundations for narrative. Both offer promise for developing the kind of public information that makes democracy possible. In the midst of the present

news crisis, devastating as it is, are the birth pangs of the kind of public information that Walter Lippmann sought

for journalism – and for democracy – nearly a century ago.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001). On page 218, Manovich holds: “After the novel, and subsequently cinema, privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age, the computer age introduces its correlate – the database. Many new media objects do not tell stories; they do not have a beginning or end; in fact, they do not have any development, thematically, formally, or otherwise that would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other.” Manovich argues also, on page 225, that “database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right” to make meaning. I do not know what sort of evidence supports this hyperbole. Nevertheless, if Manovich’s self-assurance gets the better of him here, his boldness in articulating the narrative/database contrast is stunning.
- ² Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News* (1920; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 45.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 48.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ⁷ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 216.
- ⁸ H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Sixth Series* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), 27.
- ⁹ Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
- ¹⁰ Daniel Headrick, *When Information Came of Age: Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revolution, 1700 – 1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- ¹¹ See Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 12 – 60.
- ¹² David Carr, “In Denver, A Thousand Little Pieces,” *The New York Times*, September 1, 2008.
- ¹³ Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- ¹⁴ See the 2008 annual report of the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, *A Progress Report to the Present, Fiscal Year 2008*, September 8, 2009, <http://www.ignet.gov>.
- ¹⁵ Eric Lichtblau and Sharon Otterman, “Special Prosecutor Named in Attorney Firing Case,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2008.
- ¹⁶ Robert Pear, “Violations Reported at 94% of U.S. Nursing Homes,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 2008.
- ¹⁷ James Glanz and T. Christian Miller, “Official History Spotlights Iraq Rebuilding Blunders,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 2008.
- ¹⁸ Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2009*, <http://www.journalism.org>.



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- ¹⁹ Alan Mutter, "Reflections of a Newsosaur," December 21, 2008, <http://newsosaur.blogspot.com>.
- ²⁰ Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2009*.
- ²¹ Alex Jones, *Losing the News: The Future of the News that Feeds Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.
- ²² See Leonard Downie, Jr. and Michael Schudson, "The Reconstruction of American Journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review* (November – December 2009).
- ²³ Amy Harmon, "Cancer Free at 33 But Weighing a Mastectomy," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2007.
- ²⁴ From a September 24, 2009, interview with Sarah Cohen, former *Washington Post* reporter and now professor of public policy at Duke University.

