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**New Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper
Argues for 'Wisdom Journalism'**

CAMBRIDGE, MA. — In a new Shorenstein Center discussion paper, [*Beyond News: The Case for Wisdom Journalism*](#), Mitchell Stephens argues that new media technologies have devalued "the painstaking gathering of information on current events," while increasing the need for journalists who can supply "intelligent, well-reasoned interpretation" of those events.

Stephens, a professor of journalism at New York University, was a fellow at the Shorenstein Center in the spring of 2009. His focus has been on the future of journalism at a time when most news comes for free.

"With a desperation characteristic of people whose livelihoods are at stake," Stephens notes, "journalists have been forced to rethink how 'quality journalism' might be distributed and how it might be funded." However, most have not, he writes, "been rethinking what in these changing times 'quality journalism' might be."

Stephens calls for a new conception of quality journalism. "Wisdom journalism," he calls it: "an amalgam of the more rarified forms of reporting — exclusive, investigative — with more informed, more interpretive, more explanatory, even more...opinionated takes on current events."

This would, he suggests, be a view of the purposes of journalism Franklin, Jefferson and Madison would have understood. For in their day, notes Stephens, author of *A History of News*, most news was circulated by word of mouth "in taverns and coffee houses, on front porches and on the streets." Newspapers instead were often filled with ideas and perspectives — often highly partisan ideas and perspectives. Stephens quotes Benjamin Franklin as stating that "the business of printing has chiefly to do with men's opinions."

It took the invention of the steam press and the telegraph in the nineteenth century, Stephens says, for newspapers to be able to beat word of mouth to news. The age of the reporter arrived. This was the age, he argues, into which most of our traditional journalists were born — the age in which they thrived. However, with the sudden evolution of the Internet, Stephens says, "the whole world has become one big tavern, coffee house, front porch or street — through which news races, mostly for free. Major news organizations no longer obtain most news faster than anyone else."

So, Stephens argues, the era — perhaps a century and a half long — when our best journalists could make a living gathering and disseminating news is ending. "Mere stenographic recording of great, public events has lost much of its value," he asserts. "Journalists need to sell something else."

Stephens acknowledges that there will continue to be a need for reporters to chase down hard-to-find or hidden-away facts. But he insists that journalists need to return, for the most part, to an older view of their role. They will have to, Stephens contends, "pull back from the race for breaking news and attempt to produce...the most insightful interpretations of that news."

Filling this new role, Stephens says, will require changes in the way journalists are hired. "Instead of fact-oriented generalists who are dependent upon expert sources," a new brand of journalism would employ "idea-oriented specialists who know as much as the expert sources." And it would require a significant reconceptualization of journalism. "Evenhandedness," he writes, "might no longer be a dominant value. Original perspectives would push widely available information from whatever passes for a front page."

Stephens concludes that quality in journalism in this age when news is so widely available should be "defined not by the ability to bear witness, to pursue facts, to array the five 'W's, but by the ability to write stories that are interpretive, informed, intelligent, interesting and insightful...and original."

Read the full paper on the Shorenstein Center's website:

http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/papers/discussion_papers/d53_stephens.pdf