

# Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

## Discussion Paper Series

#D-64, June 2011

---

### **Disengaged: Elite Media in a Vernacular Nation<sup>1</sup>**

By Bob Calo

Shorenstein Center Fellow, Spring 2011  
Graduate School of Journalism, UC Berkeley

---

Joan Shorenstein Center  
**PRESS • POLITICS**



**• PUBLIC POLICY •**

Harvard University  
John F. Kennedy School of Government

Journalists, by and large, regard the “crisis” as something that *happened* to them, and not anything they *did*. It was the Internet that jumbled the informational sensitivities of their readers, corporate ownership that raised suspicions about our editorial motives, the audience itself that lacked the education or perspective to appreciate the work. Yet, 40 years of polling is clear about one thing: The decline in trust and the uneasiness of the audience with the profession and its product started well before technology began to shred the conventions of the media. In 1976, 72% of Americans expressed confidence in the news. Everyone knows the dreary trend line from that year onward: an inexorable decline over the decades.<sup>2</sup> And if we fail to examine our part in the collapse of trust, no amount of digital re-imagining or niche marketing is going to restore our desired place in the public conversation.

Ordinary working people no longer see media as a partner in their lives but part of the noise that intrudes on their lives. People will continue to muddle through: voting or not voting, caring or not caring, but many of them are doing it, as they once did, without the companionship of the press. Now elites and partisans don’t have this problem, there are niches aplenty for them. But if the U.S. was full of only elites and partisans, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.

If we accept that journalism has lost trust then we ought to think about how to win it back. That’s hard. For too long, we have thought the value of what we do was obvious to everyone. Turns out, it’s been primarily obvious to us. The public ranks journalism just a touch above Congress in terms of trust and reliability—and Congress is way down the bottom of the list.<sup>3</sup> And if our response is “change nothing” because we are “essential to democracy” then we lose, and continue to be marginalized. So we have to begin to do something that we’re not very good at. We have to question everything: story forms, editorial

sensibilities, our own motivations and unchallenged assumptions about the role of the press. We are not throwing reporting overboard; reporting will always be the true center of what we do, and it is what the public values, when they see it. Trust flows from value and utility. The problem at its essence is this: How do we make reporting more engaging to the imaginations of Americans *as they are*? This is entirely a *creative* challenge, rather than an intellectual one. I'm not questioning the value of what Alex S. Jones, the Director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, calls the "iron core,"<sup>4</sup> but rather seek to make that core present in the daily lives of ordinary Americans. So what I'll be trying to describe in this paper is an authentic mechanism for reaching the alienated, the bored, and the disengaged. I'll also argue that as with most dilemmas, there's an opportunity to facilitate some kind of public commons, to crusade, even, for a public commons, at a time in our social and political history when that kind of real estate is quite rare. Most, but not all, of my references will be to broadcast and digital video, since that's where I've spent most of my reporting life, but the cultural impediments that get in the way of clear thinking about how to connect with Americans hold true for all media.

### **An Establishment Profession in a Vernacular Nation**

In the 60's and 70's an unknown writer named J.B. Jackson burst on the scene of American architecture and design. A maverick philosopher, he challenged the prevailing opinion of university trained designers and architects who stood aghast at the American landscape. Mid-century professionals looked to European ideas of planned towns and rational planning as the solution to the vulgar and disorganized condition of the American landscape. Jackson worked tirelessly through a series of brilliant articles and books<sup>5</sup> to argue for a different

way of looking at the American scene, that something of the national spirit was represented in the trailer parks, roadside businesses that elites saw as blight, that the way ordinary people, working people, organized space spoke of a set of values that ought not to be ignored. He defended the roadside landscape against the self-appointed arbiters of good taste and righteous living. In appreciation, historian Timothy Davis writes: "These critics objected both to the tawdry and tasteless visual pyrotechnics of roadside architecture and to the disturbing tendency of the uneducated masses to embrace the automobile and the new American roadside as sources of entertainment, commerce, and social interaction."<sup>6</sup> In the late 50's urban planners, in love with European ideas of planning cities and rational architecture couldn't understand why Americans, newly empowered with family cars, drove "around with no apparent goal or destination, jockeying for position in endless lines of traffic, and migrating across the country on gas-guzzling vacations. The answer simply put, was that people liked to drive. Motoring en masse appeared to fulfill a common human need for recreation and social display. The act of driving and the sense of moving smoothly and effortlessly along the modern highway also allowed ordinary Americans to indulge in *formerly elitist experiences* of mobility."<sup>7</sup>

Jackson later became a highly respected lecturer at both Harvard and Berkeley and introduced cultural geography into the American academy. He posited that there were two different ways of looking at the American landscape: establishment and vernacular.

The establishment, he argued, is composed of serious people, concerned with serious things. They are the protectors of permanent culture and physical institutions. "The establishment has permanence, which has some philosophy or method back of it. It's carefully thought out in terms of its future. It has an order that has an aesthetic quality. There is order there, a permanent order. We want it

to serve the future. We want it to be used by others but we know how it should be. And 'we' are people of education, thought and of conscience and people of taste who feel that the world has to be ordered, as indeed it does."<sup>8</sup>

The vernacular is demotic, day to day, changeable, haphazard as perceived by the establishment, but home to most working people. It is a world of labor striving for human dignity. This is ordinary daily life, pretty much unchanged from the way it was described in Middletown, the famous study of life in Muncie, Indiana in 1924: "This study proceeds on the assumption that all the things that people do in this American city may be viewed as falling under one or another of the following six main-trunk activities: getting a living, making a home, training the young, using leisure in various forms, engaging in religious practice, engaging in community activities."<sup>9</sup> The establishment abhors and avoids the public sphere. It spends its time (both leisure time and work time) in private, behind gates and inside well-appointed parlors, or in the best boxes at the symphony. The vernacular works and lives in public, more dependent on neighbors and community.

What does this have to do with journalism and its discontents? Everything, because at the core of contemporary disengagement is a problem of *translation*. The establishment press speaks one language, its vernacular clients, or readers and viewers, another.

In 2010, researchers at the University of Maryland conducted a survey to examine how Americans dealt with information, and misinformation, related to the mid-term elections. The researchers were particularly interested to see the effect of the Citizens United decision, which opened the financial spigot on "political speech." The results were dispiriting. The poll found "strong evidence that voters were substantially misinformed on many of the issues prominent in

the election campaign, including the stimulus legislation, the health care reform law, TARP, the state of the economy, climate change....”<sup>10</sup>

The poll certainly described the effects (admittedly with many variables) of the propagandistic elements of contemporary media culture, but it also is a measure of journalism’s inability to counter that culture. It is a measure of failure. Whatever we were doing in our reporting, whatever we thought we were doing, it isn’t working. Critic Christopher Lasch suggested that it’s the exclusion of the public (by an elite press which doesn’t respect them) from journalistic discourse that may be responsible:

In the “age of information,” the American people are notoriously ill informed. The explanation of this seeming paradox is obvious, though seldom offered: Having been effectively excluded from public debate on the grounds of their incompetence, most Americans no longer have any use for the information inflicted on them in such large amounts.<sup>11</sup>

### **An Establishment Press in a Populist Nation**

Contemporary journalism emerged from the progressive movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which itself had deep roots in the populism that began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and dominated American political and cultural conflict up through the second world war. Michael Kazin defines populism as having “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic and seek to mobilize the former against the latter.”

Journalism and populism have had an uncomfortable relationship since Walter Lippmann. Embedded in the modern code of journalists is that it provide a counterforce to the populism of the American public. That counterforce has been valuable, but increasingly, elite journalism has come to stand *against* populism, which leads to a serious problem. Populism is part of the American

DNA, and while its nativist strand frames one edge of its spectrum, there is also within it a deep desire against political corruption, for economic justice and democracy. So while populism fueled the rise of Huey Long and Father Coughlin during the depression, it also played a role in the creation of the labor movement and the New Left. Populism moves right, then left, but never, as we shall see, disappears completely. And just as the establishment holds the vernacular at arm's length, so do elites disdain the populist impulse in American society.

And so the problem of "disengagement" goes two ways: We're quite comfortable with the idea that the public has become disengaged from journalism; we're less ready to admit that journalism is also disengaged from the public. Lippmann himself, of course, became quickly aware of the dilemma. The code expressed in *Liberty and the News*, that the press was "the bible of democracy, the book out of which a people determines its conduct,"<sup>12</sup> gave way, in less than two years, to the cynicism of "Public Opinion":

Even if the press were capable of providing an accurate picture of the world, the average man had neither the time nor the ability to deal with a perplexing barrage of information. The Enlightenment conception of democracy—based on the assumption that every man had direct experience and understanding of the world around him—was totally inadequate to a mass society where men had contact with only a tiny part of the world on which they were being asked to make decisions.<sup>13</sup>

It must have seemed, in the 50's and 60's, that none of this would ever matter again, as two generations of post-war prosperity (for the public *and* the news industry) and rising aspirations, covered up populist dissatisfactions. But things begin to change in the 70's. By then three decades of an exuberant and profitable journalism culminated with the August 1974 resignation of President Richard Nixon, perhaps the ultimate speaking-truth-to-power moment in the history of

the American press. The reporter-as-hero-of-democracy became a familiar cultural theme. Thousands of young Americans, most of whom opposed the Vietnam War (and the draft) began careers in journalism. Salaries, at the broadcast networks and major newspapers, begin to rise. But at the same time, a return of economic insecurity restarted a murmur of dissatisfaction that quickly reasserted the populism embedded in the American spirit. In 1976, Paddy Chayefsky caught the zeitgeist with his brilliant and prophetic parody *Network* with its deranged news anchor shouting, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore." And civic engagement begins to ebb. The "End of History" never is. The country begins a fundamental change:

Beginning nearly 30 years ago, the people of this country unwittingly began a social experiment. Finding cultural comfort in "people like us," we have migrated into ever-narrower communities and churches and political groups... We have replaced a belief in a nation with a trust in ourselves and our carefully chosen surroundings. And we have worked quietly and hard to remove any trace of the "constant clashing of opinions" from daily life.<sup>14</sup>

And as ordinary Americans start to pull back from a common civic culture, the journalism establishment acquires power. Michael Kazin, referring to Kevin Phillips:

The Establishment— which Phillips defines as "Wall Street, The Episcopal Church, the great metropolitan newspapers, the U.S. Supreme Court and Manhattan's East Side"—had opposed FDR. But now it was composed of genteel liberals who disdained the conservative wave that "has invariably taken hold in the ordinary (now middle-class) hinterlands of the nation."<sup>15</sup>

It's at this point where journalism, until then running roughly parallel to American middle-class aspirations, begins to take a divergent and ultimately costly path. After the Nixon resignation, it ascends to a position of power, gains a seat at the table, becomes a player in an ideological battle for the American soul. It gets its hands on the levers of power, begins to attract people who want their



hands on the levers of power. And it begins to talk to itself, finding validation from within, embracing Lippmann's dispassionate skepticism, as well as his mistrust of the public to develop its opinions in a scientific manner. It finds politics a charade, so increasingly it portrays it that way; it has little in common with the working class, so it ignores it; it has little interest in stories of inspiration and hope, and it ceases to cover them; it's uncomfortable about religion and faith, and pretends they do not exist. As the nation became more (or perhaps returned to) the vernacular, journalism became more a part of the "establishment"; as the nation became more diverse, both racially and ideologically, journalism did neither; as the audience came to doubt "objectivity," journalism doubled down.

Just as professional architects and designers shook their heads over the vulgarity of the vernacular landscape, professional journalists came to disdain the thoughts and the lives of ordinary Americans. In his provocative book, *The Revolt of the Elites*, Christopher Lasch argues that Lippmann-inspired journalism, with its lack of faith in the American people, had the effect of choking off argument and debate, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of a disinterested public:

Arrogant and insecure, the new elites, the professional classes in particular, regard the masses with mingled scorn and apprehension...Middle Americans as they appear to the makers of educated opinion, are hopelessly shabby, unfashionable, and provincial, ill informed about changes in taste or intellectual trends, addicted to trashy novels or romance and adventure and stupefied by prolonged exposure to television.<sup>16</sup>

So not only have elite journalists come to live in a world where the actions and beliefs of ordinary Americans have become more opaque to them, they get peeved that their worldview is not persuasive. In *The Death of the Liberal Class*, former *New York Times* reporter Chris Hedges describes his life as journalist:

The sermons preached from my father's pulpit, the study of literature, history, theology, the classics, and moral philosophy in college and graduate school, gave me a language to make sense of the world and define my place in it. *It was journalism that permitted me to roam the world for two decades, every new foreign assignment the equivalent of another undergraduate degree. The languages I speak, the cultural literacy I possess, the grasp I have of political and economic systems, would not have been possible without these liberal institutions.*<sup>17</sup>

It would be difficult to better portray the establishment life, with its freedom, its global sensibility, its confident sense of morality; it would be difficult to describe a life more different than the ordinary working American. Wounded pride aside, there's a lot at stake when we try to wish populism away, as Kazin writes:

The desire to transcend populism ... ignores the very persistence of the language, rooted in the gap between American ideals and those institutions and authorities whose performance betrays them. That continuity occurs for a good reason. At the core of the populist tradition is an insight of great democratic and moral significance. *No major problem can be seriously addressed, much less nudged on a path toward solution, unless what an antebellum politician called the 'productive and burden-bearing classes' — Americans of all races who work for a living, knit neighborhoods together and cherish what the nation is supposed to stand for — participate in the task.*<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note that it was *always* citizens that "knit neighborhoods together." The press was part of it to be sure, but it was never the only factor in a sense of social cohesion. A common sense of prosperity and a general feeling of progress, trust in civic institutions, schools, the local police force, a healthy judiciary — all had as strong a claim as the local press. Given that we've never had strong metrics (for newspapers) in terms of how direct the effects of reporting were on the lives of its readers, it's been primarily journalists who have claimed the centrality of the press to such idealized versions of American community life. And of course many — people of color, the poor, gay men and

women—were omitted from the narrative during these golden years. After Watergate, the press began acting just the way that vernacular people expect the establishment to act: with arrogance. Thomas Patterson writes in *The Vanishing Voter*:

During the Watergate era, critical journalism had been a means by which the press could hold politicians accountable. Now it was an end in itself. Criticism was the starting point in the search for and crafting of news stories. It was also the path of advancement. Coveted appearances on network and cable talk shows were granted to journalists adept at sharp-edged commentary....the nation's "fourth branch" was now as entrenched as the officials it covered. Journalists had established themselves as a counter-elite operating within the tidy confines of Washington, as insular as the politicians they criticized for having lost touch with the public they serve.<sup>19</sup>

If elite journalism treated politics and public service with deep cynicism, they often treated working people as villains, ignoring high crimes and obsessing over misdemeanors. During the 90's when network television news magazines enjoyed huge and engaged audiences, investigative reporters, often using sophisticated hidden cameras and other surveillance technology spent their time, and their editorial resources, trapping hourly wage employees who may or may not have been padding repairs bills. In one celebrated segment<sup>20</sup> of ABC News' *Primetime Live*, a show where I worked as a producer, a hapless repairman in his work overalls, under the scrutiny of numerous hidden cameras, is confronted by the sudden appearance of a dapper correspondent who had been hiding in another room. The dialog goes like this:

Chris Wallace: I'm Chris Wallace.

Repairman (surprised and confused): I've been watching you!

Chris Wallace: Well, we've been watching you!

In another magazine show<sup>21</sup> about bicycle theft in Chicago, an elaborate sting, using hidden cameras, locating devices, and an entrapment scheme ends only

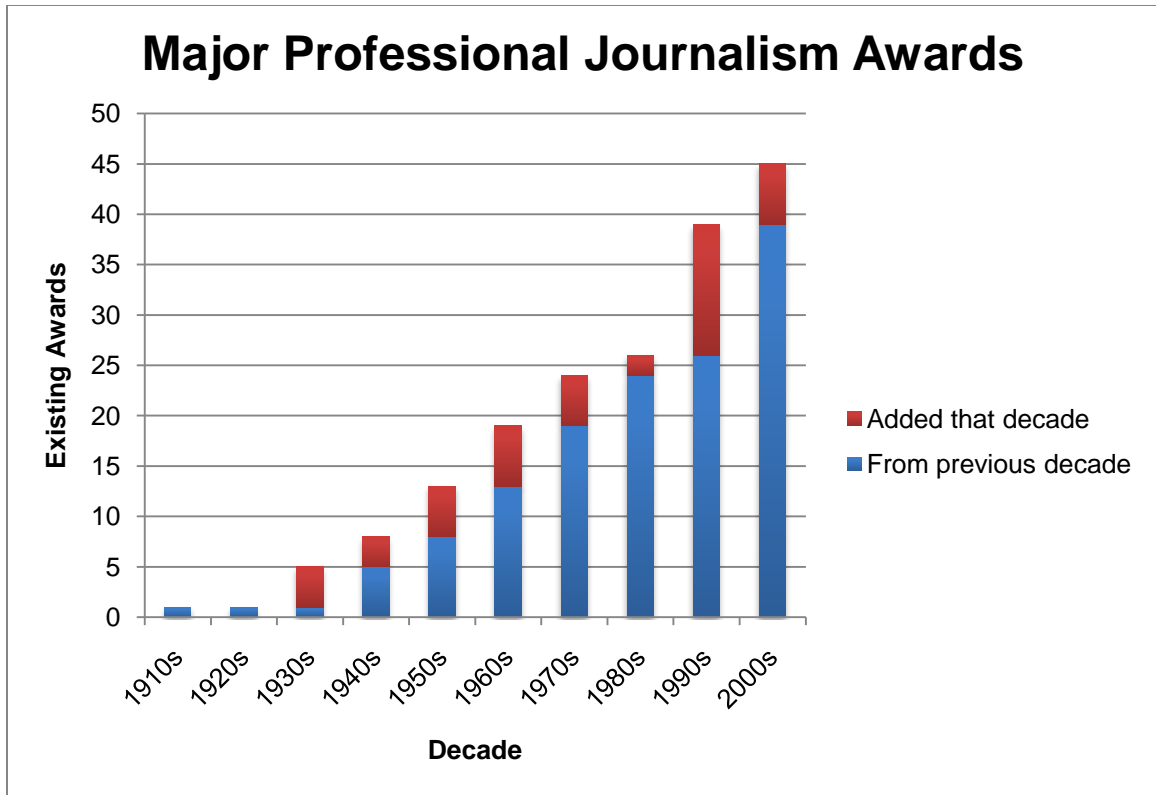
after the police, well informed by NBC producers, chase the alleged bicycle thief (if only this story had the insight into poverty of the Italian neo-realist classic of the same name) out a second-story window. As he lies on a stretcher with a shattered ankle, in the custody of the police, the handsome correspondent speaks with high moral dudgeon:

Chris Hansen: Can you tell me why you took that bike, sir? Sir?

Alleged thief: ...(Censored by station)...

His angry and x-rated response may have been the only honest word in the broadcast. I'm not excusing the petty crimes that may have been committed by the subjects of these "investigative" reports, but generally the lives of ordinary people, as they are depicted by major media, are portraits of victims (floods, tornados, random shootings) or victimizers (con artists, crooks, drug addicts.) In recent years, those television news magazines that traded in the humiliation of working people too often descend into a Grand-Guignol melodrama where the only thing newsworthy that happens in Middle America...is child abuse and murder.

As the public votes with its indifference, a strange thing happens. The less respect journalists get from their audience, the more they hold themselves in high esteem. During the 40 years of steady decline of audience trust and engagement, the journalism profession drapes itself with self-congratulatory awards.<sup>22</sup>



In a single issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review*<sup>23</sup>, bold ads for seven awards, and in a recent conference on investigate reporting, there were 123 mentions of the words “award,” “prize” or “award-winning” on the web page that listed its accomplished panelists.<sup>24</sup> This does not denigrate the work done by scores of hard-working, talented and well-meaning reporters, editors and producers. But the more valuable prize would be the respect, trust and attention of the American people. Where’s the prize for that?

What passes for “political discourse” becomes a semi-private conversation between the cultures of political journalism and politicians. An ingrained deference to power from the mainstream press is a central aspect of that conversation. The public is allowed to watch, but not take part, in the conversation. It all has the effect of re-affirming a status quo. And reporters

know it. It is one of the common private complaints one hears. This from a current news executive:

I've evolved into thinking big "J" journalism is entirely reactionary... Watching (facilitating, if I'm honest with myself) up-close the day-to-day decision making is a ghastly experience. The entire enterprise is an exercise in reconfirming bourgeois preconceptions and steering real dissent, and therefore creative and imaginative reform, into the margins.<sup>25</sup>

So given these trends—the transformative societal changes away from a single common civic language, the erosion of moderation in our political parties, the surging return of populism, the indelible mark of elitism in the “old” journalism—what would a new narrative look and sound like? If the answer is change nothing, because we are so convinced about the rightness of the role of journalism in society, then that by itself will be of great service, because the news crisis can be declared over, and everyone can settle into the (diminishing) cubbyholes of reporting to serve their very well-known audiences. *The New York Times* will work to become a single national news organization with its close political, cultural and personal ties to governing elites. ABC, NBC and CBS will serve the greatest generation to their dying day (circa 2020,) Fox News, aligning itself expertly with the current strain (and nimble enough to pivot on a dime) of American populism, will build its ratings dominance in the cable news world, *The New York Review of Books* will continue to publish their weekly erudite outrage over the vulgarity of American political (and cultural) life, wealthy benefactors will fund non-profit campaigns for investigative reporting until they lose interest or find a more worthy toy, satirists and comedians will delight us with their insights into hypocrisy, but leave us feeling bereft when the joke fades. This may well be a potential future, but one anyone who still believes in the power of good reporting ought to rue. As niche media gets more and more targeted, more carefully aligned with the end user, what incentive would there

be for that user to come back to a journalistic culture that strives to be part of a public commons?<sup>26</sup> Indeed, what incentives would there be for a news organization to continue to make the kind of investment required to accomplish that? And we don't yet know whether these decentralized niches taken together might form a new synthesis that works more or less well than the one we have. James Fallows, in a recent article about digital futures for reporting acknowledges the potential for some new kind of synthesis, but worries, "Perhaps we have finally exhausted the viable possibilities for a journalism that offers a useful and accurate perspective. If so, then America's problems of public life can only grow worse, since we will lack the means to understand and discuss them."<sup>27</sup> It's precisely that problem of public life that is at issue here. As Alex S. Jones asks, "We may be headed for a world in which there is a yawning disparity in accurate knowledge just as there is in wealth. The elite will be deeply informed, and there will be a huge difference between what they know and what most Americans know. We could be heading for a well-informed class at the top and a broad populace awash in opinion, spin and propaganda."<sup>28</sup>

A slightly more optimistic forecast comes from author Dan Gillmor, an observer of digital culture:

As we are flooded with more and more information, much of which is garbage, we'll see a strong move toward trusted sources. This will take many forms. One will be a classic retreat to quality, as the best news providers retain or earn positions of trust. Another will be progress toward increasingly sophisticated combinations of human and machine intelligence, where aggregation and curation are melded so that people and communities can sort out what they need and want based on quality, popularity and reputation.<sup>29</sup>

A fragmented media landscape may mirror a sorted society, but any hope for a journalism that aspires to be an essential part of a democracy for ordinary Americans will be hanging in the balance.

## Learning to Speak in the Vernacular

Why haven't we been able to react and develop creative approaches for our reporting? For the last 10 years or so, reporters have been forced to take a back seat to engineers, web developers and marketers in a desperate attempt to keep up with the frantic developments in digital culture. The question is how do we, as reporters, get back to the table where creative ideas that engage the audience come from?

We haven't been particularly successful in thinking our way out of the fix we're in. Journalists, despite their generally progressive ideological sensitivities are quite conservative about their profession. Conservative in that there's not much we think we ought to change. The "standard model" — disinterestedness, accuracy, objectivity or neutrality — is part of our canon, enshrined in the memoirs of hundreds of famous journalists, romanticized in popular films like *All the President's Men* and *State of Play*. (Contrast those "reporter-as-hero-of-democracy" narratives with the more populist and self-critical comedy of *The Front Page*, written in 1931.) It's a bit too much to give up. The cultural value of being a journalist, *within the social circles in which we live*, is a kind of social capital we're unwilling to part with. To think creatively about disengagement requires humility, not always a strong suit of journalists. We're also narrowly skilled. Experts in reporting, writing or producing stories we like and feel are important, but often far less talented as entrepreneurs, designers, artists. <sup>30</sup>

The embrace of the vernacular has clearly worked its way into American media over the last few years, but primarily in pure entertainment or "soft-news" settings. But consider how many of these television shows deal with work, class, economic disparity and estrangement with the establishment. Shows like *Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Coal* are reality shows that put actual work,



and the drama and dignity of manual labor, on the screen. Recently there's been a profusion of shows about pawn shops and foreclosed goods stuffed in abandoned storage facilities. All these programs circle the issue of a broken American dream, as well as a profound desire to ennoble the work that people do on a daily basis. Then there's the fiction-as-fact category, notably former *Baltimore Sun* reporter David Simon's legendary *The Wire* that many see as a more accessible, and somehow "truer" version of decades of reporting about race, crime and American cities. Add to this the phenomena of *The Daily Show*, which, particularly during the Iraq war (for anti-war Democrats and Independents, at least) was seen as a more honest version of the nightly news.

In each case there's this fracture between the "official" story as reported by journalists as opposed to the "non-news" version that feels more authentic, valuable and worthy of trust. We need to begin thinking about new narratives that favor the vernacular and respect the populism of the American audience in our reporting.

In this section I'm going to offer a few approaches that speak in the vernacular, are based on fact-based reporting on serious issues, have a populist sensibility and have engaged audiences and readers. It must be said that the vernacular lends itself more readily to media platforms where we can hear the sound of American speech. So most of the following examples come from documentary, radio and digital bricolage. Documentary, of course, frequently commits its own sins of haughty irrelevance, but for the thoughtful writer, it has possibilities.

## *Journeys With George: Alexandra Pelosi, HBO*

During the 2000 presidential election, NBC producer Alexandra Pelosi shot hundreds of hours of behind-the-scenes campaign footage with a cheap video camera.<sup>31</sup> The result, which ultimately was broadcast by HBO, was a departure from most political documentaries. While it tracked for a year and a half the progress of the Bush campaign, there was neither breathless tone, nor urgent drama. Instead, it portrayed the utter predictability of campaign coverage, with a focus on an often bored group of professionals, almost ashamed of the inertness of the work they were doing. It presents a decidedly non-heroic picture of political reporters and campaign professionals. It was ruthlessly transparent, dealing with Pelosi's personal life, as well as her unique relationship with the Republican candidate. They both were children of powerful politicians, and both used that as best they could, for leverage with each other. It also clearly notes the divide between the establishment world of the press and the vernacular world of regular Americans, otherwise known as "voters." In an early scene, Pelosi interviews a stewardess working on the charter plane that's ferrying reporters from town to town:

Pelosi: Would you ever want to be a journalist?

Flight attendant: No never.

Pelosi: Why not?

Flight attendant: Should I be honest?

Pelosi: Go ahead.

Flight attendant: You guys are just too high intensity for me. Life is too short to be that stressed out. I'm a midwestern girl; I don't have any inclining for that.

Flight attendant: Oh my god, that's Ted Koppel.

Near the end of the grueling campaign, this from a reporter describing a post-debate spin room:

Pelosi: What's going on in this room? We have to try and break this down.

Richard Wolffe: What's going on in this room is a lot of really well-paid people trying to convince a lot of other really well-paid people that we know what's going on in ordinary people's minds. I mean it's a joke.

In short, Pelosi shared a vivid depiction of American political campaigns *as they actually are*, not as the establishment press feels compelled to make them. Again, there are these parallel stories, the one that is “officially” told, and the “real” story, a story that reporters often keep to themselves, or share with each other as savvy and cynical observers to their delight. And of course, absent from this picture are the people. What are their hopes and fears? Mainstream political reporters, by relating a simplistic, predictable, redundant, flat story to their audience they are at best patronizing, and worse, dismissive. What we do know is that they are boring their audience with this false depiction of political life. Ironically, the reporters are more interesting and their words more valuable when they drop the veil of disinterestedness and objectivity and tell us how they really feel. For her trouble, Pelosi was ostracized, not by the campaigns, but by her news colleagues, for “breaking the rules.”

### **Section 60: Jon Alpert and Matt O'Neill, HBO**

In 2007, journalists Jon Alpert and Matt O'Neill shot a documentary in Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery, reserved for American casualties from Iraq and Afghanistan. Alpert has spent 40 years on the outskirts of television news, pioneering a singular and vernacular approach to reporting the news. Never really welcomed by the mainstream press, his stories often bring a creative *vérité* approach in which his presence is barely noted off-camera,

occasionally inserting a simple question or comment. There's a Dickensian quality to his work, often focused on people who rarely "make the news." One protracted series, *Life of Crime* patiently and inexorably follows the life of heroin addicts in Newark, New Jersey, over decades. In *Section 60*, which was shot over a period of four months, there are no reporters, no larger political frame, and no crafted introductions. The speakers are ordinary Americans in extraordinary situations, coping with the loss of sons, fathers and mothers, husbands and wives. This scene occurs at a gravesite in Section 60:

FEMALE VOICE: I can't believe he's under here.

FEMALE VOICE 2: I don't even feel bad sitting on top of him. He used to make me walk on his back to crack his back. (LAUGHTER) Even when I was fat pregnant. And I said, "I'm too fat for this." And he goes, "No, it feels good." So, that's what I thought of yesterday the first thing. And I stepped on it and I thought, "You always ask me to step on your back." (LAUGHTER)

FEMALE VOICE: Yeah. I don't know about you. But, the first thing when I do when I wake up every morning is check my e-mail. He didn't write me that morning. But, I thought, "Well, I bet he just got back late from a mission and he's tired."

FEMALE VOICE: I didn't know. And there I was painting.

FEMALE VOICE 2: I can't believe this happened.

FEMALE VOICE: I hate this.

FEMALE VOICE 2: I miss him. What a year? My 25th year. I think that's supposed to be a year your car insurance goes down and that you fully become an adult. People say 25. And I was 25 and had Eva. And then, a month later, I closed on our house. And then, four months later, my husband was killed. And is it better that we didn't have 50 years together? I don't know how this is supposed to go.

FEMALE VOICE: Guess we're not the only ones, you know?

FEMALE VOICE 2: Everybody's heart just breaks.

FEMALE VOICE: We're not the first and we're not going to be the last, which sucks. 'Cause I would rather us be the last.

FEMALE VOICE 2: Me too. I don't ever want anybody—any other wife to go through this.

FEMALE VOICE: I don't.

FEMALE VOICE 2: Maybe we should go over and see when he died. Maybe he just died. Do you wanna go see?

FEMALE VOICE: Could be.

FEMALE VOICE 2: Do you think we can leave our stuff here?

FEMALE VOICE: Yeah, if someone steals something from us—

FEMALE VOICE 2: From a—cemetery?

FEMALE VOICE: Really, how worse could our lives get?

FEMALE VOICE 2: I know. Right? (LAUGHTER)

Of course, American war fatalities were heavily covered in a fashion, but dispassion does not really create a real conversation about what is at stake for a grieving family, or for the nation. A long war of attrition against American speech has castrated most television news. Where did we get the idea that Americans were not eloquent? They are, if vernacular speech does not offend you.

Online, American speech is displayed with more irreverence, and with less patience for journalistic traditions. California Is a Place<sup>32</sup> presents a series of short, highly visual web videos that connect place and people. In one, a group of skateboarders from Fresno, California, dissect and discuss the foreclosure crisis, which has resulted in plenty of empty pools for them to skate in. The language, including language that would generally be expunged by a proper editor, is purely vernacular:

[Shots of empty pools, sounds of skateboards]

MALE VOICE I: The best of the times for us, the worst of the times for all these fuckin' poor people, you know? America lied to everyone—you can have "this," you can have "this," you can have "this"—and tricked everybody into like, what—what we're going through.

Close-up of “notice and order to submit vacant building plan and remove public nuisance violations”]

MALE VOICE II: Sometimes I feel bad, but I think like, a lot of the people had shitty jobs. They took stupid loans that, if they would’ve sat down and thought about it for fuckin’ two seconds, they would’ve realized that it was out of their budget, and it was just people trying to live out of their means, buying houses that they couldn’t afford, and it’s their bad that they lost them. I don’t feel bad for them. I feel glad for me—skating pools. It’s *awesome*.

Digital culture has displayed a different set of values about trust. In digital culture, transparency, opinion and irreverence is valued and trusted because there is no pretense to objectivity. The Huffington Post’s Jason Linkins writes a Sunday blog covering the network political talk shows “so you don’t have to.”

Note the tone:

My name is Jason, and the staggeringly trivial nature of these political shows, where I’m supposed to believe America’s political horse race is the most important thing in the world (SPOILER ALERT: NO ONE WINS, IT JUST KEEPS GOING FOREVER) is never in starker relief than it is on days like today.<sup>33</sup>

On this particular day, his post generated nearly a thousand comments, most of them from highly engaged readers. In addition to heaping scorn on the slippery syntax of public officials, he adds much reported fact to his posts. Irreverence is not bad manners when it’s backed up by fact. Similarly, the Politifact web feature<sup>34</sup> simply tells readers if the statements politicians make are true, half-true, false, or (everyone’s favorite) “pants-on-fire.” To its credit, ABC News’ Sunday show *This Week* has begun to partner with Politifact to provide a reality check on the Sunday verbiage.

As he received the Oscar for his film *Inside Job*, producer Charles Ferguson leaned into the microphone and reminded the audience no one has been prosecuted for the 2008 economic meltdown. The documentary, in which the off-screen journalist can barely conceal his point of view, or his irritation, attacks

both parties, and a host of financial elites, as pawns of a culture of greed in which the ordinary American serves only as the witless victim. It's old-fashioned muckraking in the purest sense: demanding answers from a cabal of elite politicians and plutocrats. The unspoken accusation "you lie!" hovers behind every question. There's little "objectivity" here, although in a nod to traditional journalism, the writer notes that this or that banker or company declined to be interviewed. Fact-based anger is a powerful narrative and delivers what is essentially advocacy, but a trusted narrative nonetheless:

They will tell us that we need them and that it was too complicated to understand. They will tell us it won't happen again. They will spend billions fighting reform...

One needs to resist the temptation to say too much about the popular radio series *This American Life*. After all, *The Onion* had a point with this fake headline: "*This American Life* Completes Documentation of Liberal, Upper-Middle-Class Existence."<sup>35</sup> But that radio series, along with a close relative, the science show *Radiolab*, have both demonstrated how changing the style of a narrative can allow reporting to be valued, shared and appreciated. They both share a transparency and openness that audiences value. There is much self-deprecation and humor, even as part of the most serious story. Mixing the serious and the humorous is an apt litmus test for some varieties of vernacular reporting. The reporter's motivations are almost always included, even celebrated. The reporter can sometimes be the fool. And there is a premium on curiosity and surprise in the storytelling, forbidden in the elite media canon. *Radiolab*, which can essentially be defined as science journalism that people actually listen to, is broadcast on public radio, but enjoys much wider distribution online as a hit podcast. Host Jad Adumrad explains its broad appeal: "But do you want to know why *Radiolab* has

worked beyond public radio?" he asked. "*Because it sounds like life.*"<sup>36</sup> Realism is a vital component of a new narrative.

Citing print examples of vernacular reporting is problematic. On any given day, reporters write stories that have a vernacular or populist sensibility. They've been doing it since Charles Dickens and of course during the heyday of the muckraking era. So the model is there.<sup>37</sup> And of course, here is where external factors *have* played a role. Wire services and local newspapers have done most of the heavy lifting for decades, the unglamorous job of filing local and national copy, much of it valuable to readers. The gutting of the business model has stolen that dependable current of conversation. But beyond talking about good writing versus bad, there's not much more to say other than there should be more of it. Yet the word "vernacular" itself refers to the spoken language of everyday people. So in one sense, print is, by definition, a thing apart. And as Lasch passionately argues, journalism has mistaken "providing information," for a more vital mission: enlarging the public forum:

People lost the capacity to use language precisely and expressively or even to distinguish one word from another. The spoken word models itself on the written word instead of the other way around, and ordinary speech begins to sound like the clotted jargon we see in print. Ordinary speech begins to sound like "information" — a disaster from which the English language may never recover.<sup>38</sup>

In terms of finding a mechanism to re-engage the alienated, most of the platforms suited to vernacular reporting will be in non-print platforms: In addition to the examples above there is the intimacy and humility of hyper-local reporting; television documentaries and specials that straddle the line between news and reality shows; well-written blogs, viral web content, transparently non-objective but fact-based websites; fact-based drama; creatively framed books about science, food and politics; and as always, the timeless effectiveness of



investigative reporting. Arguing for a more vernacular reporting that respects populism does not deny the value of traditional reporting.

The challenge facing the press is to reassert the vernacular as a complement, not a replacement, for establishment reporting. Coverage of certain events—breaking news, disasters, spectacles of one sort or another—will always attract an audience valuing the work of establishment news organizations. But it's a vernacular language that rebuilds trust.

Here's a list of strategies that ought to lead to more vernacular reporting and storytelling.

- High crimes first, misdemeanors second.
- Realism. Describe things the way they really are.
- Be vulnerable and transparent as a reporter, share your methods. Tell your audience what you really think.
- Don't be afraid to express curiosity and surprise.
- Mix serious reporting and humor.
- Be conversational. Write for your audience, not your peers.
- Include everyday voices, but not as a prop.
- Wean yourself of the "usual suspects."
- Be irreverent toward authority; be respectful to ordinary people.
- Object to stupidity and hypocrisy wherever you find it, without fear of being labeled biased. In fact, that's a bias one might welcome.
- Report on the vernacular: working people, military families, the world of work.
- Trade access to power for access to people.
- Refuse the stenographic role the political parties would prefer you have.

One day a candidate will refuse to take part in the presidential debates

- because of inane questions that get asked. One day a network will refuse to televise a nominating convention, because there is no news to report.
- Report on class, just don't use the word.
  - Cover the challenge to American democracy embedded in the demographic separation of people. Find out what we have left in common.
  - Bring a Dickensian voice to reporting: meticulously detailed, realistic, humorous, tragic, compassionate.
  - Consider that you may have chosen the wrong career. If you want to punish the guilty, become a prosecutor. If you want to see the world, join the Navy. If you want to lecture others about how they should live, become a preacher.
  - If you want to enlarge the American public commons, if you have enough faith that your neighbors, and people who are not your neighbors, can—through argument and debate—find common ground, consider journalism. Better yet, consider reporting.

To continue to insist on a cloak of exceptionalism leads to only one end: irrelevance. The alternative is much more appealing: Encourage a real conversation by engaging the American imagination, rather than our own. Explore, through our reporting and storytelling, the threads of commonality that still exist in a 245-year-old democracy and using craft, reverence for fact, truth, story and respect for our audience, help bind those threads together. One comes to see to the opportunity: Attend to the contemporary social reality of an increasingly divided nation and our problems of trust and engagement at the same time. It actually might be the purpose that we are most suited for. Journalism only has a future if it stands together with other everyday aspects of democratic living. If we stand apart, we stand alone. As the news has become

“noise” to an economically and ideologically battered middle class, it has brought about a kind of deafness—one that we can only hope is temporary.<sup>39</sup> With an audience thus hearing impaired, a reporter who wants to commit an act of journalism is faced with a clear choice: In a village of the deaf, the town crier must learn sign language.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Many thanks to my research assistant Hannah Taber, and of course, the wonderful faculty and staff at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy.
- <sup>2</sup> Jones, Jeffrey M. "Americans' Trust in the Mass Media." *Gallup*, April 20, 2004. Accessed April 22, 2011. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/11428/americans-trust-massmedia.aspx>.
- Morales, Lymari. "Distrust in U.S. Media Edges Up to Record High." *Gallup*, September 29, 2010. Accessed April 22, 2011. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/143267/distrust-media-edges-record-high.aspx>.
- "In U.S., Confidence in Newspapers, TV News Remains a Rarity." *Gallup*, August 13, 2010. Accessed April 22, 2011. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/142133/Confidence-Newspapers-News-Remains-Rarity.aspx>.
- Pew Research Center. "Press Accuracy Rating Hits Two Decade Low: Public Evaluations of the News Media: 1985-2009." *Pew Research Center for the People & the Press*, September 12, 2009. Accessed April 22, 2011. <http://peoplepress.org/files/legacy-pdf/543.pdf>.
- Saad, Lydia. "Congress Ranks Last in Confidence in Institutions." *Gallup*, July 22, 2010. Accessed April 22, 2011. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/141512/congress-rankslast-confidence-institutions.aspx>.
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/121214/Americans-Confidence-Military-Banks-Down.aspx>
- <sup>4</sup> Alex S. Jones, *Losing the News* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009)
- <sup>5</sup> J.B Jackson, cultural geographer, 1909-1996. Notable books include *American Space* (1972), *The Necessity of Ruins* (1980), *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (1984.) The interested reader might begin with *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America*, edited by Helen Horowitz, (New haven, Yale University Press, 1997)
- <sup>6</sup> Timothy Davis, "Looking Down the Road," in *Everyday America*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003), edited by Chris Wilson and Paul Groth, 63
- <sup>7</sup> Davis, "Looking Down The Road", 68
- <sup>8</sup> *JB Jackson and The Love of Everyday Places*, Documentary, Chicago, distributed by Encyclopedia Britannica Corporation, 1988, written and produced by Bob Calo
- <sup>9</sup> Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown, A Study in American Culture*, (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1929),4
- <sup>10</sup> World Opinion Poll, University of Maryland  
[http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/dec10/Misinformation\\_Dec10\\_rpt.pdf](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/dec10/Misinformation_Dec10_rpt.pdf)
- <sup>11</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, (New York, Norton, 1995), 11
- <sup>12</sup> Walter Lippman, *Liberty and the News*, (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920)
- <sup>13</sup> Ronald Steele, *Walter Lippman and the American Century*, (Boston, Little Brown, 1980), 182
- <sup>14</sup> Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort*. (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 302
- <sup>15</sup> Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, (New York, Basic Books, 1995), 251
- <sup>16</sup> Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, 28
- <sup>17</sup> Chris Hedges, *The Death of the Liberal Class*, (New York, Nation Books, 2010), 139
- <sup>18</sup> Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 286
- <sup>19</sup> Thomas Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 2003), 175
- <sup>20</sup> *Primetime Live*, ABC News, 1992
- <sup>21</sup> *Dateline*, NBC News, September 30 1997

<b>1910s</b>	Pulitzer Prize (1917)
<b>1920s</b>	—
<b>1930s</b>	National Headliner Awards (1934) Nieman Fellowship (1938) Maria Moors Cabot Prizes (1939) Sigma Delta Chi Awards (1939)
<b>1940s</b>	Peabody Award (1941) Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Award (1942) George Polk Awards (1949)
<b>1950s</b>	Hillman Prize (1950) National Journalism Awards (1953) Jesse H. Neal Award (1955) Robert Capa Gold Medal (1955) Gerald Loeb Award (1957)
<b>1960s</b>	Golden Pen of Freedom Award (1961) Silver Gavel Awards (1961?) John S. Knight Fellowship (1966) National Magazine Awards (1966) Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Reporting (1967) Robert F. Kennedy Awards for Excellence in Journalism (1968)
<b>1970s</b>	Edward R. Murrow Awards (1971) Fred M. Hechinger Grand Prize for Distinguished Education Reporting (1972) International Editor of the Year Award (1975) IRE Awards (1975) Telly Award (1978)
<b>1980s</b>	Livingston Award (1980) News & Documentary Emmy Award (1980)

<b>1990s</b>	<p style="text-align: center;">James Aronson Award for Social Justice Journalism (1990)  CPJ International Press Freedom Awards (1991)  Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting (1991)  Lorenzo Natali Journalism Prize (1992)  John Chancellor Award for Excellence in Journalism (1995)  UNCA Excellence in Journalism Awards (1995)  EPpy Awards (1996)  ASNE Awards (1997)  UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize (1997)  Walkley Award for Broadcast Interviewing (1997)  Business Journalist of the Year Awards (1999)  Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism (1999)  Payne Awards for Ethics in Journalism (1999)</p>
<b>2000s</b>	<p style="text-align: center;">Online Journalism Awards (2000)  Bastiat Prize (2002)  Shorenstein Prize (2002)  The BOBs (2004)  APME Journalism Excellence Awards (2005?)  Eric Breindel Award for Excellence in Opinion Journalism (2006)</p>

<sup>23</sup> *Columbia Journalism Review*, Nov/Dec 2010

<sup>24</sup> [http://journalism.berkeley.edu/conf/logan/?page\\_id=586](http://journalism.berkeley.edu/conf/logan/?page_id=586)

<sup>25</sup> Private email, name withheld

<sup>26</sup> Matt Baum, in conversation at the Shorenstein Center, Harvard Kennedy School

<sup>27</sup> James Fallows, "Learning to Love the New Media," *Atlantic*, April 2011

<sup>28</sup> Jones, *Losing The News*, 221

<sup>29</sup> Dan Gillmor, [blogpost](#)

<sup>30</sup> NYU Professor Jay Rosen offers a different take on the internal culture of journalism in a widely read blog post <http://pressthink.org/2010/06/clowns-to-the-left-of-me-jokers-to-the-right-on-the-actual-ideology-of-the-american-press/>

<sup>31</sup> I had a small consultative role in this production

<sup>32</sup> [California Is a Place website](#)

<sup>33</sup> [Jason Linkins, Huffington Post](#)

<sup>34</sup> [Politifact](#)

<sup>35</sup> [The Onion](#)

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/10/magazine/mag-10Radiolab-t.html?pagewanted=1& r=1&sq=radiolab&st=cse&scp=1>

<sup>37</sup> For an example of what I mean by Dickensian reporting, see Jim Dwyer's story, "Descent Into Slavery, And Then a Ladder to Another Life," NYT June 23 2010, or any of CJ Chivers battlefield reports, also in NYT

<sup>38</sup> Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites*, 175

<sup>39</sup> Thanks to Robin Granados, Meredith White, Steve Cheng and Bill Densmore for helping with this idea