

# Goodbye, Mr. Gates:

## Are the gatekeepers irrelevant now that the fences are down?

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By Charles Lewis  
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Old gatekeepers don't die or fade away, they merge and acquire, consolidate, brand, target and sell "content" in this new online, consumer, digital demand world. Some of them, like the publishers of the remaining family-owned or controlled newspapers, struggle to survive market forces and out-of-town shareholders. Others, like today's new media owners, harvest their mature investments, reduce annual expenses, raise the operating margins and obtain more platforms to amortize the same "news" for online access to more consumers and more advertising revenue.

In the past year we have seen the Bancroft family members sell Dow Jones and *The Wall Street Journal* to Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation for \$60 a share price and Arthur Sulzberger Jr., and his family successfully stave off a shareholder challenge to *The New York Times'* two-tier ownership stock structure. And the world's most successful software company, Microsoft, has made a hostile bid to buy Yahoo, for \$44.6 billion, and access to Yahoo's 137 million monthly online visitors. [1] It is all about becoming more competitive with Google for the most annual online advertising revenue.

And in recent years, it has become painfully apparent online that advertisers do not need news and journalism as they once did. According to the most recent, annual *State of the News Media* report, "On Madison Avenue, talk has turned to whether the business model that has financed the news for more than a century – product advertising – still fits the way people consume media." [2]

Meanwhile, with nearly every news media sector declining in audience, and online news consumption no longer increasing, the incredible shrinking newsroom problem continues. Hundreds of reporters and editors have accepted buyout offers at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Boston Globe*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *The Dallas Morning News*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and many other newspapers. Four dailies that have produced fine international coverage in the past — *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Boston Globe*, *Newsday*, and *The Baltimore Sun*—closed their remaining overseas bureaus. In TV, as veteran correspondent Tom Fenton has observed, a quarter century ago CBS News had twenty-four foreign bureaus and stringers in forty-four countries; today, there are six bureaus, none of them in Africa or Latin America. Since 2000, over 2,500 newsroom professionals, approximately 5% of the editorial workforce nationwide has been fired. [3]

At ironically the same time the Internet and other new technologies are enabling occasional, astonishing, heretofore unimaginable feats of innovative, in-depth journalism, overall these exciting advances in the possible have been outweighed and overshadowed by financial imperatives. In a 2004 Project for Excellence in Journalism survey of 547 journalists and news media executives, 66 percent felt that profit pressures were hurting national coverage – up 25 percent since the question was first asked in 1995. As the world is becoming infinitely more complex, 86 percent of national journalists whose newsrooms have undergone staff reductions believe the news media is "paying too little attention to complex stories."

There are fewer and fewer professional reporters today monitoring the uses and abuses of power and in general covering the most important public issues of our time in America and the world. The most respected, independent news outlets – the TV network evening news programs and the leading national daily newspapers, Associated Press and National Public Radio – of course all still have

“gatekeepers,” executives and editors deciding which news reporting is fit to print, but with shorter stories, often updated throughout the day and night.

Before the advent of the Internet, there were glaring omissions in major organizations’ news coverage, sometimes for quirky, idiosyncratic, journalistically indefensible reasons, and certainly these continue today. As we have been reminded in the years since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Washington access journalism and reporters’ over-dependence on official sources continue to adversely affect the quality of their news coverage, sometimes rendering it unduly cautious, uncritical and susceptible to manipulation. But unfortunately, fewer independent reporters, under more frequent daily deadlines, working for media owners simultaneously spending millions of dollars annually to achieve various other, commercial, non-journalistic objectives in Washington, exacerbate this vulnerability to press release journalism.

Now, with millions of new ways for people to vent their spleens and to socially network, through the blogosphere and platforms such as Facebook and My Space, disparate information and wide-ranging points of view abound to an unprecedented extent. However, serious, painstakingly thorough, independent newsgathering does not abound; indeed, it is in alarming decline.

The most serious encumbrance to daily journalism today is not traditional gatekeeper intransigence by editors and publishers deigning to cover certain subjects, though unfortunately that still very much exists at major news organizations. The worse problem, though, is economic; insufficient reporting and editing capacity to do in-depth local, national and international stories about the most important public issues of our time. But the financial pressures and influences are pervasive and run even deeper.

Media company marketing research about customer attitudes and interests is hardly a new concept, but the precise impact and relationship of market forces on political content in the news are becoming clearer. Research in late 2006 by two University of Chicago economists, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro studied all of the words of politicians in the 2005 *Congressional Record*, isolating the 1,000 most partisan phrases spoken by members of Congress. Certain phrases such as “death tax” and “illegal aliens” were more often uttered by Republicans, while “minimum wage” and “oil companies” were said by Democrats. They then analyzed 417 newspapers in the U.S. (covering about 70 percent of newspaper circulation) and measured how often these types of phrases turned up in news articles (not editorials). Not only does the study identify which newspapers most use Republican or Democrat words and phrases, confirming many popular perceptions, it found that “the main driver of any slant” appears to be “the newspaper’s audience, not bias by the newspaper’s owner.” [4]

Gentzkow and Shapiro then juxtaposed this data with per capita circulation data compared to the ratio of Democratic/Republican campaign contributions by zip code. Circulation, they found, was closely related to whether the newspaper’s news coverage “slant” matched the reader’s own views. For example, *The Los Angeles Times*, a paper this word content analysis found to be liberal/Democratic leaning, does not sell as well in southern California where contributions to Republicans are high. According to Shapiro in an interview, “The data suggest that newspapers are targeting their political slant to their customers’ demand and choosing the amount of slant that will maximize their sales.” [5]

Another financial pressure on news content is the new phenomenon of in-text advertising now used online by several Gannett newspapers, including *The Indianapolis Star*, *The Arizona Republic* and the *Reno Gazette-Journal*, Cox Enterprise’s *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and others. One of the leading firms selling in-text advertising, Vibrant Media, has nearly doubled the number of publishers placing online ads in this manner. As *Business Week* noted, “Many journalists believe that selling the words in a story blurs the line between editorial and ad content. Some worry it creates an incentive to

insert ad-linked words or order up certain types of stories.” *Forbes’* online operation ceased the practice in 2004 after an internal and public uproar. [6]

Advertising and marketing owner gatekeeper influences are increasingly encroaching upon news content decision-making these days. What content will get monetized and what won’t? What stories are economically advantageous and which ones are not? Obviously the most time-consuming, expensive and legally or physically jeopardous types of journalism – investigative and international reporting – do not fit well into this market-driven journalism mentality.

Which makes the vision of one distinguished deacon of American newspapers, computer assisted journalism pioneer and author Philip Meyer, the Knight Chair and Professor of Journalism at the University of North Carolina, all the more important. He wrote in his 2004 book, *The Vanishing Newspaper*, “The only way to save journalism is to develop a new model that finds profit in truth, vigilance and social responsibility.” According to Meyer, there is “more than one way to pay for the next news” and he cited nonprofit institutions such as National Public Radio and the Center for Public Integrity. These and other new examples offer hope for the future and “creative outlets for the best and the brightest of the next wave of young journalists. Watch for them.” [7]

And who better to carry on the social influence sensibilities of 20<sup>th</sup> century newspapers but without the elitist gatekeeper and high profits obsessions than entrepreneurial-minded journalists committed to, first and foremost, high quality public service journalism.

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[1] Peter Whoriskey and David Cho, “Microsoft Bids \$44.6 Billion to Buy Yahoo,” *The Washington Post*, February 2, 2008, p. A1. Miguel Helft and Andrew Ross Sorkin, “Eyes on Google, Microsoft Bids \$44 Billion for Yahoo,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 2008, p. A1.

[2] The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *The State of the News Media 2007*, [www.journalism.org](http://www.journalism.org), Overview, p. 1.

[3] [http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2006/narrative\\_overview\\_intro.asp?cat=1&media=1](http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2006/narrative_overview_intro.asp?cat=1&media=1)

[4] Austan Goolsbee, “Lean Left? Lean Right? News Media May Take Their Cues from Customers,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2006

[5] Ibid.

[6] “Pitching Between the Lines: In-text ads tied to keywords on Web news pages are growing fast – and causing a stir in some newsrooms,” *Business Week Online* ([www.businessweek.com](http://www.businessweek.com)), December 3, 2007.

[7] Philip Meyer, *The Disappearing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* (University of Missouri Press: Columbia, Missouri: 2004), pp. 226-227, 246.