Stop the Press: The Future of Journalism Is Not Post-Political

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Discussions of the future of journalism center on new economic models, digital modes of distribution, and how to attract young audiences. But what of how future journalism might represent, describe, and critique issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality? And what of the race, gender, class, and sexuality of future journalists themselves? Issues of industry survival take center stage in debates about journalism’s future. Issues of integrity, wisdom, and increased levels of equity in coverage and employment have less success finding the spotlight. Concern over how to deliver news in the coming decades generally trumps debate about who might deliver it and the character of what might be delivered. The importance of political economy analyses of new journalism, coupled with keeping gender, race, and sexuality identities front and center, is emphasized.

Discussions of the future of journalism center on new economic models, digital modes of distribution, and how to attract young audiences. Scholars, pundits, and journalists forecast the field in terms of money, technology, and circulation. The National Civic Review hopes small, nonprofit teams of reporters can plug the gap left by closing papers and dwindling news staffs (McGrath, 2014). Scholars claim that crowdfunding offers readers the power to choose which stories are covered and which are not (Sanchez-Gonzalez & Palomo-Torres, 2014). Research indicates that new media platforms can’t bring in a profit, but might shore up traditional media (Krumsvik, 2012). Journalist and media critic Dean Starkman debates whether news will be gathered on digital delivery platforms with volunteer citizen journalists or in...
legacy media with paywalls (2014). *The Atlantic* writer James Fallows celebrates new media for their swift and multi-voiced coverage of Egyptian and Iranian uprisings, the Haitian earthquake, and the Indonesian tsunami (Fallows, 2011). Scholars find that audience satisfaction increases when viewers can tweet back to gatekeepers (Xu & Feng, 2014). “Anyone in the world with an Internet connection can now create journalism,” writes Henry Blodget, CEO and editor of business news and analysis site *Business Insider*, painting a rosy picture of a new golden age for journalism (2013, para. 9).

But what of how future journalism might represent, describe, and critique issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality? And what of the race, gender, class, and sexuality of future journalists themselves? Claiming that “more great journalism is being produced today than ever before,” web publication editor Henry Blodget argues that all a modern journalist needs “are your eyes, ears, nose, and storytelling and digital publishing tools” (2013, para. 9). Intelligence, education, critical thinking, and an ability to assimilate information from a wide variety of sources do not make this list of essential journalism skills. And, Blodget does not mention a journalism future in which coverage of issues of identity might be intelligently nuanced and include previously marginalized perspectives, or one in which media ownership is no longer dominated by White men. Gender, race, and sexuality issues appear to be handled as problematically in digital media as they have been in print and broadcast media, yet these issues are not mentioned in futuristic imaginings of the news. For example, a content analysis of online U.S. and international magazine websites found that, despite the endless story space afforded by a website, online magazines have no more extensive or balanced coverage of women than did print news (Yun, Postelnicu, Ramoutar, & Kaid, 2007). A study of accredited sports photographers reports that they operate in a sports journalism culture of “rampant sexism” and that some of them provide voyeuristic shots of female athletes to pornography websites (Keats & Keats-Osborn, 2013, p. 643). And, a study of news coverage of female political candidates finds that the historic trend of stereotyping women as being unfit for public office is still in existence and active (Valenzuela & Correa, 2009). When the future of journalism is considered, issues of industry survival take center stage, but those of integrity, balance, and increased levels of equity in coverage and employment have less success finding the spotlight. Concern over how to get paid for delivering the news generally trumps debate about who might deliver it and the character of what might be delivered.

Some writers do draw distinctions between the sheer volume of digital information and the accuracy and value of the journalism on offer (Fallows, 2011; Jolley, 2014). And, some successful news organizations—ProPublica, I-News in Colorado, and *The Chicago Reporter*, for example—employ digital technology to enhance meaningful coverage of social justice issues (McGrath, 2014; Richardson, 2014). But most discussions of the future of journalism
focus on whether or not journalism will survive, what its business models might be, and how digital technology drives content.

Scholars discuss problems of journalism education and declining enrollments without drawing particular attention to the challenges of attracting students from marginalized communities or educating students about dealing with sensitive issues of gender, race, or sexuality identities (Anderson, 2014; Becker, Vlad, & Kalpen, 2012; Bor, 2014). Mitchell Stephens' book, *Beyond News: The Future of Journalism*, argues for “wisdom journalism” that includes interpretive analysis and informed perspectives, but does not discuss gender, race, or sexuality—in the news or among the news gatherers—as factors to be considered (2014). In the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Starkman contemplates future directions in journalism digital technology and business models, but does not mention future directions in journalism hiring practices, ownership, or coverage of marginalized communities (2014). In an *American Journalism* article headlined a “radically different future of news,” Paul Sparro (2014) envisions developing technologies, but does not consider gender, race, or sexuality. The current historical moment in the journalism industry is characterized by upheaval, rapid technological change, tectonic shifts in audience usage patterns, economic calamity, and perilous employment. These matters deserve and receive thoughtful analysis and debate by industry leaders and media scholars. But even considering that the scope of these articles may never have been to encompass issues of identity, it is striking that none of them do. It is revealing that, among so many articles with the phrase “the future of journalism” in the titles and texts, none of them considers or includes issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality among future journalists or in future news coverage.

The evolving digital formats are new; the politics are wearily familiar. White men dominate ownership and staffing. Web publications encourage workers to contribute the products of their labor at no cost, and only those at the very top—owners and executives—profit. The work of “citizen journalists” who might have never reported a story in their lives often receives, on the web, the same importance and credibility awarded to stories reported by a team of trained and seasoned professional journalists whose work is overseen by editors exercising ethical and critical judgment. “Editing,” says scholar Jill Lepore, “is one of the great inventions of civilization” (Fallows, 2011, para. 36). But online, editing is in short supply. Distinguishing between accurate, well-crafted work and unsubstantiated and unresearched rants becomes a literacy task that audience members must perform on their own, providing more free labor to the journalism industry.

What is conspicuous about the future of journalism is how much it resembles the old journalism—and how seldom its past conventions are challenged in envisioning the future. Such visions are generally lacking in fresh conceptions of operational models that might correct inequities around race, gender, and sexuality in legacy journalism structures. Such visions, in
fact, rarely take identity, subordination, dominance, and marginalization into consideration at all.

The modern, post-political historical moment may play a part here. In the *Los Angeles Times*, Mary McNamara calls the current cultural period

the brave new post-everything world in which we mark our rejection of past cultural movements, and our refusal to commit to new ones, with one little word: “post” . . . In the past few years, Americans have been told . . . that society is becoming post-black, post-ethnic, post-ironic, post-feminist . . . post-political (2003, para. 4–5).

McNamara offers a time line of “post” terminology: post-feminist was coined by Camille Paglia in the 1990s¹; post-ethnic was used in 1995 by scholar David Hollinger; post-gay appeared in 1996; post-Black appeared in 2001 in a show at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2003). The “post” prefix, McNamara and her sources argue, appears to indicate that a particular previous social inequity is now over, which she finds problematic and inaccurate.

Much of the discussion of the future of journalism incorporates post-political thinking in its uncritical and even dangerous assumption that issues of race, gender, and sexuality are resolved and require no particular concern. Amid assertions that culture is now post-feminist, post-race, and post-gay, explorations of where gender, race, sexuality, and class are headed in the coverage and ownership of news become sidelined, right along with cultural and social issues related to sexism, racism, and homophobia.

Take, for instance, media discussions about post-gay politics. *Out* editor James Collard told *The New York Times*: “Post-gay isn’t ‘ungay,’ it’s about taking a critical look at gay life and no longer thinking solely in terms of struggle” (“Sexual Politics,” 1998, para. 3). In his book, *The End of Gay (and the Death of Heterosexuality)*, Bert Archer is celebratory in his claim that American culture is post-gay and post-straight (Archer, 2004), but *The Advocate* columnist Michelangelo Signorile fears such new categories reveal politics that have become complacent (Signorile, 1999). Journalist Daniel Mendelsohn defines the post-gay era as the “heterosexualization of gay culture . . . the over-time acceptance of mainstream cultural norms by those who were once revolutionaries” (1996, p. 3). But the concept of post-gay is problematic in that “it reflects a perception that the discursive environment relating to minority sexualities has significantly altered” when it has not (Boyle, 2012, p. 267). Bush defines a post-gay world as “one in which old attitudes, behaviours and prejudices continue to persist in spite of, or even because of, enlightenment” (Bush, 2012, p. 186). Scholar Amin Ghaziani defines the post-gay era as a shift from an oppositional political approach to an inclusive one, emphasizing similarities between the LGBTQ community and the straight one and assimilating gays into the heterosexual mainstream in a “troubling politics of normalization” (2011, p. 103). Post-gay, he argues,
indicates a movement that is “motivated less by drawing boundaries against members of the dominant group and more by building bridges toward them” (2011, p. 99) in a “distinction-muting logic” (p. 101).

Simon Watley critiques post-gay journalism, particularly in *Time Out* and *The Independent*, as symptomatic of displaced anxieties and fears, “attacking the very idea of gay collectivity, or community values of any kind” (1996, p. 162). Noah Michelson, executive editor of Gay Voices at *The Huffington Post*, identifies the future of journalism coverage of LGBT issues as self-determined by the community, characterizing the content and characterization of LGBT journalism coverage as choices the community will make for itself. He points to *New York Times* coverage of the trans journey of Bruce Jenner in which Jenner is referred to as “Mr.” as evidence of unnecessary and inaccurate gendering based on outdated journalism style books and attitudes that lead to identities being overlooked or dismissed (2015). Use of the term “post-gay” does not erase discrimination and heteronormativity (Seidman, 1993). Building a future of journalism on the idea that gay political activism has accomplished all its goals may contribute to future journalism discourse that fails to properly consider issues and identities of the LGBTQ community.

Similarly, post-race, writes scholar Ralina Joseph, indicates that the current moment is not one in which issues of race are important, and incorrectly assumes an end of racial inequality: “Pundits and politicians proselytize about post-race to create the illusion that the contemporary United States is a racially level playing field where race-based measures are not only unnecessary for people of color, but actually disempower whites” (2009, p. 240). H. Roy Kaplan protests the terminology and the idea of America being post-racial, attributing the concept to, in part, an incorrect conclusion drawn by some from Obama’s election (2011):

A black man in the White House signified that we had finally matured as a nation, embraced diversity, and were forging a future of equality. That idyllic view obscures the reality that color still permeates life in a society born from an economic system based on human bondage . . . race and racism are still deeply woven into the fabric of our society (Kaplan, 2011, ix–x).

Although for some the Obama presidency signals that America is post-racial, simultaneous immigration conflicts over the Mexican border, racial profiling in security and police actions, and disproportionate numbers of African American and Latino men being imprisoned tell a different story (Callender, 2012). Callender argues against the post-political “attitude of casual acceptance of racial difference and breezy confidence regarding the end of racism” (p. 445). Following the killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City, *Washington Post* editorial board member Jonathan Capeheart wrote: “All I want for the new year is the banishment of
‘post-racial’ anything from all social and political discourse,” calling the term and concept “misguided and delusional” (2014, para. 1).

Claims that multiculturalism has moved beyond race “ignore the continuing impact of racism upon socio-economic inequality,” argues Alana Lentin (2014). Such post-political logic accepts reductive culturalist explanations of tensions and conflicts while sidestepping political and institutional responsibility (Lentin, 2014). Post-politics flattens out factors of power and history, reduces “racial/cultural difference to aesthetic and consumable signifiers evacuated of any historical and political gravitas,” and “constructs difference as devoid of power” (Hua, 2009, p. 64).

When *The New York Times* moved its race and ethnicity beat reporter—one of the few race beats at any major news organization—off the race beat and to the metro desk, Chris Ip at *Columbia Journalism Review* raised questions about what that meant for the future of race coverage at the *Times* (2015)

at a time when race issues have reached fever pitch, ranging from the police killings of unarmed black men like Eric Garner and Michael Brown, to controversy over the lack of diversity in this year’s Oscar nominations. The *Times’* coverage not only leads the news agenda in the U.S. but gives credibility to the country’s struggles with race in an age that some commentators still insist is “post-racial” (Ip, 2015, para. 1).

The race beat, argued Ip, “means not just reporting on protests that explode onto the streets, but how to tackle the buried structure of race relations that lead to them”; such insightful coverage is unlikely to happen without a dedicated beat reporter assigned to it (2015, para. 10). Previously, when the *Times*, in a similar move, dissolved its environmental reporting beat in 2013, editorial leadership promised staff that environmental coverage would not diminish; however, in ten months, it had (Ip, 2015).

In her book, *The Post-racial Mystique*, Catherine Squires tracks the use of the term in online media, news, and network television (2014, para. 16). Using coverage of Tiger Woods, Colin Powell, and Obama’s campaign and election, among others, Squires connects post-racial frames to the elision of memory about both the civil rights movement and the realities of racism, poverty, and profiling. During the 2008 election, “pundits and politicians, bloggers and celebrities made tentative and dismissive statements about the (finally?) declining significance of race. But as the last few years have demonstrated (again), racism and racial inequalities persist” (p. 4). Post-racial discourse blames individuals rather than cultural institutions and infrastructures for inequality. Squires argues that journalistically and culturally “we need to discuss more deeply the causes and effects of the long civil rights movement, and the ways our mediated remembrances do not provide sufficient context for conversations about and approaches to racial reconciliation”
Addressing the future of racial identity in news coverage appears less likely to occur when a post-racial society is imagined.

Existing alongside these other post-politics is post-feminism, defined by Angela McRobbie as “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s come to be undermined” (2007, p. 27). The term relegates feminism to the past and implies no necessity for feminism in the future (Tasker & Negra, 2007; Vavrus, 2002). Post-feminism repositions feminism, moving it from activism to an aging cultural memory; it “simultaneously evokes and rejects” feminism, argues Hannah Hamad (2014, p. 11). Modleski defines post-feminist media texts as “negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism—in effect, delivering us back into a prefeminist world” (1991, p. 3). Feminist scholars argue that post-feminism dismisses and minimizes feminist issues and concerns (Levine, 2001, 2008; Projansky, 2001; Rodino-Colocino, 2012; Vavrus, 2002). Tasker and Negra (2007) define it as an “othering” of feminism, a way of constructing feminism as being “extreme, difficult, and unpleasurable” (p. 4). They track the term “post-feminism” to the 1980s/1990s where it was “concretized, both as a discursive phenomenon and as a buzzword of U.S. and U.K. journalism” (Tasker & Negra, 2007, p. 8).

In news accounts of women in politics from 1991 to 2000, Mary Vavrus (2002) finds dominant a post-feminist ideology that privileges domesticity over public life. She argues that media position feminism as a “problematic social movement that should be superseded instead by postfeminist beliefs and assumptions” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 165). Media blame feminist ideology and activism—not patriarchy, inequity, and cultural infrastructure—for difficulties in the lives of women (Vavrus, 2002). Post-feminism silences feminism by pointing to a few examples of feminist success—female CEOs (who are often White, wealthy, and well-educated), for example—and implying that these privileged few are examples that feminism worked and can now be retired (Ferguson, 1990; Vavrus, 2002). These few examples, however, do not indicate that all races and all classes of women now enjoy legal, fiscal, and cultural equality and rights.

Feminism is vilified and depicted as an extreme politics that has benefited few and harmed many. What is constructed as middle ground, between the feminist and pre-feminist extremes, is postfeminism: an essentialist ideology that privileges individualism and the interests of elite, white, straight women at the expense of a collective politics of diverse women’s needs. (Vavrus, 2002, pp. 167–168)

Additionally, the few visible women media professionals in the spotlight do not indicate a wholesale industry shift away from male dominance in media leadership. Vavrus points to the “vilification of feminism” in news coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, Larry King’s broadcast on Hillary Clinton’s fashion sense and body, and Time magazine’s cover “Is Feminism
Dead?” as just three examples emerging from a lack of feminist judgment at the top (Vavrus, 2002). Sarah Projansky identifies media representations as post-feminist when they are “by definition contradictory, simultaneously feminist and antifeminist, liberating and repressive, productive and obstructive of progressive social change” (2007, p. 68).

These contradictory categories apply to post-race and post-gay media representations, as well. If media operate from a position that there is no longer any need for activism regarding racial, sexual, or gender inequity, then what editors judge to be news will be affected by their judgments that race and gender oppression are past and post-. Discussion of oppression and subordination is silenced with a blanket assurance that previous concerns are now irrelevant.

When post-political terms are employed to indicate that American culture and social structures are at a point of enlightenment, tolerance, and equity that negate any need for recognition, adjustment, or restitution, they silence and discipline the margins while protecting the centers from uncomfortable realities. Although progress has been made at varying levels in differing categories of identity politics, that does not mean there is no more progress to be made, nor does it mean that individuals self-identifying in these categories feel that equality has been achieved. Use of “post” terms to indicate that American culture is “over” dealing with these issues can work to obscure awareness of ongoing work that still needs to be done.

Scholarly and professional envisioning of the future of journalism cannot uncritically accept post-politics and must remain alert to and critical of how gender, race, and sexuality are reflected in staffing and ownership of media organizations and in media coverage. Forecasts of what shape journalism might soon assume must be firmly situated in the historical moment in which those predictions are cast—in this case, in a culture that is too often self-congratulatory about being “over” its most vexing and complex challenges. As new methods of journalism delivery and consumption are imagined, so must new balances be envisioned for gender, race, and sexuality representation in media leadership, staffing, and content. And before such reimagining can take place, the current state of affairs must be critically observed, recognized, and named.

The evolving digital format of current and future journalism dissemination allows media representations of gender, sexuality, and all identities to be swiftly generated, almost instantly circulated, and ultimately consumed by audiences of larger numbers than print journalism ever reached. This speed of broadcasting and breadth and width of audience may make new media representations even more powerful and influential than those found in legacy media. This makes political economy, content, and narrative analyses, among others, all the more relevant going forward into new journalism.

Emily Bell points out in The Guardian that media analysts and scholars are too quick to claim that a progressive revolution in journalism is
underway. The technology and business models may have changed, but who sits in the corner office—or the center cubicle—is still, too often, a White man. Bell calls this the “repackaging of the status quo” (2014). The future of journalism, in this sense, is not edgy and groundbreaking, but rather
an all-too-familiar structure, wrapped up not in newsprint but in 0s and 1s. Bell cites new journalism digital projects Vice, Quartz, Buzzfeed, Politico, Grantland, ESPN’s FiveThirtyEight, First Look Media, and Vox as being male-led and male-dominated (Bell, 2014). Marc Andreessen lists 16 new journalism start-ups and expansions—“people and companies that are doing it right”—and they are almost all run by men; Politico has one woman on its five-person executive team and a rare balance of gender and race on its editorial team (Andreessen, 2014). The new, almost entirely White male digital journalism “already bear[s] the hallmarks of [its] restrictive heritage” (Bell, 2014). It is, writes Bell, “as if diversity of leadership and ownership did not really matter” (2014).

But they do. In a Time article about how statistics analyst Nate Silver hires journalists for ESPN’s digital publication, FiveThirtyEight, Silver says “clubhouse chemistry matters” (Dickey, 2014). Clubhouses are, by their nature, exclusionary, and Silver’s choice of vocabulary may be telling; at the time of that article, his clubhouse was almost entirely male (Bell, 2014). In his cultural history of American manhood (1997), Michael Kimmel argues that men’s clubs and fraternal organizations played a historic role in offering men solace from the threats of a changing economy and work landscape. Framing a work environment as a clubhouse evokes images of exclusionary spaces where a select gender and race can retreat from the rest of the world—not a beneficial mind-set for journalists asked to interpret the daily events, pressures, and contradictions of a culture made up of many identities. When a physical space is exclusionary, it contributes to naturalizing ideological and cultural spaces in which the absence of “others” is enforced and the authority and perspective of “us” goes unchallenged.

Who covers the news makes a difference in, among other things, tone, story selection, framing, and interpretation of the facts of a story. The social backgrounds of journalists have been found to strongly influence their perceptions of their profession, how it works, and how it ought to be practiced (Santos-Sainz, 2013). Rather than journalism schools defining attitudes of journalists, “other sociological, economic and cultural factors . . . play a decisive role,” including “family media habits, cultural practices, and ideological heritage” (Santos-Sainz, p. 140). Men and women journalists covering presidential elections were found to cover political news differently (Grabe, Samson, Zelekauskaitė, & Yegivan, 2011). Women reported a greater quantity of stories, were more likely to employ human-interest angles in covering an issue, and used gender-neutral frames more often. Men “emphasized the competitiveness of campaigns” but were less adversarial and aggressive than were women in reportage (Grabe et al., 2011, p. 285). The authors
conclude that, as more women candidates enter political life, “fully entrusting women with reporting election news would certainly not hurt the momentum toward gender-uniform political participation” (p. 303). Such studies reveal the limitations of a journalism dominated by Whites and males.

Feminist scholars have long argued that in addition to journalists’ backgrounds, the political economy of media—financial factors, ownership structures, and staffing patterns—are relevant in scholarly discussions of how and why representations of gender and sexuality are produced (Levine, 2001; Vavrus, 2002). Understanding these tensions and conditions of production are central to conceptualizing media accurately and to recognizing the importance of issues of identity. McChesney identifies critical political economy analysis as a particularly helpful tool in revealing relationships between democracy, capitalism, and media (2013). The future of journalism is inextricably bound up with all three.

The imbalances of race, gender, and class that have been long-critiqued in legacy press are not digitally erased in online media. A Fox website opinion piece asks “Why is so much of liberal cable news begging for a race riot in Ferguson, Missouri?” (Williams, 2014, para. 1). A site called GotNews: Independent, Unbiased & Unafraid ran the headline: BREAKING: Cops: #MichaelBrown Stepfather Inciting #Ferguson Race Riot Is Blood Gangbanger (Johnson, 2014). The drive to create clickbait-able content is an economic one, valuing “speed for speed’s sake, volume without thought, and a downward quality spiral of local news” (Starkman, 2014, para. 4). Rather than creating an online space in which issues are examined from a multitude of perspectives, media producers tend to opt to publish first and revise later. Legacy media coverage of the Olympics has been criticized for being gender- and nation-biased (Angelini, MacArthur, & Billings, 2012), but new media coverage of the 2012 Olympics was found to be more equitable and bias-free (Eagleman, Burch, & Vooris, 2014). Yet, an examination of the ten most popular sports blogs found that male athletes receive more coverage than females, and female portrayals are more sexualized (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011). Matthew Hindman argues that “beliefs that the Internet is democratizing politics are simply wrong” (2008, p. 3) and the Internet’s failures in democratizing public discourse are “profound” (p. 4): “The Internet is not eliminating exclusivity in political life; instead, it is shifting the bar of exclusivity from the production to the filtering of political information” (p. 13). Political economy analyses of the Internet could usefully include, along with site ownership and management, data on search engines and other points-of-entry. He urges scholars to “take a closer look at the infrastructure of the Internet” and to “be mindful of the difference between speaking and being heard” (p. 13).

The Internet gutted journalism’s economic support with fierce advertising competition and new ways of delivering the product to the audience at no cost (McChesney, 2013). McChesney finds “scant evidence that what is
occurring online today could plausibly generate a popular journalism sufficient for a free and self-governing society. . . . Journalism is something society requires but that the market cannot generate in sufficient quantity or quality” (2013, p. 175). The solution, he argues, is to choose democracy over capital when it comes to journalism: “political economy—an understanding of capitalism and its relationship to democracy—can provide a rudder as we make sense of the Internet. . . . political economy should be the organizing principle for evaluating the digital revolution” (McChesney, 2013, p. 13).

A reinvigoration of rigorous political economy research, applied particularly to online news delivery generators, aggregators, and disseminators, would offer fresh and relevant information about identity representation in new media. The body of literature of representation of race, gender, class, and sexuality that has primarily centered on network television and print journalism could be usefully extended into online news operations. Coverage of racial tensions and violence in Ferguson, debates over police brutality and killings, discussion of rape culture and sexual assaults on college campuses and by celebrities, and examinations of LGBTQ issues are current media examples of old lessons—complex societal issues that require thoughtful, nuanced, and informed journalism, and often do not get it. It is hopeful to imagine that future journalism might include reporting, writing, and editing that reflect careful judgment and illuminate challenging topics, rather than exacerbate hysteria, overreaction, misunderstanding, and objectification.

However, “thoughtful,” “nuanced,” and “careful” are not adjectives commonly associated with digital journalism. Internet, journalism, public relations, and blogging often blur together into one amorphous category, creating troubling areas where branded or unreported content may be mistaken for professionally gathered reporting (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014). Comments sections at the end of journalistic accounts also open a space for uncivil discourse: racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic statements, as well as personal insults and threats, are profuse. These often appear on the same page as professional journalism, or are one click away, and receive the benefit of the same large circulation possessed by the story being commented on. Optimistic accounts of how this democratizes the news do not take into account the impact and meaning of positioning uninformed diatribes as carrying equal weight as news coverage. Comments have significant impact, polarizing the perceptions of readers and influencing how journalism and other reports are received and understood (Anderson et al., 2014).

Online stalking, bullying, and harassment of journalists, particularly female journalists, are also deeply concerning and resist the claim that the Internet is a democratic space where gender, race, class, and sexuality are rendered neutral. Cyberbullying and violent behaviors discipline and constrain women who participate personally and professionally on the Internet, limiting their expression. The 2014 American Society of Magazine Editors
winner of the public interest category was a *Pacific Standard* piece by Amanda Hess on the digital and social media threats of violence, rape, and murder she regularly receives as a female journalist writing for journalism websites. Internet harassment of women marginalizes their presence online, impinges their freedom of communication, and is minimized and dismissed by law enforcement and media publishers. The tenor of Hess’s e-mails is chilling: “I’m going to rape you and remove your head” (2014, para. 2); put you and another feminist “in a gimp mask and tied to each other 69 so the bitches can’t talk or move and go round the world, any old port in a storm, any old hole;” and “Amanda, I’ll fucking rape you. How does that feel?” (2014, para. 6).

“None of this makes me exceptional,” writes Hess. “It just makes me a woman with an Internet connection.” She cites similarly violent examples of threats to female journalists working on the developing edge of the future of journalism:

To Alyssa Royse, a sex and relationships blogger, for saying that she hated *The Dark Knight*: “you are clearly retarded, I hope someone shoots then rapes you.” To Kathy Sierra, a technology writer, for blogging about software, coding, and design: “I hope someone slits your throat and cums down your gob.” To Lindy West, a writer at the women’s website Jezebel, for critiquing a comedian’s rape joke: “I just want to rape her with a traffic cone.” To Rebecca Watson, an atheist commentator, for blogging about sexism in the skeptical community: “If I lived in Boston I’d put a bullet in your brain.” To Catherine Mayer, a journalist at *Time* magazine, for no particular reason: “A BOMB HAS BEEN PLACED OUTSIDE YOUR HOME. IT WILL GO OFF AT EXACTLY 10:47 PM ON A TIMER AND TRIGGER DESTROYING EVERYTHING” (Hess, 2014, para. 7).

The volunteer organization WHO@, Working to Halt Online Abuse, has tracked, identified, and fought online harassment since 1997, its inception. It handles 50–75 cases a week and tracks statistics on cases when victims agree to fill out detailed questionnaires. Its 2013 data reveal that most victims are single, White women between 18 and 40 years of age, and most harassers are male. Two thirds of the cases escalate into harassment on more than one type of social media site, and one fourth of the cases included threats of physical violence (http://www.haltabuse.org/about/about.shtml). The Pew Research Center’s 2014 study of online harassment finds that 75% of adult Internet users have seen someone being harassed online and 40% have been harassed themselves; 18% of those have been digitally stalked, sexually harassed, and physically threatened (Duggan, 2014). Young women (18–24) experience “severe types of harassment at disproportionately high levels” (Duggan, 2014, para. 12). Online accounts with feminine usernames receive 100 sexually explicit or threatening messages a day; accounts with masculine usernames receive 3.7 (Meyer & Cukier, 2006). Hess argues that
such gendered harassment has “severe implications for women’s status on the Internet” (2014).

As the Internet becomes increasingly central to the human experience, the ability of women to live and work freely online will be shaped, and too often limited, by the technology companies that host these threats, the constellation of local and federal law enforcement officers who investigate them, and the popular commentators who dismiss them—all arenas that remain dominated by men, many of whom have little personal understanding of what women face online every day (Hess, 2014, para. 12).

Although data regarding online harassment, stalking, and violent threats are preliminary and, in many cases, challenging to gather, the available data on online violence echoes established scholarship on offline violence. Most victims are women, most perpetrators are men, occurrence is likely underreported, and physical violence begins with stalking. In the United States, one in four women are violently attacked and 29% of all women are raped, stalked, or physically assaulted (Black et al., 2011). Women are stalked three times as often as are men (Black et al., 2011). Being stalked creates long-ranging and costly health consequences, including emergency room visits, post-traumatic stress disorder, headaches, ulcers, chronic pain, poor mental health, and other conditions (Black et al., 2011). Stalking is directly linked to murder and physical assault; 76% of femicide victims are stalked before being murdered (McFarlane et al., 1999).

Online harassment and violence appears to be the same violence in a different format. Certain conditions of new delivery modes of journalism—the comments section, Twitter access, ability of the audience to give immediate feedback to journalists—allow old patterns of stalking, intimidation, bullying, and threats to occur more readily and in new formats. And the digital and design connections between journalism and comments from readers blur the line between reportage, bias, and opinion, compromising public perception of what journalism is and what it should deliver.

An encouraging sign in discussions of the future of journalism are attempts to grapple with the issue of the quality of journalism, rather than the digitalization of it. That the future of journalism will be digital is uncontested, but whether or not it will be wise, socially just, and intelligently synthesized—and be capable of addressing the future of gender, race, class, and sexuality rights and issues—is a debatable matter.

Mitchell Stephens proposes “wisdom journalism”—adding applied “wisdom” from the journalist and editor to the five Ws of journalism (who, what, when, where, why) (2014). In a digital world where breaking news is broadcast almost instantaneously, the interpretation and analysis possible in written stories gains particular value. Well-reported and thoughtful stories are even more of a public asset now, and not outdated. The insight and
synthesizing capability of a professional journalist is valuable to readers, and some scholars and professionals point to narrative long-form journalism as a form well suited to the web and as a form that supplies the space and time for thoughtful analysis (Neveu, 2014; Starkman, 2014). It cannot be assumed that every writer’s “wisdom” automatically includes thoughtful and sensitive handling of gender, race, and sexuality, but it seems a positive step toward such a journalistic future.

David Weinberger, technology commentator, calls transparency “the new objectivity” (2009, para. 1). This begs the question: whose transparency? Weinberger encourages journalists to reveal their personal biases and backgrounds, but such revelations do not make visible the organizational and financial structures of media companies, their owners, and their subsidiaries. This thinking pushes onto the worker responsibility for the policies, values, and practices of an entire corporation. A writer being transparent about personal financial or romantic information may or may not be relevant for a particular news article, but for every story, it is always relevant to understand the process used in reporting and writing the article, who edits website content and using what criteria, and who owns the website and profits from its commerce. Locating the need for transparency with the individual journalist diverts attention from who owns media and what that particular political economy might mean in terms of fairness, thoroughness, and responsibility. Holding the individual journalist responsible is disingenuous when content can be dictated, directed, edited, and disseminated by editors and publishers to whom the journalist reports. Such blinkered vision also disguises the responsibility of sponsors, advertisers, and larger media organizations to which a site might belong. There are numerous sources of bias, agenda setting, prejudice, and assumptions—the journalist is but one cog in a large machine.

Scholars and industry leaders point to the “democratizing” possibilities of news on the web. The infinite space available on a website allows reporters to post interviews and their notes, and web stories can include links to original documents and data (“The Foxification of News,” 2011). These are benefits in many ways, but it is also worth recognizing that they push journalistic responsibility onto the consumer. The future of journalism may be that each citizen must report each story herself. Ezra Klein, an economic and domestic policy blogger on The Washington Post site, calls for reporters to publish full transcripts of their interviews. “This is a baffling waste of good information. Reporters are endlessly interviewing newsmakers and then using, at most, a handful of lines out of thousands of words” (Klein, 2010, para. 2). This practice might be informative in some cases, but simply tacking reporter’s notes or a lengthy Q and A onto a story is not necessarily adding value to it and the suggestion reinforces the popular (and digital) assumption that quantity of information is more valuable than information that is responsibly gathered, synthesized, and thoughtfully weighed. And, throwing more raw information gathered by middle class White men and
edited by upper-middle class White men at issues of gender and race is unlikely to shift attitudes. More notes and more links are well and good, but I believe more compassion, empathy, awareness, and comprehension must be incorporated into reporting, as well.

Yet there are dangers here, too. *The Economist* argues that “consumers are overwhelmed with information and want to be told what it all means”; its call for journalistic transparency points to Fox News, Al-Jazeera, and *The Economist* itself as organizations that are “unafraid” to say what they think and are “prospering” as a result (“The Foxification of News,” 2011, para. 2). *The Economist* conflates journalistic practices of fairness and objectivity with fear, rather than attributing such practices to professionalism.

Expecting readers to report stories for themselves by following links and poring through interview notes may indeed be the future, but it is far from a creative envisioning of what the future of journalism ought to be. It is rather a stamp of approval of sorts for running journalistic operations on duct tape and a prayer, with skeleton staffs and strapped budgets. We must not assume that new media equate to new attitudes. Evidence points to new media repackaging old attitudes, subordination, and dominance in a new format.

Discussions of the future of journalism often look back nostalgically for a level of painstaking professionalism that may or may not have existed, and look forward to new formats, speed, and business models. But the question before the crystal ball ought to be: How might media be differently imagined by different genders, races, sexualities, classes? If journalism is being reinvented, minute-by-minute, could it not be cut entirely from new, whole cloth?

The future of journalism could include content that is synthesized and contextualized across varied racial, gender, sexuality, and class experience. It might privilege all perspectives, rather than one or a few. It might carefully consider, weigh, and balance facts with interpretation. It might take responsibility for itself and for the democracy it is meant to support.

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NOTE

1Vavrus traces the term back to 1919, when it was used to decenter analyses of sex made popular by the suffrage movement (2002, p. 188, n. 6).
REFERENCES


