JOURNALISTIC AUTHORITY

LEGITIMATING NEWS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

MATT CARLSON

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Journalistic Authority

Legitimating News in the Digital Era

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To Barbie Zelizer, my teacher

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Introduction

The Many Relationships of Journalism

"Of all the arguments under way these days at the noisy crossroads of the news business, none is quite so basic as the debate over journalistic authority—who has it, and what it is worth."[1] With these words, then *New York Times* executive editor Bill Keller opened his review of Alan Brinkley's 2010 biography, *Henry Luce and His American Century.* The book chronicles Luce's rise from Yale University dropout to creator of a unique journalistic form: the weekly news magazine. *Time* and later *Life* would become not merely influential news sources but part of the collective culture—magazines whose pictures and prose captured the collective attention of a nation. Visible in homes, newsstands, waiting rooms, buses, and trains, they came to symbolize the force of mass communication.

Although the story of Luce's ascension atop the pinnacle of twentieth-century journalism is fascinating on its own, the book review offered Keller the opportunity to opine on the state of journalism in the opening years of the twenty-first century—a time when many observers of the press seemed ready to shrug off mass communication as a quaint notion connected to a bygone century. Keller stood at the helm of one of the world's most venerated news organizations in an ocean of digital icebergs. Beset by an ethos esteeming the flat configuration of networked participation, Keller clung to a vision of journalism as a hierarchical public service, encompassed in a "conviction that a significant population

of serious people feel the need for someone with training, experience and standards—reporters and editors—to help them dig up and sort through the news, identify what's important and make sense of it." In Keller's argument, journalists work on behalf of audiences to structure the world into a coherent and believable news product—a responsibility best reserved for legitimate professionals. This ideology has been clearly expressed each day for more than a century in the upper right-hand corner of the newspaper Keller edited: "All the news that's fit to print."

On any given day, the hundreds of journalists working at the *Times* churn out an incredible array of stories created in accordance with this vision. Below the iconic Gothic letters, either printed in ink or rendered in pixels, readers encounter stories ranging from on-the-ground accounts of battles in the Middle East to a review of the latest Broadway play. The newspaper assembles what is important or interesting at any moment, at least as selected by its hierarchically arranged staff. The *New York Times* delivers the news of the day. It is joined in this endeavor by the cacophony of Twitter, the microtargeting of a neighborhood blog, BuzzFeed listicles, an endless stream of commentary on cable television, the vast reservoir of formally secret documents housed by WikiLeaks, and a multitude of other sites that also tell us the news of the day. In this media environment, audiences confront a bewildering array of news stories claiming to represent or explain the world.

Journalistic authority has increasingly become a topic of concern, due in no small part to the transformation of all media, from the scarcity of the analog age to the abundance of the digital era. Keller's review provides a glimpse into how the head of a venerated news organization struggles with the ways in which digital media alter the availability of news, its economic structures, and the relationship between journalists and their audiences. Digital media have brought new potentialities and new players. Google News, Facebook, and Twitter are relatively new services, yet all three have become indelible parts of the news ecosystem. The advertising dollars that propped up traditional journalism outlets continue to migrate online, often away from news. A surplus of new digital sites for news, including those with particular political viewpoints, fragments the collective attention once commanded by newspapers and television networks. Even more recently, the rise of automated journalism in which computer programs author news stories without the inter-