

# Online Newsgathering

## Research and Reporting for Journalism

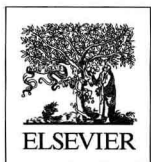


Stephen Quinn and Stephen Lamble

# Online Newsgathering

## Research and Reporting for Journalism

Stephen Quinn  
*and*  
Stephen Lamble



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# Introduction

Journalism is changing around the globe. The change seems to have accelerated in the past decade. Indeed, since the start of the new millennium we have seen the spread of media convergence (which has influenced newsroom practices around the world), the arrival of citizen or participatory journalism, a boom in the number of blogs and related publishing forms such as moblogs, podcasts and wikis, and the spread of multimedia forms of reporting.

The premise of this book is simple. As the changes listed above develop and as reporters move from working in one medium to working in several, they will need to change the way they gather information. Hence the subtitle of this book: Research and Reporting for Journalism. In times of rapid and large-scale change, two constant stars seem to make a difference: quality and trust. The only long-term way to provide quality content and ensure or consolidate trust is through education and training, and through a commitment to excellence. To paraphrase Aristotle, excellence is not gained overnight but earned over an extended period. This book exists to help mono-media journalists and students in journalism programs around the world move into the realms of multimedia reporting.

Each of the changes mentioned here requires new ways of doing journalism. Granted, the basics of journalism do not change: We still need to collect good information, write succinctly, clearly and for a specific audience, and conduct ourselves ethically. We still need to acknowledge the importance of accuracy within a context of an awareness of legal constraints. But to these basics we need to add new skills and, perhaps more importantly, we need to develop new mindsets. With media convergence for example, where reporters provide content in more than one medium, reporters need to work to new deadlines. Working with citizen or participatory journalism means listening to our audiences and learning from them. Blogging and

related forms such as moblogging, podcasting, and video blogs mean that journalists must find new ways to work with their audiences. And multimedia reporting requires new ways of gathering information. Mainstream media needs to learn to work with these new media forms, and share the best of what is available.

One of the big changes is a new relationship with breaking news. The early years of the twenty-first century have seen the arrival of a new news cycle, via the Internet. It is debatable when audiences first started turning to the Internet for breaking news. But we would argue that big news stories in 2005 and 2006 such as the London and Mumbai transport bombings, the disasters in New Orleans, and Saddam Hussein's execution have seen audiences turning to the Internet first for news. In countries where broadband is not widely available, breaking news is more likely to be delivered via a third generation mobile phone or portable data assistant such as a Treo or Blackberry. Increasingly, video of news events becomes available on the Internet and the mobile phone at about the same time, such as the video of Saddam Hussein's death in January 2007. The news cycle has evolved over the past century. Until the arrival of radio in the 1920s, newspapers and news agencies had a monopoly on the spread of news, with word of mouth their sole competitor. News broke primarily on the radio until the 1950s. Television later embraced the live broadcast and broadcasters dominated breaking news when they introduced 24-hour news channels. But by the early years of the twenty-first century, the Internet and the mobile phone are the places audiences go when they want the latest news. Certainly the Internet and the mobile phone offer two places where innovation and journalism meet.

As an interesting aside, on January 18, 2007, *The New York Times* published a video obituary of humor columnist Art Buchwald, who died that day. Buchwald recorded his own obituary. You can watch it at [http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/obituaries/BUCHWALD\\_FEATURE](http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/obituaries/BUCHWALD_FEATURE).

As the century evolves, we will see the Internet assume an even more significant role in publishing and delivery of news. Professor Bob Papper of Ball State University believes newspapers will become a boutique subset of online. "I've been saying that for years now and people look at me less strangely today [2004] than when I first started saying it five years ago [1999]." Newspapers would have multimedia aspects that will look more like an online publication (quoted in Quinn 2006: 141). Buzzmachine's Jeff Jarvis believes reporters and photographers should carry multimedia tools—a digital voice recorder, still camera, and a laptop—with them at all times. Reporters need to be encouraged to work in multimedia. "Then they should tell the story however it is best told" (Jarvis 2005). Newsrooms are changing around the world, and will continue to adapt. The prescient and erudite Kerry Northrup, Ifra's director of publishing, has been pointing out the multimedia future of journalism for almost a decade. Northrup talks about the four stages of news in chapter 6. Newsrooms need to change to adapt to, and adopt, these stages of news.



And newsrooms need to learn to become aggregators of news. This requires an acceptance of the idea that our audiences know as much, or often more, than the reporters in our newsrooms. Dan Gillmor refers to this concept as “news as conversation,” which accepts that news becomes an exchange between audiences and journalists. Again, this requires a new mindset and a new approach to newsgathering. In future years the criterion of completeness, of a story being as good as we can manage by a given deadline, could be judged on the number of links to relevant sources as much as it is judged by the reporter’s skill at gathering good information.

What, then, is the likely future of news? Certainly news and journalism have a future, because people continue to want to be informed. It will be accessible all the time: at any time and any place, through any device. News will need to be transparent—that is, audiences will want to know as much about news sources and the trustworthiness of those sources as they do the news event itself. Trust takes a long time to build, but can be destroyed through mistakes or ethical breaches. A key word is authentic: in the news environment of the twenty-first century, trust is the new mantra. News will be more participatory: a conversation rather than a lecture and involve many and varied communities. Because of the over abundance of information, news will be edited more tightly in some media. Journalists will put their energies into writing more tightly. Daily newspapers must learn to look forwards rather than backwards. That is, instead of reporting what happened yesterday they need to consider what will happen today, tomorrow and later in the week.

## An Outline of this Book

Chapter 1 sets the scene for this book, looking in a broad-brush way at how the Internet and related technologies have changed journalism and media. It notes how audiences are fragmenting in an environment of excess information, and considers the boom in online advertising relative to mainstream media revenues. It also discusses the way that the Internet threatens traditional commercial media business models. All of the chapters that follow are more hands-on and specific. Chapter 2 shows how to use various parts of the Internet such as the UseNet and listservs to generate story ideas that are beyond the often PR-generated news agenda, and how to find experts to interview for those stories. Chapter 3 does the same with blogs and related new media such as moblogs and podcasts. Chapter 4 considers the issue of citizen or participatory journalism and discusses how this phenomenon, often called audience-generated content, relates to newsgathering and the future of journalism. Chapter 5 looks beyond the usual suspects such as Google and offers ways to use the Internet technologies to find background information for stories. Chapter 6 works from the premise that the multimedia reporter will need to adopt different information-gathering processes compared with the mono-media reporter, and shows how to do that.

Chapter 7 looks at how to assess the quality and veracity of information we find on the Internet. Technologies give us access to a vast amount of data, but how reliable and accurate are those data? Chapter 8 shows how to develop a beat using the Internet. It offers strategies for developing an area of expertise. Chapter 9 reflects the generosity of journalists on the Internet. It introduces the vast array of resources that reporters have made available for their colleagues around the world. Chapter 10 considers the legal implications of gathering information online and reporting news on the web. Chapter 11 shows how to do deeper forms of journalism using the Excel spread sheet and drawing on the wide range of statistics available on the Internet.

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## How the Internet Is Changing Journalism, and How It Affects You

All journalism today involves computers. Regardless of whether you write for a newspaper or magazine, an online site, or for a television or radio newscast, you almost certainly will write with a desktop computer or laptop and some form of word-processing package. Computers are also involved in most of the news production process after a story leaves a reporter's desk. You are also probably using the Internet as a newsgathering tool. But if you are not using it to its fullest capacity, you are ignoring a goldmine of information. Professor Steve Ross formerly of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism has been tracking the adoption of the Internet by journalists each year since 1996, and by 2002 he concluded Internet adoption was almost universal. By the early years of the new century, Ross said, journalists had embraced the Web and e-mail as reporting tools (Ross 2002: 22–23).

The phrase computer-assisted reporting (CAR) describes this combination of computers and reporting. Any journalist who uses the Internet is doing a form of CAR. Journalism is, after all, about working with information and the Internet is one of the world's single largest sources of information. The section *Journalists and Technology: Some Context and History* notes that when journalists first started using telephones, stories were labeled "telephone-assisted reporting." We face a similar situation with CAR. With time the phrase "computer-assisted" will atrophy, just as the phrase "telephone-assisted reporting" has become redundant. CAR is about using technology to help gather better quality information to produce better quality reporting. Any journalist younger than 30 probably takes computers for granted. They are the first generation to have been surrounded by

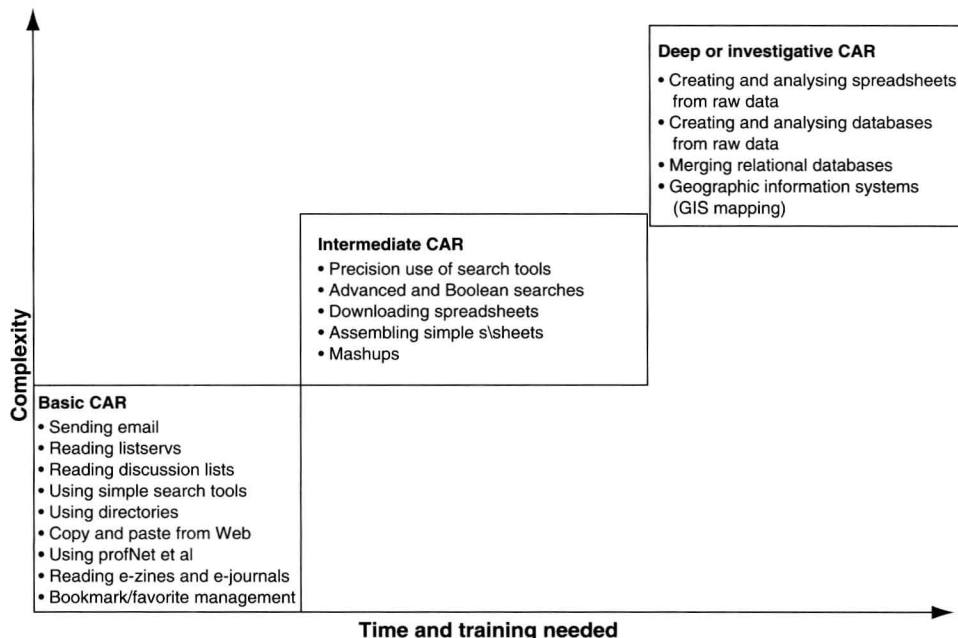
computers during their high school years. The Internet is now as common and available to high school and university students as the encyclopedia and library were to earlier generations.

This book reserves the phrase deep CAR for a sophisticated form of reportage that involves analysis of spreadsheets, databases, and other high-end software packages. We believe that deep CAR is one of the most important new tools available to journalists, and we dedicate the last chapter to it. Figure 1.1 describes the levels of CAR as they are applied in this book. Perhaps it is because the authors started with manual typewriters and dial-up phones, and initially accessed the Internet via slow modems rather than broadband that we appear so pedantic.

This book is about learning skills to make you a better journalist, regardless of the terminology people have adopted. Professor Philip Meyer, a CAR pioneer who also coined the phrase “precision journalism,” argues that CAR has become so broad that the phrase should be abandoned. He fears that online research, under the mantle of CAR, diverts attention from complex data analysis and other powerful uses of the computer. In the interests of keeping things simple, we will concentrate on the idea of using technology to produce better journalism.

At the turn of the last century, one of the authors wrote that the Internet would “prove to be the most significant human development since Gutenberg’s

Figure 1.1



invention of moveable type in the middle of the fifteenth century” (Quinn 2001: ix). This book acknowledges the massive changes since then, and believes that the Internet will continue to produce more change as we move further into the new century. One of the biggest changes will be the trend toward a multimedia form of journalism, which necessitates a multimedia focus and mindset during the newsgathering process. That is the focus of this book: How to gather good information in the context of an evolving form of journalism that is interactive and incorporates multimedia.

This opening chapter deliberately takes a big picture overview. Those of you who like jigsaws will understand the process. When building a jigsaw the most efficient approach is to establish the outline first, then fill in the middle. That is the purpose of this chapter. It looks at how the Internet is influencing journalism and newsgathering and consider how audiences are fragmenting and how journalists need to change to accommodate those fragmented audiences. We also consider one of the major reactions to fragmenting audiences: the phenomenon known as media convergence. It is both a management and a journalistic change. At the editorial level, convergence represents a new form of journalism that requires new skills. As a business process, convergence is an attempt to reaggregate or regather splintered audiences. People get their news from a variety of sources, at different times of the day. The only way a news organization can reach as large an audience as possible is by offering news via different media at different times of the day. We need to consider the economic environment in which the worlds of media and journalism operate, so we need to consider the changing forms of media economics. This chapter concludes with a short outline of the tools the journalism profession has embraced in its relatively short history.

The Web and e-mail are becoming, as journalism researcher Steve Ross notes, the “soul of newsgathering.” Increasingly the rhythm of the news business “keeps time with the Internet” (Ross 2002: 4). Nine out of ten people who responded to his national survey of American journalists said that the Internet had “fundamentally changed” the way they worked. Slightly more (92 percent) agreed that new technologies and the Internet had made their jobs easier and made journalists more productive (Ross 2002: 27). A study of media students in Australia showed they were more likely to obtain their news from the Web than from printed newspapers. They all used e-mail extensively, researched online rather than with books, and seemingly carried their mobile phones with them at all times (Quinn and Bethell 2006: 51).

This chapter needs to be read in the context of major change within journalism and the world of media. One of the biggest changes is the emergence of convergent forms of journalism. Convergence is also known as multi-platform publishing (in some parts of the world each medium is seen as a platform; thus



we have the newspaper platform or the radio platform). Convergence comes in several forms. Editorial staff work together to produce multiple forms of journalism for multiple platforms to reach a mass audience. In many cases the one newsroom produces content for a daily newspaper, radio and television bulletins, online sites, and sometimes magazines and weekly newspapers. Some reporters only work for the newspaper; others only work to produce television news. But some reporters work across media, and others produce interactive content especially for the Web on a 24/7 basis. For the last group, convergence represents a new form of journalism. A converged newsroom has links with traditional media and draws from its history and traditions, but convergence also requires reporters to produce original content in multimedia forms. This form of journalism is often expensive and time-consuming. For more on this international trend, see Stephen Quinn's 2005 books in the reading list. Media organizations around the world are merging their newsrooms. An international study in 2002 showed that two out of three media organizations in both print and broadcast have shared their newsrooms with the online team (Ross 2002: 20–21).

Mike Game, chief operating officer of Fairfax Digital, the online arm of what has become Australia's biggest newspaper publisher, noted how people were turning to the Internet for breaking news. The Internet's great strength, he said, was its ability to attract people during the day for short news grabs. "In many ways it is displacing more traditional media like radio news services" (quoted in MacLean 2005: 18). In a major research report released late in 2004, the Carnegie Foundation noted that 39 percent of men aged 18–34 got their news from the Internet compared with 5 percent who read newspapers. Women in the same age group preferred local television news (42 percent), compared with 7 percent who read newspapers (Brown 2005: 1–2). In a landmark speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington on April 13, 2005, News Corporation chairman Rupert Murdoch cited the Carnegie figures:

What is happening is ... a revolution in the way young people are accessing news. They don't want to rely on the morning paper for their up-to-date information. Instead, they want their news on demand, when it works for them. They want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it (Murdoch 2005).

In response, news has become a 24-hour continuous process, demanding major changes in the way journalists work. To provide unique content for their Web sites, major American newspapers such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *USA Today*, and *The Los Angeles Times* introduced groups of rewrite journalists on "continuous" or "extended" news desks. The aim is to publish breaking news online as soon as possible after stories become available. These teams function like the rewrite desks that were common in afternoon

newspapers until the 1960s. Groups of senior editorial staff at these major newspapers talk to reporters about stories they are working on, or rewrite reporters' early versions of stories in conjunction with wire copy while events are still unfolding.

The continuous news desk at *The Washington Post* is based in the newspaper's newsroom in Washington, DC. The Web site, WashingtonPost.com, is located across the Potomac River in Arlington, Virginia. Robert McCartney, assistant managing editor for continuous news, said a team of three editors and two writers solicited and edited breaking news from reporters in the field—"especially during peak Web traffic hours of 9 am to 5 pm"—and also wrote their own stories. The goal was to increase the flow of original content to the Web, to distinguish *The Washington Post* coverage from what other papers and the major news agencies produced, McCartney said. Ideally the newspaper's reporter wrote the early file for the Web. "We want to take advantage of the beat reporter's expertise, sourcing, and credibility." When a beat reporter did not have time, the reporter telephoned notes to the desk, where a writer produced a story under a double byline. "This arrangement encourages beat reporters to file for the Web while relieving them of the burden if they're too busy." If necessary, continuous news department editors wrote stories on their own, "doing as much independent reporting as possible, and citing wires or other secondary sources." (McCartney 2004)

Dan Bigman, associate editor of NYTimes.com, said the continuous news desk at *The New York Times* had been a catalyst for changing newspaper journalists' opinions about online, and vice versa. "The continuous news desk has changed the culture," Bigman said. In August 2005 the New York Times Company announced that its print and online newsrooms would merge when the company moved to new headquarters in 2007. Online commentator Mark Glaser suggested this was the beginning of a philosophical change that would echo through the newspaper business. Publisher Arthur Sulzberger, Jr. and the man in charge of NYTimes.com, vice-president of digital operations Martin Nisenholtz, had been planning the merger for a decade (Glaser 2005).

*USA Today* started its 24-hour newsgathering service for the Web in December 2005 and *The Chicago Tribune* followed a month later. Ken Paulson, editor of *USA Today*, said he hoped the print edition would enhance the online edition, and "those online will help bring their talent to the newspaper." It was, he said, "a combining of talent." Charles Madigan, editor of continuous news at the *Tribune*, said this form of news was his paper's new primary focus. "We needed some vehicle to provide a constant stream of news to the Tribune Web site." (quoted in Strupp 2006: 23) Joseph Russin, assistant managing editor for multimedia at *The Los Angeles Times*, said his paper created an extended news desk to get immediacy on the paper's website. "The extended news desk takes stories—wire or *LA Times* reporters'

stories—and rewrites or edits the items and gets them on the website.” The desk allowed the site to get ahead of stories. “We compete with *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. In order to be more competitive we needed to be more current.” Russin said a strong push for the desk came from national and international reporters who wanted their stories published faster (Russin 2003).

Elsewhere in the world, similar forms of journalism are emerging. *The Inquirer* is one of the most innovative media groups in the Philippines. J. V. Rufino, editor-in-chief of Inquirer.net, regards his team of 15 multimedia reporters as a “testing lab” for the future of *The Inquirer* newspaper. All his team are multimedia reporters: They take photographs at news events and shoot video as well as write stories for online. The Web team typically produces about 120 breaking news items a day. Rufino tells his multimedia reporters that they are the future. Meanwhile, a lot of the younger reporters at the newspaper have said they want to get involved with multimedia. In Singapore, a team of a dozen producers assemble content for Straits Times online, mobile, and print (STOMP). STOMP is part of Singapore Press Holdings, the major newspaper company in the city whose flagship is *The Straits Times*. The newspaper has a Web site that mostly contains content from the newspaper. Much of STOMP’s content is multimedia and focuses on a younger audience (Quinn, personal observation).

These news organizations are innovative. Elsewhere in the United States, we see relatively little original content, based on research from Columbia University’s Steve Ross. More than a quarter of media respondents admitted that less than 10 percent of their Web content was original, while only 13 percent of respondents whose organizations had a Web site said the bulk of their Web content was original. “In general, however, original content—that is, content on the web site that has not previously been broadcast or published in print—seems to be increasing faster for newspapers (from a low base) than for magazines and broadcast.” Ross did note that more newspapers were allowing their Web site to scoop the print publication. “Routine scooping by the web sites has increased greatly in recent years, but [the 2001] jump was the greatest of all: 45 percent of print respondents said the Web site routinely scoops the print publication.” Three out of ten newspaper respondents said they never or almost never allowed the Web site to scoop (Ross 2002: 18–19).

Around the world, print newsroom staff still represents the bulk of any editorial team, because the bulk of advertising still appears in print form. Online numbers remain low relative to total editorial staff numbers. Some examples from Australia help illustrate this point. News Ltd was the country’s biggest newspaper publisher until May 2007, publishing seven daily and seven Sunday newspapers. Its two dailies in Sydney, *The Australian* and the *Daily Telegraph*, have more than 700 people on their editorial staff while its online arm, News Interactive, has only about 60 journalists across its range of sites: news.com.au, foxsports.com.au, homesite.com.au, carsguide.com.au, and careerone.com.au. The other News Ltd sites associated with capital city mastheads each had about 10 dedicated journalists, although