Respondent Remarks

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The Challenges and Effects of Journalists and Journalism

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Let me begin by complimenting all the authors of these excellent papers and by urging each of you in the audience to get copies of these papers and read these studies carefully. They offer four distinct and instructive examples of the diverse approaches and methods available to scholars in our field to probe topics related to both scholarship and to professional practice.

Mr. Lewis combines survey methodology with one-on-one interviews to explore how theories of professional ideology shape professional attitudes about attributing story ideas to the sources of those ideas.

Ms. Griffin uses intensive interviewing to examine the professional practices and personal impact on journalists of witnessing state executions on behalf of news organizations and the public.

Authors Gamreklidze, Ferrante, and Williams use classic content analysis to examine the ideological frames manifest in what are arguably the two polar representatives of the ideological continuum that is cable television news in the 21st century.

And authors Altinay, Brown, and Piccoli use a between subjects and within subjects experimental design to test framing theory, strength of attitude, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion in the context of three types of video presentations about Climate Change.

In these papers, we have a wonderful primer on the diversity of approaches to examining a variety of professional concerns.

You have heard the presentations. I look forward to your observations about the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. I would simply note that each study does offer both strengths and weaknesses.

However, in the few minutes I have here, I would like to focus on a broad question that underlies all of these studies, one that challenges each of us in journalism today and I am afraid will haunt us for a number of years to come. That issue grows out of what I will suggest is the common theme of this research and of much of our research about professional practices. Each of these studies assumes that we—media professionals—have the power to shape professional practice and that our professional practices have the power to shape media effects. Certainly, I have believed that for most of my career as a news professional and as a professor of journalism. Much of my life has been spent teaching professional practices and professional standards to my students in the belief that those practices and standards affect the quality of journalism itself and the quality of information in society.

However, as you all know, we have been inundated in recent years with analyses and books suggesting that our professional standards and practices have been increasingly been rendered irrelevant by the flood of online communication from blogs, to news aggregators, to social media, to mobile media, to texting. We are told that the engagement of “citizen journalists,” on-line twitterers, posters of many stripes, and on-line idealogs and predators have destabilized the impact of whatever frames or standards we embrace.

This has come from journalism professionals, sociologists, social theorists, and those self-same online posters.

In 2001 in the journal *Mass Communication and Society,* Chaffee and Metzger even asked if we have reached “the end of mass communication,” both as a set of institutions and as an academic field. They suggested that online media had undermined the power of mass media to affect an increasingly diverse online environment of many professional and non-professional communicators

Manuel Castells has similarly suggested that mass communication has been replaced by an “informational network” with unlimited entry points, multi-point-to-multi-point interconnections, and a constant “flow” of changing symbolic currents whose meaning is highly unstable.

The European sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has suggested that “The News, that part of electronic information with the most chance of being mistaken for the true representation of the ‘world out there”…is…among the most perishable of the goods on offer….News broadcasts are…(the) daily repeated celebration of the breathtaking speed of change, accelerated ageing, and perpetuality of new beginnings.”

So, let’s return to this wonderful set of presentations we have heard today. Mr. Lewis found that professional journalists have been unable to reach consensus about attribution for a “story idea” (a concept that I suggest needs better definition). In the age of digital “mash-ups” and what Lawrence Lessig designates as the “information commons,” could a consensus among journalists change the tide from what Sham Sundar has called the “murky sourcing” that dominates the Internet an spills into legacy media not just for story ideas, but for authorship of all kinds? Mr. Lewis wisely did not venture far into the impact of online citizens practicing the blending of journalism and opinion without any attribution.

The beautiful content analysis of “opinion news” programs provided by the “Use of Occupy Wall Street” paper wisely narrowed the study to two cable news operations. It did not venture into the morass of ideological Web sites bracketed by sites such as the Drudge Report and Moveon.org.

The lovely experiment offering global, personal, and fact only videotapes to measure the impact of climate change frames on attitude change and intentions to act of undergraduate students, many of whom, no doubt, has just stopped surfing the net and pocketed their iPhones and Droids with the ideological furor of the climate doubters and political rhetoric still echoing in their brains, leaves unanswered the degree to which those devices might have shaped their responses.

And the deeply moving accounts of the very real reactions of journalists to the trauma of witnessing an execution did not attempt to reach into the impact of the intense, immediate, and suffacatingly thorough blanket of internet accounts of the record number of journalists dying in Syria and other war zones even as these journalists talked about their personal experiences.

I have had the privilege of reading each of these papers. They are excellent and I recommend them strongly. They leave me yearning for much more. I long for someone to build on Mr. Lewis’ work about idea attribution to confront the inadequacy of attribution of all kinds on the Internet. I long for someone to build on the work of my colleagues at Louisiana State to expand our understanding of the much more diverse range of “opinion news” sites populating the Internet and competing with each other for our attention by being as outrageous as possible. I long for someone to build on the work of my other colleagues from Louisiana State to look at online stimuli, permeated as they are by the over-the-top, anti-science rhetoric of ideology. And I long for my wonderful colleague here at OU to contextualize her study of journalistic trauma by probing the symbolic world that has helped shape their work and networked world of trauma within which journalists’ personal responses are shaped today.

Above all, these studies call out for more work—work that takes into account the intense and fluid semiotic networks within which we all swim today. Our practices and standards are swamped by currents sweeping in from the interplay of our work with those who know nothing about our standards and who certainly do not follow those standards. They are now our competitors. They, too, shape us and our audiences. I hope as our scholarship proceeds, we can better account for their influences, as well.