

**How Americans Are Getting
News and Information in the 21st Century**

By Sarah Katherine Schultz

Air War College

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	6
Brave New Media World: Digital Age.....	7
The Evolution from Print to the Digital Age.....	7
The Ascent of Commercial Satellite Imagery.....	9
Where Americans Get News and Information.....	11
Newspaper Readers Migrate to the Digital World.....	13
Blogs – Legitimate News Source?.....	16
Consumer Choices Steer the Future of the Media.....	18
Packaging News and Information.....	21
The Changing Media Economy.....	22
Reaching the Audience.....	24
Conclusion.....	27
Bibliography.....	31

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Biography

Katherine Schultz is completing a Masters Degree in National Security Studies at the Air War College, Maxwell Air Force Base. She has worked for the Central Intelligence Agency since graduating from the University of North Carolina in 1985 with a degree in journalism. She began her career as an imagery analyst and completed the Career Trainee program in 1988. From 1989 to 1993 she was the Special Assistant to the Director of a mission ground station for the National Reconnaissance Office. She served in CIA Public Affairs as the Chief of Public Liaison from 1993-1995 and as Chief of NRO Public Affairs from 1995-1997. Ms. Schultz served as a Congressional Fellow in the United States Senate from 1997 to 1998. She was then Chief of the Recruitment Support Division, managing all CIA advertising and recruiting materials. During 2002 she served as an editor for Intelligence Community warnings and publications in the Counterterrorism Center. She was most recently assigned to support the Department of Defense as a CIA representative to Strategic Command at Offutt AFB until 2005 and European Command in Stuttgart until 2008.

Introduction

Nearly a decade into the 21st century, public affairs officers are grappling with the new frontier of the digital media age, where information options are overwhelming in both speed and volume, but often underwhelming in content. The purpose of this research paper is to identify how Americans are getting news and information to help public affairs specialists better package information for release to the public in this digital age. If public affairs officials are to be successful, they must first understand the basic roots of information extraction – from where does the audience retrieve its information, whether the American public, Congress, or even potential military recruits.

Reporters and editors in traditional media—newspapers, magazines, television and radio—still occupy a large part of their work day, but harried public affairs specialists must also contend with digital pioneers of the internet and the web, to include on-line journalists, bloggers, tweeters, YouTube, Facebook, and anyone else with an opinion and access to a computer.

This paper will use the cause and effect methodology to argue the author's claim. The first section of the paper will cover the digital age; the second section addresses where Americans currently get news and information; and the third section considers how to package news and information for release to the public and the way ahead in the information environment.

Brave New Media World: Digital Age

While much has been made of the digital age, the available statistics do not reflect a mass migration of news-seekers to the web, but instead an evolving blend of traditional media and the web, with the appetite for the latter increasing the younger the generation.

The *revolution* in media availability, however, means information, whether good or bad, moves at a speed faster than it can be consumed or even corrected. Plenty of media pundits have bemoaned the decline of “traditional journalism” and the rise of the digital age, most often under the repetitious title of “***Brave New Media World***.” A simple Google search on this term found over 3,000 articles under the title¹. What none of these articles addressed, however, is where Americans get information nearly one decade into the 21st century. The change in media delivery may have been revolutionary, but the public’s reaction is clearly evolutionary.

The Evolution from Print to Digital

In 2004 *The Sling and the Stone*, Thomas X. Hammes’ book on “Fourth Generation Warfare,” or 4GW, was published to wide acclaim. Hammes, a Marine colonel, leads the reader through the development of irregular warfare and insurgents. The 4GW theory of information management centers on the ability of non-state actors to communicate across many mediums with no geographic or technological constraints.² Societies have changed from hierarchal communication, with information moving up and down depending on economic status, to lateral communication, across societies. Unlike previous eras, he notes, technology has changed the delivery of information exponentially, vice a gradual change. Societies that were once separated by oceans are now connected by newsgroups.

¹ A Google Search on “Brave New Media World” resulted in 3,580 hits in the English language alone. 13 December 2008.

² Hammes, COL Thomas X. *The Sling and the Stone*, Zenith Press, 2004, St. Paul, Minnesota, pp 38-40.

The move of information from the private libraries of wealthy landowners to the desktop computer occurred over a 300-year period in the United States. In her study on Information Warfare for the Air University, Major Robin Crumm detailed technical events in modern times that affected the reporting of military affairs, primarily wars, presented in short form here: ³

- Revolutionary War: George Washington used newspapers to exaggerate reports of British casualties and Benjamin Franklin created fake letters in order to engender support from other nations against the British
- Civil War: Telegraph lines increase the speed of reporting and journalists follow armies into battles
- Spanish American War: Army appoints its first officer to serve as press liaison, Major Douglas MacArthur
- World War I: President Wilson creates the Committee on Public Information to coordinate propaganda efforts against the Germans
- World War II: Electronic broadcasting—radio, movies, newsreels—make daily updates possible and war correspondents become heroes
- Vietnam War: Television enables the broadcast of war news into homes every evening, bringing near real-time action to viewers
- Persian Gulf War: Live coverage by CNN as the air war begins over Baghdad
- Operation Iraqi Freedom: Suit-case sized terminals enable embedded reporting

Source: Information Warfare: An Air Force Policy for the Role of Public Affairs

Technological Luddites bemoan the move to the digital age, believing it to be more impersonal and prone to impulse news gathering, vice comprehensive study. Baby Boomers (1946-1964) who grew up on a diet of morning newspapers and evening news broadcasts are not ready to give up their old forums. Following behind them are the 25% of Americans who are part of the Internet news audience,⁴ who according to a Pew study, are better educated than the public as a whole. There is no doubt, with the Internet generation, commonly known as Generation X (1964-1979) that computers were omnipresent in the household and not a novelty.

³ Crumm, Major Robin K. "Information Warfare: An Air Force Policy for the Role of Public Affairs," School of Advanced Airpower Studies, June 1996, Air University Press, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, pp 16-27.

⁴ Pew Research Center Publications. "Internet News Audience Highly Critical of News Organizations: Views of Press Values and Performance 1985-2007," 9 August 2007.

Other studies show, however, that most Americans are using the web as a *secondary* source of information vice a primary resource. A separate Pew study of 3,200 adults primary finding is that "...the so-called Internet revolution should be more accurately characterized as an internet evolution."⁵ It follows that the digital revolution is also an evolution and the transition from print mediums to web is on going and may take another generation to be complete, if ever. Are Americans replacing their morning newspaper or talk radio on the drive to work for surf sessions on the web?

The Ascent of Commercial Satellite Imagery

The Gutenberg press, using movable type, was introduced in 1439 and spread throughout Europe within 60 years, bringing printed paper materials to the general public for the first time in history. It is no coincidence that the Renaissance occurred during the same time frame, bringing printed art, literature and music to the middle classes, activities once limited to the upper and ecclesiastical classes. A similar revolution is occurring within the visual realm today following a decade of commercial available satellite imagery. QuickBird introduced the world to high-resolution imagery in 2001 and ten years later one of its most popular outlets, Google Earth, has 200 million users worldwide.⁶

Complicating the imagery picture is the fact that a number of operators are beyond U.S. control and laws governing the distribution of such imagery. For instance, the German TerraSAR-X produces high-quality one-meter radar with a revisit opportunity within two to four days. There is no doubt that foreign governments, militaries, and media organizations will be purchasing radar imagery, which allows one to see even through clouds and some kinds of roof

⁵ Jurkowitz, Mark. "Now in its Adolescence, the Internet Evolves into a Supplementary News Source," 1 August 2006. Pew Research Center Publications.

⁶ Eisler, Peter. "Commercial Satellites Alter Global Security," *USA Today*, 7 November 2008, pp 13A-14A.

coverings. This information is invaluable in determining the presence of large forces in inclement weather, or even the lack thereof when they have departed garrison. The availability of information previously reserved for the world's intelligence agencies has leveled the information field.

In addition, the use of commercial imagery has an exponential effect in aiding natural disaster and humanitarian crises. President George W. Bush made reference to its utility during the on-going Darfur crisis on a recent visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.⁷ Another case study demonstrated the utility of monitoring the situations in Zimbabwe and Lebanon, providing the world with a visual double-check on policies being implemented by Robert Mugabe and Hizballah against their respective populations.⁸

Commercial satellite imagery has given news organizations a view into what was previously government-held territory. To remain competitive with finicky viewers—who can easily visit Google Earth themselves—news organizations are becoming avid subscribers to commercial satellite servers.

⁷ Bromley, Lars. Zimbabwe + Sudan: Towards a Human Rights Observing System," *Imaging*, Summer 2007, pp 16-21.

⁸ Arkin, William and McKinzie, Dr. Matthew. "Imaging Destruction In Lebanon: A Perspective From Satellite Remote Sensing On The 2006 Israeli-Hizballah War," *Imaging*, Fall 2007, pp 20-25.

Where Americans Get News and Information

Statistics on the Traditional American Media Landscape:

15,000	Newspapers and periodical
12,000	Radio stations
11,000	Cable systems (providers)
1,500	Television stations ⁹

Source: Old Media, New Media: Mass Communications in the Information Age

It would be safe to say that America is a nation of news junkies. The country that guarantees freedom of speech in its very first amendment also gave birth to the 24-hour television news service with the creation of the Cable News Network (CNN) in the 1980s. Americans appear to be at a crossroads of how they receive information, however, with more moving to the web-based sources and newsrooms across the country reconsidering their budgets. The movement of the critical advertising dollars that fuel the print industry to the web has not been sufficiently studied and the jury seems to be out on exactly how long some venerable institutions can last.

Much of the discussion on the digital age centers on people making choices about whether to use traditional media or to go online. Empirical data suggests, however, that Americans, in fact, are not making a choice but instead are *blending the two forms of communication*. Instead of choosing one path on the information highway, consumers appear to constantly change lanes and take the occasional exit.

A 2006 survey on media usage showed that 50% of Americans were using two or more news sources a day. In addition, web usage was not limited to the younger generations, but

⁹ Dizard, William Jr. Old Media, New Media: Mass Communications in the Information Age, 2000, Addison Wesley Longman, Inc, New York, pp 2-3.

appeared to span the spectrum of media users in the 3,200-person survey.¹⁰ The survey analysis indicates increased media availability as a positive to users, with two-thirds preferring multiple outlets of information and 28% complaining of saturation. What is interesting about the 2006 study is that it does not differ significantly from a similar study in 1996, in which Pew recorded 52% of the public using two different platforms for news content, but in that case, TV, radio, or newspapers.¹¹ Clearly the convenience of accessing the web is a factor in the 2006 study, having displaced—but *not replaced*—the traditional sources.

Using data from a 2008 key study on where audiences are getting their news, the Pew Research Center categorized media consumers into three distinct groups: Integrators, Net-Newsers, and Traditionalists.¹²

- Integrators are 23% of the public, well-educated, affluent, middle-aged. Television is their main source of information, but they go on-line for news once a day. Political news and sports are the preferred categories.
- Net-Newsers are 13% of the public, well-educated, affluent, and relatively young, with 58% being men. Favor political blogs and viewing news on-line, with strong interest in technology news.
- Traditionalists are 46% of the public, less-educated, less affluent, and older. Most have computers, but rely on TV news, with heavy emphasis on weather.

Source: Pew Research Center on People and the Press, 17 August 2008

Of these three groups, the Integrators spend the most time reading news in a day and, given their preference for politics, are also the greater consumers of national and political news. Net-Newsers are twice as likely to read their news on-line vice reading a printed newspaper. Traditionalists watch more television and presently represent the larger portion of the public.

¹⁰ Jurkowitz, Mark. "Now in its Adolescence, the Internet Evolves into a Supplementary News Source," 1 August 2006. Pew Research Center Publications.

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² The Pew Research Center for People and the Press. "Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources," 17 August 2008. This study polled over 3,000 people.

They also are at the lower end of the education and income scale, with 43% not employed and 60% having only a high school education.¹³ Though the survey did not distinguish the 43% “not employed,” it likely means a good percentage of that group is retired, vice unemployed.

The data from the Pew Study about the three distinct groupings of media users appears to parallel well-known generational monikers, lending more even more credence to the theory of Integrators, Net-Newsters, and Traditionalists. Traditionalist media consumers could also be referred to as “The Silent Generation,”(1925-1946) the generation that predates Baby Boomers and witnessed World War II. Integrators are most closely aligned with Baby Boomers (1946-1964) and Generation X (1964-1979). Net-Newsters, when culturally defined, would be known as the “Millennial Generation,” (1979-2000) and raised in a world in which most has always had access to personal computers in school and many at home as well.¹⁴

The Traditionalists were the first American generation to experience television, so their propensity for viewing news on the airwaves is understandable. As their generation dies off, however, the statistics should reflect an increase of web usage as integrators, or Baby Boomers, replace their generation as the largest percentage of the American public.

Newspaper Readers Migrate to the Digital World

According to the Pew Research Center, only 27% of the public read a printed daily paper in 2008, down from 34% in 2006. Those figures represent an overall decline of 40% since the 1990’s. The study states that television news audience has remained stable, with cable news viewership actually increasing to 39% in 2008. Not surprisingly, most of the cable news viewers are Integrators and Net-Newsters. Finally, radio news owns an impressive 46% of Integrator’s

¹³ The Pew Research Center for People and the Press. “Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources,” 17 August 2008. This study polled over 3,000 people.

¹⁴ Caruthers, Amy. “Managing Generations: What the Air Force Can Learn from the Private Sector.” Ms. Caruthers cites numerous sources for her generational descriptions.

attention on a daily basis, no doubt “driven” by the fact that Integrators are more affluent and likely to be driving their own cars to and from work, although not denoted in the study.¹⁵

Ball State University’s Center for Media Design conducted a much smaller study focused exclusively on web-users that also had some revealing statistics. It showed 60% used the web for news, 40% read newspapers and 30% read magazines. Of the overall time spent using consumer media, 17% was spent on the Internet.¹⁶

This figure would seem to confirm the 2006 Pew Study that although increasing numbers are going to the web for news, they are not spending lengthy amounts of time on it. It is likely, therefore, that the web is being used as a secondary source of news. Whereas previously news consumers might have gone to a book, library, expert, or friend to verify information or curiosity, the convenience of the web means follow-up on news stories of interest is that much easier.

The decline in newspaper readers, however, does not necessarily mean all those readers have now migrated to the web. While the on-line news audience is clearly growing, the studies do not necessarily reflect a direct transfer of readership from print to the web. The Pew study shows that the percentage of readers getting online daily news has grown from 18% in 2006 (50 millions users)¹⁷ to 25% in 2008. Because the printed newspaper business has experienced a decline from 40% to 34% in the same time period, the readers have chosen other options.¹⁸

These former readers have not migrated to television either, as network news audiences, like newspapers, are also declining. The three original networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—command a combined 20 million viewers each evening. The number of Americans who regularly watch an evening news broadcast has gone from three out of every five TV viewers in

¹⁵ The Pew Research Center for People and the Press. “Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources,” 17 August 2008.

¹⁶ Bergfeld, Carols. “How We Use the Web Today,” News Analysis, *Newsweek*, 8 June 2006. Polled 350 users.

¹⁷ The Pew Research Center for People and the Press. “50 Million Americans Get News Online Every Day,” 22 March 2006.

¹⁸ The Pew Research Center for People and the Press. “Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources,” 17 August 2008.

the last decade to only one out of every four.¹⁹ Even the professionals within the industry fear the demise of the nightly news broadcast, with 42% of national-level journalists surveyed believing nightly news broadcasts may not last another decade.²⁰

What some news seekers have probably done is migrate to talk radio for daily news. Talk radio appears to have had exceptional growth in the last decade, largely due to deregulation and the growth of digital radio. A Gallup Poll of 2003 found that 22% of Americans were using talk radio as their primary source of news, a figure that had been only 11% in 1998.²¹ With Americans having so many choices in media, it is natural for them to make choices of convenience in an information-saturated world. The radio may provide a unique opportunity to listen while accomplishing other tasks, whether driving to work, cleaning, or exercising, whereas reading a paper, watching television, and searching the web all require visual action on the part of the viewer.

One of the other key findings of the Pew study was that more young people are choosing not to be informed at all. In the age category of 25-and-under, nearly a third—34%—are getting no news on a typical day.²² The survey noted the popularity of social networking sites, but did not draw a correlation between the birth of this forum and the decline in news readership. One has to wonder, however, if the opportunity to network with friends on Facebook and MySpace is a more appealing social diet than grazing news websites.

Another factor in the media equation is that not all news is from news shows. “The Daily Show” and “The Colbert Report” are highly popular programs on Comedy Central that use the daily news in a comedic form. According to a Pew poll of April 2007, 16% of Americans are

¹⁹ Jurkowitz, Mark. “Now in its Adolescence, the Internet Evolves into a Supplementary News Source,” 1 August 2006. Pew Research Center Publications.

²⁰ Doherty, Carroll. “Network News Signing Off?” Pew Research Center Publications, 15 April 2008.

²¹ McChesney, Robert W. *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communications Politics in the 21st Century*, 2004 Monthly Review Press, New York, pp 116-117.

²² Doherty, Carroll. “Network News Signing Off?” Pew Research Center Publications, 15 April 2008.

regular viewers. What is striking is that figure is on par with the viewership of Fox News (17%) and more than PBS (14%).²³

Finally, podcasts are a recent development that allows users to download a favorite broadcast or television show to a personal device (iPod, MP3) for viewing later. While it allows a viewer to drive content by pulling only those programs they want to see, it is not a major factor in user-driven media. Only 19% of Internet users have actually downloaded a podcast, according to a 2008 survey.²⁴

If the lack of news interest in young people bodes ill for the industry, the good news is that 51% of Americans do check the news everyday. The Pew study noted this is the first year since the question was implemented in 2002 that more Americans “graze” the news than read it in detail.²⁵ This figure may imply that Americans have reached a saturation point with the non-stop, 24-hour news cycle. If Americans are feeling overwhelmed by too much news, it begs the question of whether or not they participate in the web’s newest craze – blogging.

Blogs – Legitimate News Source?

One remarkable phenomena of the digital age is the advent of web logs, or “blogs,” for short. Would-be writers used to keep diaries and then type on an IBM Selectric II in hopes of finding a publisher. Today any blogger can post his views immediately on a personalized electronic diary, chat room, home page, or any other myriad of electronic options for publishing. Researchers who used to have to retrieve primary research from libraries and bookstores are now faced with thousands of hits on research topics, creating a monumental wheat-and-chaff sorting challenge. Bloggers have become to the web what ham radio operators used to be in radio

²³ Pew Research Center Publications. “The Daily Show” Journalism, Satire, or Just Laughs?” 8 May 2008.

²⁴ Madden, Mary. “Podcasts Proliferate, But Not Mainstream,” Pew Research Center Publications, 28 August 2008.

²⁵ Jurkowitz, Mark. “Now in its Adolescence, the Internet Evolves into a Supplementary News Source,” 1 August 2006. The Pew Research Center Publications.

broadcast—the voice of the little man in the wilderness—but with much greater impact, due to the fact that to blog only requires a personal computer, whereas ham radio operators required an antenna and broadcast set.

“What began as a hobby is evolving into a new medium that is changing the landscape for journalists and policymakers alike.”

“Web of Influence,” Foreign Policy

In their article on bloggers for *Foreign Policy*, Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell detailed the impact of bloggers on international news coverage. The first prominently known blogger was “Salam Pax,” also known as the Baghdad Blogger, who gave an on-the-spot report of the air war over Baghdad in 2003 that reached audiences at CNN, New York Times, and Guardian.²⁶

Drezner and Farrell refer to bloggers as a powerful 5th estate in their ability to influence the news that is reported, although the influence of blogs themselves is still in question. According to their study, only 4% of Americans who are on-line participate in blogs.²⁷ Bloggers carry influence, however, in that journalists and pundits monitor them for news leads and background on stories. It would seem that the mainstream media maintains the decision-making in what stories are important, but bloggers provide a pulse of what is stirring beneath the surface.

The exponential growth of blogs denotes its importance in the digital age, yet at the same time, one wonders if it is a fast-burning fire that will soon peter out. Where blogs will probably have the most impact, according to Drezner and Farrell, is in countries where press restrictions eliminate or strictly limit dissent. In a country like the United States where press restriction is virtually unknown, this author proposes that bloggers will probably serve the purpose once claimed by letters-to-the-editors and opinion pages, or op-ed pages. Newspapers that once

²⁶ Drezner, Daniel W. and Farrell, Henry. “Web of Influence,” *Foreign Policy*, November/December 2004.

²⁷ Drezner and Farrell cite a Pew research study in their article for this study.

employed an ombudsman to monitor fairness and accuracy can instead use an electronic blog to receive citizen's opinions, eliminating a personnel position, and reducing mail and faxes.

The Growth of Blogs

1999	50 estimated blogs on the World Wide Web
2004	2.4 million estimated blogs
2005	10 million estimated blogs ²⁸

Source: "Web of Influence," *Foreign Policy*

Finally, blogs might not be quite as independent as their supporters would like to believe. In their 2008 book on the perils of the 24-hour news cycle—*No Time To Think*—Los Angeles Times media critic Howard Rosenberg and CNN reporter Charles Feldman interviewed Michael Copps, the Federal Communications Commissioner. Copps gleefully pointed out that the same complaints made about media conglomerate ownership of TV, radio and newspapers rings true for blogs as well.

*"Go to the top 20 news sites on the Internet....They're owned by the same folks that own all the other properties in the cable and broadcast."*²⁹

Consumer Choices Steer the Future of the Media

The Pew Foundation conducts an annual survey on "The State of the News Media," providing statistics and points of analysis from a survey of executives, editors and reporters at 259 newspapers.³⁰ Journalist Tyler Marshall, working with Pew and the Princeton Foundation, queried these industry leaders on changes in their newsroom as a result of migration to the web. What the Pew study revealed is that newspapers continue to hold a primary position in delivering

²⁸ Drezner, Daniel W. and Farrell, Henry. "Web of Influence," *Foreign Policy*, November/December 2004

²⁹ Rosenberg, Howard and Feldman, Charles S. *No Time To Think: The Menace of Media Speed and the 24-hour News Cycle*, 2008, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, New York. Pp 103.

³⁰ Marshall, Tyler. "The Changing Newsroom," Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Princeton Survey Research Associates, 21 July 2008.

in-depth coverage of issues. The greater problem for newspapers is not necessarily declining readership, but declining advertising dollars, an issue beyond the scope of this research paper.

Editors realize what consumers value most in newspapers is immediacy and accuracy and while the web offers the former, its accuracy is not guaranteed. They recognize that excellent journalism combined with the latest technology will ensure a customer base, even though some might migrate to the web version of newspapers. With that said, many are cutting newsroom staffs due to declining advertising dollars, according to the survey.³¹

Some of the more telling statistics from the study include:

- 85% of daily newspapers with large circulations—over 100,000 readers—cut news/editorial staff in the last 3 years
- Only 52% of smaller papers reported cuts during the same period
- 66% of newspapers surveyed have cut back on foreign news³²
- Ethnic press was growing, but appears to have crested, with Spanish-language newspaper circulation up to 17.6 million readers daily
- Newspaper earnings are flat or falling, with a similar decline in ad pages
- On-line advertising market grew by one-third to \$17 billion
- On-line radio advertising grew 77% to \$60 million

Source: “The Changing Newsroom,” Pew Research Center

Even among editors and reporters, there seems to be a realization that the American public has developed an affinity for more local news over international stories, that local, state and even national political news are of more interest than international news. If “*...all politics is local*,” according to the political adage, then it seems the news is as well.

Editors would do well to keep in mind two statistics from the comprehensive study that reflect on bias and accuracy in the press: 68% of Americans prefer getting their news from

³¹ Marshall, Tyler. “The Changing Newsroom,” Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Princeton Survey Research Associates, 21 July 2008.

³² *Ibid*

sources without a declared point of view and 48%--or barely half—have a favorable view of the press.³³

“Will newspapers survive?” is a fair and often asked question within the media industry, given some of the gloomier statistics. It would appear that for the next decade newspapers will continue to play a major part of consumer’s daily news diet, based on the aforementioned statistics and commentary from within the media industry itself. Some of the predictions for the near future from a roundtable discussion on the survival of newspapers, held in July 2006, predict the demise, but most believe that newspapers can survive when combined with a marketing plan for web versions.³⁴

“I have 100% confidence that the mainstream media organizations will survive. The toughest issue will be the transition period (from print to online, broadcast to broadband), but once the migrations is over, cheaper distribution costs should enable media companies to more than find the news gathering resources. ...Every newspaper should have an affiliated website to the main newspaper website which completely caters to the interests of the 18-34 year olds with a completely different set of values on what news is important.”

Paul Ginocchio, Media Analyst for Deutsche Bank

“I think the print newspaper is a survivor for at least 10 to 15 years.....Newspapers will have to keep having lots of cash to invest for some time to come. These big boats do not turn fast, but the industry needed to get a lot more urgent and has.”

Rick Edmonds, Researcher and Write for the Poynter Institute

The bottom line for the news industry is that consumer preferences are changing, but not at the rate of technology, leaving business managers and editors with the difficult task of managing news in an era of moving targets – the audience.

³³ Marshall, Tyler. “The Changing Newsroom,” Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Princeton Survey Research Associates, 21 July 2008.

³⁴ Pew Research Center Publications. “Can the ‘Dead Tree’ Newspaper Survive? A Roundtable Discussion Among Industry Experts,” 26 July 2006.

Packaging News and Information

Too many times public affairs specialists have made numerous press releases to a variety of news organizations in hopes that some would feature their stories. If they understand the generational shifts and changing media economy, public affairs specialist can better target and package information using the right blend of traditional and digital media to reach the public.

The U.S. Air Force has traditionally trailed behind the other services in embracing new media, but has made recent in-roads into herding its on-line audience. In October 2008 the Air Force Public Affairs Agency created the Emerging Technology Office to improve its communication with media, airmen and women, potential recruits and supporters.³⁵ Whereas the Air Force has traditionally blocked any access to social networking sites, it now uses YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs to communicate with its public and the media.

“Our bang for the buck is providing more information than a standard news release,” said Captain David Faggard, Chief of Emerging Technology. “Our second lieutenants get it—they’re all on Twitter themselves.”³⁶ Faggard notes that the audience for emerging technology isn’t necessarily recruits, as the media age of the electronic user of Air Force information is late 20’s to early 30’s. “What we see is the news migrating onto social networks.”

The Changing Media Economy

To see how the media economy is changing, one need look no further than the daily television lineup. Where there used to be a schedule of dramas, made-for-TV-movies, and specials, there are now reality program and news magazines. The difference for networks is the

³⁵ Lagrone, Sam. “Air Force Makes Change to Embrace Web 2.0,” Air Force Times, 1 January 2009.

³⁶ Faggard, Captain David, USAF, Chief of Emerging Technology, Air Force Public Affairs Agency. Telephone interview, 3 February 2009.

former is very expensive while the latter is very cheap. Shows such as “Dallas” or “Friends” required full production sets and high-paid actors. Reality shows and news magazines rely on a host or news anchor and lots of videotape, some of it offered freely by the public or institutions.

Dr. Richard Paul and Dr. Linda Elder, in their study detecting media bias, note that there is “...a symbiotic relationship between powerful media sources (which need news stories) and powerful economic interests (which generate and disseminate news stories in their interests).”³⁷ Paul and Elder argue that many institutions help shape the news by offering up press releases, interviews and pre-written media stories. As a result, newspapers in particular become sensitive to the advertisers concerns, as they represent a major portion of their revenues.

If their analysis proves correct, the economy of the digital age might increase the reliance on the military public affairs officers for stories, information and leads. When reporters and news crews are laid off, media outlets become more dependent on wire services, press releases, and pre-packaged stories to fill white space and air time. This market trend suggests the military will benefit from that reliance on sellable material, especially when the U.S. becomes involved in a foreign conflict and costs or access prevents media outlets from sending its own reporters.

Douglas Porch, in his analysis of military-media relations, cites the examples of the Jessica Lynch rescue and downed pilots as the type of must-have coverage for media outlets.³⁸

*“A balance will probably be struck, not least because the long-term market trends are poor for foreign news coverage in general, and for military stories in particular...News is a business and polls and focus groups inform editors that the priorities of the public are local news first, foreign news last.”*³⁹

³⁷ Paul, Dr. Richard and Dr. Linda Elder. “How to Detect Media Bias & Propaganda in National and World News.” Third Edition, 2006, The Foundation for Critical Thinking, pp 18-20.

³⁸ Porch, Douglas. “No Bad Stories – The American Media-Military Relationship.” *American Defense Policy*, Eighth Edition, 2005, John Hopkins University Press, pp 314-325.

³⁹ Porch, Douglas. “No Bad Stories – The American Media-Military Relationship.” *American Defense Policy*, Eighth Edition, 2005, John Hopkins University Press, pp 325-326.

Porch warns editors and reporters against the American public's "compassion fatigue," exhaustion from international bad news about tragedy, famine and conflict. What sells the story, according to Porch, is the fact that U.S. military is arriving to do something about it.⁴⁰ Two recent examples of this trend would be the tsunami relief provided by Pacific Command to Indonesia and National Guard relief to the citizens of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

Because of the public's preference for local news first, one trend that could be expected is continuing coverage of troop deployments for nearby military bases and guard units, but less coverage of strategic issues or NATO and coalition troop activities. This would require the Department of Defense to plus-up its public affairs staffs at these bases and units, vice concentrating public affairs efforts within the Pentagon.

John A. Robinson is a managing editor of Defense Daily and also a public affairs officer in the Navy Reserve. In a study for the Air Force Research Institute, Robinson provided a history of Air Force public affairs and analysis of strategic communications efforts since 9/11. Robinson argues that the lack of a flag billet in the Air Force public career corps has stymied career development and appreciation of the unique skills of public affairs officers. He makes a strong case for emulating the Navy's public affairs programs and bemoans the reduction of public affairs staff at Air Force facilities worldwide.⁴¹

Robinson offers up the now infamous Minot Air Force Base nuclear weapons mishandling as an excellent example of the perils of unpreparedness. He notes the public affairs position at Minot AFB had been eliminated; a reservist was mobilized days after the event; and

⁴⁰ *ibid*

⁴¹ Robinson, John A. "Communicating Airpower: Strategic Communication and the United States Air Force Since 9/11." Air Force Research Institute, Air University, August 2008, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.

the investigative team included no public affairs officials, deciding there would be little public interest in the incident.⁴²

Sadly, the economics of Air Force downsizing led to the elimination of what turned out to be a key position. Air Force officials should carefully weigh the costs of keeping trained public affairs officers on staff at its largest facilities vice the costs of a long-term recovery in public and Congressional confidence. The cost of public confidence in the case of the wandering nuclear weapons is probably much higher than the cost of staffing a public affairs position would have been.

Reaching the Audience

If a public affairs specialist understands how the audience he or she is trying to reach receives information, the question of establishing a message becomes easier. Common sense should prevail and the truth is always fashionable. Admiral James G. Stavridis, Commander of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), makes a compelling case for honesty in his discussion on strategic communications in *Joint Forces Quarterly*:

*“Simply stated, the objective of strategic communications is to provide audiences with truthful and timely information that will influence them to support the objectives of the communicator.”*⁴³

Stavridis enumerates SOUTHCOM’s principles for communication in a direct form, eschewing the verbosity of public affairs guides and professional media pontificators. Any public affairs officer who has come to understand his audience need look no further than Stavridis’ guidelines to know how to reach them:

⁴² Robinson, John A. “Communicating Airpower: Strategic Communication and the United States Air Force Since 9/11.” Air Force Research Institute, Air University, August 2008, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.

⁴³ Stavridis, James G. “Strategic Communication and National Security, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 46, 3rd Quarter 2007, National Defense University.

- Tell the truth
- Have a good message
- Understand the audience
- Pull the trigger promptly
- Think at the strategic level
- Organize at the operational level to enable the tactical level
- Measure results
- Adjust Fire, add spice, steady pressure, bursts of energy
- Accept defeat and move on; some communication battles are unwinnable
- Know when you win⁴⁴

"Tell the truth" might sound simplistic, but it seems to be a lesson that has to be learned over and over again in media crises. From Watergate to Abu Gharib, public officials have experienced the maxim that the cover-up is often worse than the truth itself. At a time when American confidence in the media is at an all time low, public affairs officers can ill-afford to be seen as either purveyors or complicit in deception. The U.S. military has slight confidence edge with the American public over the mainstream media, a lead that should not be squandered by poor handling of any future "hot stories." According to a April 2007 poll, only 46% of Americans are confident military is giving an accurate picture of the Iraq situation and only 38% are confident in the mainstream press's view of the war.⁴⁵ Those figures are a far cry from the beginning of the war, when there was an 85% confidence level in military information and 81% confidence in media information.

Stavridis makes a key point: some battles are unwinnable. Digital warriors, like any other public affairs officer, must know when to stop expending energy on losing battles and focus on the ones that are winnable. Instead of trying to control bad stories, information officers must work to communicate the solutions to those problems and "bad stories."

⁴⁴ Stavridis, James G. "Strategic Communication and National Security, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 46, 3rd Quarter 2007, National Defense University.

⁴⁵ Dimrock, Michael. "Who Do You Trust For War News?" Pew Research Center Publications, 5 April 2007.

Douglas Porch, in his article on 2005 American media and military relations, argues that poor relations between the two institutions are not a product of modern times, but in fact, an perennial problem. Porch notes three roots that make the relationship in inherently contentious:

- The institutional cultures are antithetical
- The goals of the two institutions are entirely different
- A haphazard formulation of U.S policy in dealing with the media in battle⁴⁶

Public affairs specialists should be wary of instituting what this author would describe as the automatic spin cycle, or the knee-jerk organized and predictable departmental responses to any crises. They should recognize that the truth spreads evenly, but falsehoods spread like wildfire, erratic and out of control. Take for example the Pentagon's efforts to enlist retired generals to make the case for the Iraq war. In what came to be known as "The General's Revolt," a group of officers then countered the orchestrated media bandwagon and exposed it nationally. What had been formerly viewed within the administration as a successful propaganda campaign came to be a millstone of deceit and loyalty litmus tests around the Department of Defense.⁴⁷ Restoring trust in the Pentagon's public affairs establishment following this debacle may have to wait until the retirement of this generation of reporters.

A common misperception among military officers that complicates the ability of public affairs officers is the view that the armed forces are rarely portrayed in a positive light. According to one source, positive stories actually outnumbered negative stories over a six-month study by two to one.⁴⁸ Public affairs officers should keep that figure in mind when addressing the nature of the media with their bosses, prone to view the relationship as a battle of wills vice a

⁴⁶ Porch, Douglas. "No Bad Stories – The American Media-Military Relationship." *American Defense Policy*, Eighth Edition, 2005, John Hopkins University Press.

⁴⁷ Barstow, David. "Behind TV Analysts, Pentagon's Hidden Hand," *New York Times*, 20 April 2008.

⁴⁸ Wittkopf Eugene R. and McCormick, James M. *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy*, "The Gap," written by Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, 4th Edition, 2004, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland, pp 89-90.

discussion of information. Air Force leaders should take advantage of the statistics that are presently in their favor and multiply the effects exponentially using digital media to reach the upcoming generations of news-seekers.

Conclusion

As the information age continues to evolve, Americans are straddling the digital divide and a complete migration to the web may never take place, given the public's continuing penchant for printed materials. Wilson Dizard, in his book on *Old Media, New Media* predicts the media will fall into three distinctive patterns in the foreseeable future:

- Traditional mass media – broadcast, TV, film radio and print
- Advanced electronic media – the Internet, web, broadband
- Personal electronic media – podcasts, MP3 players, user-pulled content⁴⁹

The Internet surpassed 100 million users worldwide by the turn of the century⁵⁰, and as of 2008, the number more than tripled to nearly 361 millions users.⁵¹ The impact of the American audience on the web cannot be understated, as 52% of websites are posted in English, according to a study on the global media.⁵² Furthermore over 73% of the American population uses the Internet, compared with 60% Australians and only 48% Europeans.⁵³ With both Americans and Australians dominating the usage, English will continue to be the primary Internet language.

No matter where Americans get their news, they still have a preference for patriotism. Even though the younger generation tends to get its information digitally, they have developed discerning skills and preferences for forums without bias. In fact, the Internet news audience

⁴⁹ Dizard, William Jr. *Old Media, New Media: Mass Communications in the Information Age*, 2000, Addison Wesley Longman, Inc, New York, pp 179-180.

⁵⁰ *ibid*

⁵¹ Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

⁵² Hafez, Kai. *The Myth of Media Globalization*, 2007, Polity Press, pp 104. First published in Germany in 2005 and translated by Alex Skinner.

⁵³ Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

tends to be the most critical of the mainstream press for what it perceives to be anti-American bias. When studying “Views of Press Values and Performance, 1985-2007,” the Pew Foundation discovered that 68% of the Internet news audience criticized news organizations for “their failure to stand up for America” and for political bias. Over half—53%—believed that news organizations in general were too critical of America.⁵⁴

What is telling about those figures is that young Internet users tend to be more defensive about America than the general public, an older audience made up of more traditional users. Gloomy prognosticators who view the advent of the digital age and its users as a dumbing-down of news consumers with no sense of patriot are likely to be proved wrong in the next decade.

The digital age has created opportunities for more people to read and more importantly, participate, in the making of the news. Letter-to-the-editors might become archaic in the digital age, but will likely be replaced by the speedier blogs on newspaper websites. Citizen activist can e-mail reports and editors directly through e-mail links on a papers website, offering insight and some time new leads. In its study on “The Changing Newsroom,” the Pew Foundation found that 46% of editors believe citizen contributions would be key ingredients for newspaper and website operations.⁵⁵ One Florida editor noted that following a tornado, hundreds of photos were sent to the paper’s website, providing instant coverage and helping establish the range of damage. Another paper used “citizen journalism” to study document the rise in property assessments in a town, prompting the town’s administration to reconsider many cases.⁵⁶

Military bloggers, like citizen journalists, have proven invaluable to the U.S. Army, where once they were the bane of military public affairs officers and operational security. This

⁵⁴ Pew Research Center Publications. “Internet News Audience Highly Critical of News Organizations: Views of Press Values and Performance 1985-2007,” 9 August 2007.

⁵⁵ Marshall, Tyler. “The Changing Newsroom,” Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Princeton Survey Research Associates, 21 July 2008.

⁵⁶ *ibid*

change in viewpoints came about because the military finally realized bloggers were commenting more positively on the military than negatively, according to a recent article on military blogs.⁵⁷ Bloggers have gone from being banned in the military to having established guidelines and the first-ever conference held in 2006. The importance of the audience to the military, according to the article, is not so much the bloggers but the potential supporters in their audience, such as former military officers, family members, and opinion writers, who might later write their Congressmen or local newspaper.

The Air Force's recent foray into the digital frontier tracks with the generational shift in the way America gets its news. The younger generation of Net-Newsters is getting its information from the web more than traditional print media. What remains to be seen is if these users will become more conservative and discerning in their news sources as they age and revert to traditional sources. It is important to remember, as well, that in 2008, this category only represented 13% of the news audiences. This group of consumers will need to be tracked carefully over the next decade to discern whether or not the move to the Internet/Web continues or reaches a plateau.

For the public affairs specialist this means the next decade will be spent balancing the needs of traditional media users with those of the emerging generation and future generations. The sources of news will ultimately be sustained, or rejected, by the viewers and advertisers paying into the system. Newspapers will have to adjust their marketing models to accommodate for the rise in web users and the decline in advertising dollars. Television has to compete in an environment where 500 cable choices exist, watering down a shrinking pool of advertising dollars in a receding economy. Even websites are competing with one another, due to the fact that anyone can become an on-line merchant with a laptop and good digital camera. For the next

⁵⁷ Vaughn, Chris. "Milblogs Gain Place in Mainstream," Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 29 September 2008.

decade, the information environment is expected to expand even more. American news consumers will continue to use a variety of means to retrieve information of interest, challenging broadcasters, public affairs officials, and advertisers. They will have to stake a claim on their attention span and better target and package information or be left behind on the wrong side of the digital divide.

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