

The NewspHERE

Understanding the News and Information Environment



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INTRODUCING THE NEWSPHERE

I first started writing news when I was a junior at Mother Seton Regional High School for girls in Clark, New Jersey. I was the editorial page editor of the *Setonnaire* and more than the mild celebrity, I enjoyed seeing my words in print and having a public place to think out loud and create news—that singularly powerful blend of events, ideas, thoughts, information, and yes, hopes and dreams, too. I was constantly in awe—and still am—of my friends, the visual thinkers: the cartoonists who cleverly and quickly sketched their ideas and powerfully captured the essence of an idea. “Words were all I had (to take your heart away...),” as the Bee Gees crooned, but even as a fledgling journalist I sensed the organic, heady yet paradoxical power of this uniquely ephemeral yet lasting form.

It's pretty amazing actually that each day, all over the world, hundreds of thousands of people who call themselves reporters get up and go out and find out what is happening and let the rest of us know. We wake up and look at our BlackBerries, our iPads, and laptops or turn on the radio or television sets and yes, some of us actually read a newspaper that we may still pluck from our front porch in the morning. There it is, tried and true—news, in all its glorious and not so glorious incarnations.

It's the stuff of our lives and rich fodder for movies and novels. It's an oft-criticized but much coveted profession. It's an exciting and evolving academic discipline. It's also THE cornerstone of any viable and working democracy. Without a

quality flow of reputable news and information it is impossible to have a true representative government. History and the heavy hand of censorship both around the world and yes, here in the United States, too, have proven this over and over again. None of this is new (or news: yes, I'm aware of the irony here). But what is new and what has dramatically altered the news environment, which I will hereto refer to as our *newsphere*, is the sheer volume of messages carrying the important distinction and designation as “news” and the proliferation of methods, channels, and networks to deliver it.

In addition to a greater amount of both information and disinformation masquerading as news, and the creation of dynamic and ubiquitous systems used to deliver it, news stories also have a different life span now that they are free from the traditional constraints of print and electronic broadcasting forms. They circulate and evolve and, like our own DNA molecules, some survive and thrive. Some die a natural and welcome death, while others are fueled by powerful winds of consensus, as well as by darker forces, such as unprocessed and unconscious acceptance, and last well beyond their time. There is also a dramatic increase in the volume of individuals creating and distributing news. From well-intentioned bloggers, the new breed of citizen journalists, and seasoned reporters doing a better job with powerful new tools, to bombastic cable television news show hosts, angry and vengeful agitators, and the highly literate bored with too much time on their hands, our virtual and physical newsstands are bursting at the seams.

Learning how to sort through the newsphere's noise and the clutter, and particularly recognizing unprocessed and unconscious messages, is a key focus of this book. But the real work is a deeper and more integral understanding of the effect news has on you so you can design a more viable and enlightened relationship with and in the newsphere. Please carefully consider precisely what news is doing to you: Is it distracting you? Probably. Is it informing you and making you a better citizen? Probably. Is it making you angry? Sometimes. Is it shifting your focus away from things you can realistically change and instead focusing your attention on problems with no solutions and tragic events that drain your energy? Yes. You can immediately change that once you become aware of it! Determining the personal relevance, significance, and value of each bit and byte as well as the imagery that enters your consciousness is something only you can do. When you assume this vital, personal responsibility and channel your energy and attention in a more conscious way you not only improve the quality of your own life, you concurrently enhance our collective endeavors.

The News Road Less Traveled

It is an oft-elusive yet elegant and paradoxical quality of human existence: We crave connection with others while simultaneously reveling in our fierce independence.

Journalism historian Mitchell Stephens brilliantly describes this basic human need, the desire to ask and also to answer, “What’s new?” as a “hunger for awareness”:

More than specific information on specific events, the great gift a system of news bestows on us is the confidence that we will learn about any particularly important or interesting events. The news is more than a category of information or a form of entertainment; it is an awareness; it provides a kind of security.¹

How do we maintain a sound balance between our insides and our outsides—our independence and our interdependence—in the digital age of iPhones, iPads, and 24/7 deadlines? We look anew at the traditional journalistic quality of relevance. Long understood as one of journalism’s bedrock principles—news must be relevant to the audience—relevance means something very different now that the news environment is networked and readers not only easily talk back to reporters but can become reporters themselves aka “citizen journalists.”

I would venture that most of us are similar in thinking to my friend Melody McCormick, a retired reporter. We want to determine just the right balance of outlets, sources, media, and channels to create that fat and happy feeling of being just full enough of news. Here’s a quick glimpse at Melody’s optimal network: “a combo of internet, newspapers, radio sites, magazines, maybe club or church newsletters, and social sites I cobble together to make me well-informed and also entertained.” Sarah Merion, a young Boston executive who studied abroad in Buenos Aires, has different but not incongruent needs. Sarah works to increase the quality of the information that she is receiving. “I’ve placed myself in a position to receive news, but it’s divide and conquer. I need to decrease the quantity and increase quality if news is going to have real value in my life and in my world right now,” says Sarah. She has tried multiple methods to design a viable news network, and she believes the only way to create, maintain, and ensure quality is to consciously limit news exposure. “Once you consciously decrease the quantity, quality should improve,” she says.

The news is there—no need to lament the demise of the newspaper and the robust social practice of journalism that continue to draw some of this country’s (and other countries’) best and brightest. What we need to do now is stop complaining that news is lost and newspapers (and the journalism that supported them) are dead, and instead focus on creating, distributing, engaging, encouraging, recognizing, respecting, and supporting quality news in all its forms and guises. I respectfully disagree with the throngs of professionals and scholars such as Alex Jones, who’s *Losing the News* is a melancholic and nostalgic lament for “the kind of news I knew.” Instead, I align with the progressive journalism scholars and innovative thinkers—notably Howard Rheingold, Jay Rosen, and Jeff Jarvis—among others, who are building on the fundamental understanding that what we have come to know as news—its form, style, and substance—has been irrevocably changed because of the advent and proliferation of digital technologies. Quite simply, news

is very different now because of the way it is created, distributed, and used. It is time now to work to make it better. As always, it starts and ends with us.

We Are All Connected (Even If We Don't Know It Yet)

I begin *The Newsphere: Understanding the News and Information Environment* by doing what journalists do best: I tell a story. On August 12, 2004, the Northeast power grid collapsed. After the lights came back on, the first question everyone asked was “why did this happen?” Hindsight now provides a reasonable answer: the decision, or more accurately, the indecision of an Ohio power plant operator to stay connected to the grid after his plant failed instead of “shedding load,” an industry term for rationing power during peak usage, had profound and far-reaching consequences for millions of people.²

In addition to dramatically and powerfully illustrating our deep and real interconnectedness, this story also illustrates what happens when total faith and trust are put in technology. This is the reality of the newsphere in which we live. It demands a new, more sophisticated and active awareness, and while it is not necessary to experience the dramatic shock of a power failure to awaken us, it truly is time to pay much more careful and close attention to the effect news, and indeed all the information that we receive and process, has on us, our communities, and ultimately our collective consciousness. One of the biggest news stories of 2011 is the birth and activities of the international Occupy Movement, whose slogan “We Are the 99%” demonstrates how collective awareness and the power it generates can work to reform even seemingly insurmountable challenges such as the corrupting effect of money on politics.

Just as it was difficult for the control room operator in the power plant to really see and appreciate the reality of the situation, our day-to-day lives and the challenges of survival often mask our awareness of our deep and profound interconnectedness. Perhaps even more important, we are often clouded and confused about our power to effect change in our world and how to use that power effectively. This is a fundamental and profound challenge of human existence. The relationship of our internal and external universes (which ideally manifests as our outsides matching our insides and vice versa) is broadly termed *Integral Philosophy*, and has attracted the time and energy of some of the world’s wisest and most talented philosophers and scientists including Ken Wilber, Henri-Louis Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, Jean Gebser and of particular note and focus here, the Jesuit mystic and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.³

Teilhard (1881–1955), as he is affectionately known, coined the term *noosphere* to describe the location, structure, and evolution of our collective thoughts and knowledge. He believed the human condition could be improved through participation in the noosphere. He understood the organic unity of this web of thoughts

and its beautiful, symmetrical evolution: it's really quite simple, we move together as we move alone. "The human is not the static center of the world, as was thought for so long," Teilhard says, "but the axis and arrow of evolution—which is much more beautiful."⁴ Everything was one in Teilhard's heart and mind, a vision of the world he developed as a young child living amid the rocks and stones of the volcanic peaks of Auvergne, France, and the natural beauty of its forested preserves. He coined the term, "le Tout," or "the All," to describe the organic unity of spirit and matter, science and religion, the human and the divine.⁵ He used what we all have—heart, hands, and head—to transcend the dualities of human existence, and he then devoted his life to sharing that wisdom with us in profound and often heroic ways.

For these, and numerous other reasons you will soon discover, Teilhard is the inspiration of this book. His intimate knowledge of the Earth and of men's souls was preserved in the charter of the United Nations, among other places, and more than a century since his death, he has a devoted Facebook following: As of this writing, about 2,000 people follow him on Facebook, and the number continues to grow.⁶

Each day we are challenged to find balance between internal forces—the free will and agency that make you "you" and me "me"—and external forces—the desire for connection and satiation of our "hunger for awareness." How do we achieve balance in the newsphere? How do we do what Teilhard did and transcend this duality? We move in a new way: We expand our awareness and navigate toward a nonjudgmental dialogue news style. Just as Appalachian Trail (AT) thru-hikers who must ultimately leave the sanguine forest for the highly mediated world, we may need to step away from our daily dose of news to better understand our own relationship to news and information. Jack Magullian is a New Zealand hiker who fasts from news for months while trekking the AT from Georgia to Maine. "Once you've achieved some degree of separation from normal media, your perspective changes," says Jack, an expatriate who has logged thousands of miles on the trail.

A news fast is just one way to wake up from the trance that unconscious participation in the newsphere creates. We need to wake up to the illusion of news and look closely at the historical and theoretical forces that precipitated the structural decay of the American news and information structure. From fake press conferences and the churnalism that turns real news into rubbish, to the misuse of power and our own delusion, the stories we unconsciously consume are often just smoke and mirrors, or worse, deliberate manipulation that includes our own self-deception. Building on the admirable, poetic, and powerful work of the journalist Bill Moyers, the reception theories of John Fiske, and cutting-edge research on news processing, I will demonstrate that an honest integration and appreciation of news are often elusive, and I will offer an analysis of one of the most popular stories of 2009, the capture of the *Maersk Alabama* in the Indian Ocean. The takeover of an American cargo ship and its captain by Somali pirates is an illus-