

# **Poor Richard's iPad: The Return of American Journalism to its Roots**

## **2013 Hosokawa Journalism Lecture By Terry Tang, delivered March 28, 2013**

It is a real honor and privilege to be here at Whitman. Thank you President Bridges, members of the faculty, and the students at the Pioneer for being so welcoming to me, and also much thanks to the Hosokawa Family Foundation for this wonderful opportunity and for being so supportive of young journalists here on campus. And many thanks to the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin for sponsoring this event.

I have to say, it's also a parental pleasure to visit the campus. My son John is a first-year here, and he loves the community, the classes and the friends he's found here. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, since it's always alarming to see your mom talking to your classmates, he is on the baseball team and is headed to Portland to play Lewis and Clark.

I'm the deputy Editorial Page editor of The New York Times. It's a long way from New York to Walla Walla, and yet our common experiences as news readers have never really been closer.

In the 1980s, it was big news when the New York Times started printing the paper in Tacoma and offered home delivery in Seattle. Before that, it was hard to get your hands on The Times or its crossword puzzle. Maybe you could read a few New York Times stories as syndicated articles, which the Seattle P.I. carried. But that was it.

If you lived in Seattle or Walla Walla, you read your own newspaper, which had AP wires to fill in the national or foreign news that the local paper's reporters did not cover. Now, The New York Times has 30 million unique visitors a month to its Web site, compared with about 1 million subscribers in the 1980s. Now millions more see tweets and other social media that share Times content around the world.

Our cultural and political footprint is expansive. It's a newsroom with more than 1,000 people – reporters, editors, photographers, designers, web producers, videographers, software architects, information technologists.

My view is that if the newspaper did not exist – not just The Times, but the daily American newspaper – it would have to be invented. And if it were introduced at, say, South by Southwest or at a TED conference, it would be considered an insanely ambitious idea.

But here's the point. If we had to start over, even Apple with its \$140 billion cash reserves could not just throw money at the project and end up with a newspaper that covers the world.

And that's because journalism is a culture and a kingdom, there's no shortcut. It's something money can't buy – not overnight certainly, or even over decades. In fact, after the Berlin Wall fell, many academics and writers from Eastern Europe came to the U.S. as visiting fellows at universities to learn how a society creates a free press and the necessary value system that keeps it alive. They could learn about it in lectures at journalism schools, but that is not the same as having a tradition that is embedded in this society.

We in this country take our idea of journalism pretty much for granted. Part of the reason is that the press seems ubiquitous and vast – certainly it feels that way on the Web. Yet there are only about 45,000 newsroom professionals working today – compared with 700,000 lawyers in America, 900,000 software developers, 1 million high school teachers.

These journalists work at 1,400 daily newspapers, with a median daily circulation around 26,000. It's a very localized business – yet go anywhere in America, and you'll find a surprisingly cohesive industry that operates by common rules established centuries ago.

The qualities of American journalism grew out of our particular needs. So it's worth going back and talking about how we got here.

When I started thinking about this talk, I realized that I personally have gone through about 150 years of journalistic experience in America. I don't mean that I'm 180 years old, but pretty much journalism – as I found it in 1984 when I started out – was directly connected to the practice and ethics of journalism in 1850.

I came into journalism as an amateur. I've made writing and editing my profession, but I've always approached it from the vantage point of a reader. There's no license required. That has only become more and more true.

When I applied for my first reporting job, at The Weekly in Seattle, the editor told me: "My model is a newspaper like that of Addison and Steele" -- Addison and Steele being the founders of The Spectator, the stylish daily paper that was the rage in London in 1711.

I may have laughed – don't laugh in any job interview when your prospective boss does not appear to be joking. He dressed like a throwback, but really? Back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century? Since he was going to pay me almost nothing, I figured I could always quit if he turned out to be a nut, so I took the job.

What he meant was that opinion and news would not be separated --- that the news would inform the opinion and that a point of view would inform the telling of the story.

That was where the western tradition of journalism started, and that's how I started off. And that's why you – if you have a blog or tumblr or twitter account or Facebook or Youtube channel – are also participating in journalism in the most authentic way, the way it was practiced in 1721.

You are writing down news, ideas, you have an audience, you influence readers – like it or not, for good or for ill. A huge number of Americans – maybe your parents, maybe your quirky aunt – are practicing some form of journalism. This simply was not possible 20 years ago – because from colonial times, being part of the press has meant ownership of heavy equipment, or access to someone who owns it. Not any longer.

Since we are all practicing journalism, I'll give you a short little history of what it's meant to be a journalist in America. There's a reason protection of a free press is in the *First* Amendment, not the 4th or 8<sup>th</sup> amendment. It was the founders' belief that the press was a foundation of society. Would you consider NBC News, Fox News, even the New York Times a foundational institution – something this society literally could not exist without? That was their perspective, a perspective that no other societies held in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

So why here? It started with people who owned a press – literally, they had invested in a machine, and they needed to put it to use. The earliest American printers printed government forms, hand bills for merchants and some even had contracts to print paper money for the colonies. And some found that printing newspapers – if they were decent writers – was a good way to make money if you could sell the paper and sell ads in your papers. Like most bloggers now, you would be a one-person band. You would also have to be a decent machinist able to fix the press when it jammed up.

Among the first American papers to be very influenced by Addison and Steele was the New England Courant of 1721, a paper that lasted only about four years. It was owned by James Franklin, a printer, who figured he could make money selling papers with fashionable, witty stories written in a style like the fashionable, literary wit of Addison and Steele.

His big splash – maybe the first example of a paper stirring up controversy – was his relentless ridiculing of Cotton Mather's proposal in Boston to use inoculations to fight small pox, which was a scary new science-based technique. This was a guy who figured out how to make money mocking a Puritan.

Turns out he was also the mean older brother of Ben Franklin, who was made his apprentice around the age of 13. Ben Franklin ran away to Philadelphia at the age of 17 when he couldn't take the abuse anymore. He too would eventually acquire a press and become a printer. He had the good fortune to be able to write stuff people wanted to read – like Poor Richard's Almanac, which was a huge best seller. And of course, he wrote, edited and printed a newspaper. The papers then were a lot like personal blogs – they had tidbits, interesting little items, rewrites of news from abroad. What appeared was what the printer knew or heard. They also had to be entertaining.

The political change for this kind of press was gradual but significant. In the decades before and during the Revolution, the press had become a vehicle in which the public debated common interests, independent of government. The most important quality of the American press was that it was the venue where information did not flow just from the top down -- from the elites of society to the masses -- but from the center outward to the periphery.

The most charming story about the early American newspaper reader is from Alexis de Tocqueville. In 1831, he was traveling through frontier Michigan, where he came upon a miserable hut in the forest. "Who wouldn't suppose that this is the home of ignorance?" he wrote. Wrong. Inside is a literate man who knows history, is curious about the future and can argue about the issues of the day. He is a highly civilized individual, who "plunges into the wilds of the New World with the Bible, an axe, and a file of newspapers."

How would a newspaper get into the woods of Michigan in 1831? Michigan Territory had around 30,000 residents in 1830 -- roughly the number of people in Walla Walla. It was almost entirely unsettled wilderness. Yet it had 940 miles of mail-roads, built by the federal government to disseminate mail -- and the bulk of that mail was newspapers.

The Europeans marveled at this readership. It was seen as a curious American quality, this desire to be informed when Britain and France had equally literate cultures. In 1840 -- total weekly newspaper circulation in America -- with 17 million people -- surpassed that in all of Europe with a population of 233 million. The vast majority of papers were very small, local affairs, with close ties to politics and local debate.

American journalism, of course, doesn't end with that model. By the mid-1850s, newspapers were becoming big commercial businesses, which meant that their values changed to meet their business needs.

It was around mid-century that the newspapers, including the New York Times, became professionalized. They were no longer organs of the political parties, which until then had sponsored and subsidized their operation. The smart publishers realized they could get more business from advertisers as well as more readers if they were politically neutral -- which meant being independent and "objective" in their reporting posture.

One big innovation was the "interview" that directly quoted a person. This was so unusual that it was actually considered an "American" technique when it became more commonly used 20 years later in Britain. Before this, the reporter would talk to the source, but would not quote from the conversation. The interview format added to the feel of neutrality in newspaper articles.

The reporter, too, was an innovation. As newspapers grew prosperous, they were able to increase their news-gathering capabilities. The New York Herald, for instance, had 63 reporters covering the battles of the Civil War.

This is where my own professional history picks up. When I joined the Seattle Times in 1989, the American newspaper business – how we gathered facts, how we interviewed people, how we were separate from the political parties, how we valued independence in our presentation of news – was essentially unchanged from around 1850. The New York Times, for example, was founded in 1851. And the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin traces its founding to 1869 – 20 years before statehood.

Now fast forward to 2013. What's different? A guy in a survivalist hut in Michigan might well have a Bible, an axe and an iPad. But instead of being a reader exclusively, this person could be like Ben Franklin without the need to have heavy machinery. He can write his blog, blending what people tell him, with news he reads – he's an aggregator, and he retweets to his Twitter followers stuff that's worth reading. He tells his Facebook friends his take on Obama and gun control and Gonzaga's Bulldogs.

And if he's an energetic writer, he might well get tens of thousands of readers and followers. And maybe the site even sells ads. But even as this blogger becomes a publisher, the vast majority of what he reads and links to has been produced by the professional press.

It still takes salaried full-time reporters to actually go outside and talk to people who don't want to talk. To go to Iraq and Afghanistan to tell the story of the war. To go to Congress to find out what is in the health care reform bill, and then to interpret it. To pore through the safety records at aging nuclear power plants. To tell you about lawsuits filed and settled by Google over violations of your privacy.

But millions of new writers with real audiences also change the way the professional press operates. Opinions are everywhere – and yet it's never been harder for a reader to sort out competing facts and views. Worse, you don't know if the stuff on the blog of the guy in Michigan is even true.

At newspapers, there's professional pride – and reputation and habit and peer pressure and your boss – to stop you from putting wrong information into the report. The New York Times has a senior editor whose entire job is to investigate and write corrections. We run several a day – and given the enormous amount of content published daily – that is a miraculous battling average.

So we have these values – of accuracy, of fairness, of thoroughness – that in some ways run counter to speed and volume. It's not an easy time for newspapers. We in the industry are trying hard to figure out a better business model as readers move to the Web, where ads are cheap and a lot of content is supposedly “free.”

The model we're accustomed to is more than 150 years old, so it's time for some tweaking. But the power and roots of American journalism won't change.

Tocqueville wrote 180 years ago: “In the United States each separate journal exercises little authority, but the power of the periodical press is only second to that of the people. When a great number of the organs of the press adopt the same line of conduct, their influence becomes irresistible.”

The Web and social media allow you to magnify that power. They now make it possible for you to practice journalism – to hand out pamphlets, Ben Franklin-style, to the community that you create.

So here’s the question for you. What responsibilities and ethics do you owe to your readers? What do you retweet, what links do you put on Facebook? How do you decide what’s legit, what’s not?

That’s worth thinking about.

I know that American journalists have been thinking about that for three centuries.

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