Feature: The End of News?
By Michael Massing

In late September, the Government Accountability Office—a nonpartisan arm of Congress—issued a finding that the Bush administration had engaged in "covert propaganda," and thereby broken the law, by paying Armstrong Williams, a conservative commentator, to promote its educational policies. The GAO also faulted the administration for hiring a public relations firm to distribute video news segments without disclosing the government's part in producing them.[1] The auditors' report, which followed a year-long investigation, presents chilling evidence of the campaign that officials in Washington have been waging against a free and independent press. Only months before, it was revealed that Kenneth Tomlinson, the President's choice to head the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, had paid a Republican operative to monitor the political leanings of guests on Bill Moyers's show Now, as part of a broader effort to shift PBS's programming to the right.

The Bush administration has restricted access to public documents as no other before it. According to a recent report on government secrecy by OpenTheGovernment.org, a watchdog organization, the federal government classified a record 15.6 million new documents in fiscal year 2004, an increase of 81 percent over the year before the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Spending on the declassification of documents dropped to a new low. What's more, 64 percent of Federal Advisory Committee meetings in 2004 were completely closed to the public. The Pentagon has banned TV cameras from recording the return of caskets from Iraq, and it prohibited the publication of photographs of those caskets, a restriction that was lifted only following a request through the Freedom of Information Act.

The restrictions have grown so tight that the normally quiescent American Society of Newspaper Editors last fall issued a "call to arms" to its members, urging them to "demand answers in print and in court" to stop this "deeply disturbing" trend. The conservative columnist William Safire, usually a supporter of Bush's policies, complained last September that "the fundamental right of Americans, through our free press, to penetrate and criticize the workings of our government is under attack as never before."

But the campaign against the press is only partly a result of a hostile White House. The administration's efforts have been amplified by a disciplined and well-organized news and opinion campaign directed by conservatives and the Christian right. This well-funded network includes newsletters, think tanks, and talk radio as well as cable television news and the Internet. Often in cooperation with the White House, these outlets have launched a systematic campaign to discredit what they refer to disparagingly as "MSM," for mainstream media. Through the Internet, commentators can channel criticism of the press to the general public faster and more efficiently than before. As became plain in the Swift Boat campaign against John Kerry, to cite one of many examples, an unscrupulous critic can
spread exaggerated or erroneous claims instantaneously to thousands of
people, who may, in turn, repeat them to millions more on talk radio
programs, on cable television, or on more official "news" Web sites. This
kind of recycled commentary has become all the more effective because it
is aimed principally at a sector of the population that seldom if ever sees
serious press coverage.

Partly as a result, newspapers find themselves less popular than ever before,
at a time when the newspaper industry itself is losing readers while
struggling to cuts costs and meet demands for ever larger profits. Today's
journalists, meanwhile, when compared to their predecessors, often seem
far less willing to resist political pressure from the White House. In the
1970s, for example, The Washington Post refused to buckle under intense
White House pressure during Watergate, and The New York Times did not
shrink from publishing the Pentagon Papers. Recently, in contrast, the
Times had to apologize for uncritically publishing false government claims
about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, and Time magazine released the
notes of its journalist Matthew Cooper to a government prosecutor without
his consent. Conservative commentators and the administration have also
been able to intimidate publications into shunning investigative reporting,
as when, for example, Newsweek promised to crack down on its use of
anonymous sources after being criticized for its story about the mishandling
of the Koran by the US military, and when CBS forced the resignation of
due news employees after questions were raised about the 60 Minutes
broadcast on Bush's record in the National Guard. With the President's poll
numbers down and infighting among conservatives more visible, the
coverage of Washington has sharpened of late, but overall the climate
remains hostile to good reporting.

In 1969, when Vice President Spiro Agnew gave a series of speeches
attacking the TV networks and top newspapers as liberal and elitist, only
one small organization outside the government was pursuing similar aims.
Accuracy in Media was run out of a modest office in Washington by a
reactionary gadfly named Reed Irvine. He published a newsletter that
singled out journalists whose reporting he found objectionable, insinuating
that they were soft on communism and on leftist dictators, if not entirely
disloyal. Such charges caused conservative newspaper readers to question
the fairness of some news accounts, but Irvine's politics were so extreme
that most editors dismissed him as a crank.

In 1979, conservatives discovered a new basis for criticizing the press when
S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman released a study purporting to show
the leftist leanings of national journalists. Of 240 journalists surveyed, eight
out of ten said they voted Democratic in presidential elections from 1964 to
1976. Nine out of ten said they supported abortion rights, more than half
said they saw nothing wrong with adultery, and few attended church. In
1985, Lichter and his wife Linda, with the financial support of such
conservative foundations as Scaife and Olin, formed the Center for Media
and Public Affairs, a research institute that, while presenting itself as
nonpartisan, sought to document instances of liberal bias on the networks
and in newspapers. Its reports helped complement the Reagan
administration's efforts to portray the press as out of step with "mainstream
America." The impact of these efforts was apparent in journalists' often
uncritical coverage of such issues as supply-side economics and the abusive activities of the Salvadoran military, the Nicaraguan contras, and other forces allied with the US in Central America. (There were exceptions, however, such as The New York Times's investigation of the CIA's relations with Panama's Manuel Noriega in the late 1980s.)

An even more consequential, though much less visible, change took place in 1987, with the abolition of the Fairness Doctrine. Introduced in 1949, this rule required TV and radio stations to cover "controversial issues" of interest to their communities, and, when doing so, to provide "a reasonable opportunity for the presentation of contrasting viewpoints." Intended to encourage stations to avoid partisan programming, the Fairness Doctrine had the practical effect of keeping political commentary off the air altogether. In 1986, a federal court ruled that the doctrine did not have the force of law, and the following year the FCC abolished it.

At that point, stations were free to broadcast whatever they wanted. In 1988, several dozen AM stations began carrying a show hosted by a thirty-seven-year-old college dropout named Rush Limbaugh. Advertising himself as "the most dangerous man in America," Limbaugh attracted listeners by combining political jokes, thundering polemics, and outrageous overstatement. He spoke, he said, "with half my brain tied behind my back, just to make it fair, because I have a talent on loan from...God. Rush Limbaugh. A man. A legend. A way of life."

The eternal enemy, he claimed, is "liberalism.... It destroys prosperity. It assigns sameness to everybody." On his show, he has described feminists as "feminazis" and referred to the prison in Guantánamo as "Club Gitmo," a place where the conditions are so plush as to resemble those of a country club. Limbaugh appealed to conservatives who felt no one else was expressing their resentments with such satisfying vehemence; soon hundreds of stations were carrying the show, which by now, according to Media Week, has generated well more than $1 billion in revenue.

Limbaugh's success, in turn, has inspired "a vast new armada" of right-wing talk show hosts, according to Brian C. Anderson in his book South Park Conservatives: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias.[2] A senior editor at City Journal, a magazine published by the Manhattan Institute, a conservative New York think tank, Anderson is so sure of the press's liberal slant that he makes only slapdash efforts to document it. He claims, for instance, that press bias is "at its most egregious in war reporting." A prime example, he claims, is the "defeatist coverage of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars," each of which was portrayed by CNN and the daily press as "another Vietnam." Anderson overlooks the nearly unanimous support of editorial boards for both those conflicts, the credulous acceptance by national news organizations of the Bush administration's claims regarding Iraq's WMDs, and the triumphalist coverage of the US military's push into Baghdad.[3] He takes no note of the thoroughly conventional views of most of the guests on CNN's talk shows, the network's heavy reliance on retired military officers for commentary, and Wolf Blitzer's often obsequious and usually predictable questioning of administration officials.

But South Park Conservatives does give a concise account of the right's successful assault on the mainstream press. "Drive across the country these
"days," Anderson writes in a chapter on talk radio, "and you'll never be out of range of conservative voices on the AM dial or satellite radio." The list of the top twenty talk radio shows nationwide is thick with conservatives. The most popular is Limbaugh, whose daily three-hour show attracts an estimated weekly audience of around 14 million. Next comes Sean Hannity, whose show, carried on nearly four hundred stations, attracts 12 million weekly, and who is also the co-host of Fox News's nightly TV program Hannity & Colmes. "Dr. Laura" Schlesinger, who inveighs against feminists and homosexuals, has eight million listeners, as does Michael Savage, who ridicules the handicapped and considers Arabs "non-humans." Laura Ingraham, the author of Shut Up & Sing: How Elites from Hollywood, Politics, and the UN Are Subverting America, has five million. Other popular right-wing hosts include Bill O'Reilly, William Bennett, G. Gordon Liddy, and Michael Medved. (The liberal Air America is now carried on sixty-eight radio stations nationwide, but its daily audience is puny compared to that enjoyed by the right.)

As Anderson makes clear, these shows not only provide their own slant on the news, but also work ceaselessly to discredit what they call "liberal" news organizations. Day after day, talk radio echoes and magnifies the criticisms of the press made by the White House, charging The New York Times and The Washington Post, CBS and CNN with being for big government and against big business, for abortion rights and against gun rights, for Democrats and against Republicans.

In mid-October, I tuned in to Limbaugh's show, aired in New York on WABC, and heard him spend much of his three hours defending the White House against press criticism that the President's aides had scripted a videoconference between Bush and a group of soldiers in Iraq. Attempting to turn the tables and make the press the issue, Limbaugh cited several cases in which he claimed news organizations have helped to stage events, such as when a reporter from the Chattanooga Times Free Press helped shape the question a GI asked Donald Rumsfeld in Iraq about the lack of adequate armor for US military vehicles. This was a typical ploy by Limbaugh, who seeks at every opportunity to hail the progress being made in Iraq and to blame negative news on Bush-hating reporters.

Limbaugh's three hours on WABC were followed by three by Sean Hannity, who denounced the media for its distorted coverage of Iraq and its "nonstop attack on the President" from the very start of the war. Then came two hours by Mark Levin, a lawyer turned talk show host who specializes in right-wing name-calling (he called Joseph Wilson and his wife "finks," Judy Miller "a rat," Ted Kennedy "a lifelong drunk," The New York Times the "New York Slimes," and Senator Charles Schumer "Chucky Schmucky"). Then came two hours by Laura Ingraham, who, also taking up the Bush staging charges, denounced the "elitist" press for scripting "everything" and being "out of touch with the American people." Such tirades are issued daily on hundreds of stations around the country.

An even bigger boon to the right, in Brian Anderson's view, has been the rise of cable news, especially Fox News. Founded in 1996, Fox first surpassed CNN in the ratings in early 2002 and now consistently outdraws it. It is available to more than 85 million subscribers, and, on average, it attracts more than eight million people daily— more than double the
number who watch CNN. As with talk radio, Fox relentlessly hammers away at the press, casting it as fundamentally opposed to the values of ordinary Americans—particularly in such matters as abortion, faith, and fighting terrorism. Last spring, New York Times executive editor Bill Keller estimated that last year Fox's Bill O'Reilly had attacked his paper no fewer than sixty times.

Last May, during the controversy over Newsweek's report that a copy of the Koran had been flushed down a toilet at Guantánamo, Hannity & Colmes presented a report from Ramadi, Iraq, where Oliver North, now a Fox correspondent, was talking with Specialist Jonah Bishop of the US Army's Second Infantry Division. North said that he'd just returned to al-Anbar Province after many previous visits:

Oliver North: It's things like this false story that came out about what happened at Guantánamo that creates divisions between the Americans out here and our Iraqi allies. It would strike me that what we're going to see, as a consequence of that, is an increase in the No. 1 unit of attack that they use against us, which is what?

Specialist Bishop: "IEDs."

North: "That's improvised explosive devices?"

Bishop: "That's correct."

In other words, North was asserting that the brief item in Newsweek would cause more roadside bomb attacks on US forces, and, by implication, more deaths of US servicemen. For weeks, Fox regularly repeated its charge against Newsweek's Koran report, neglecting to make any mention of the well-substantiated reports about the mishandling of the Koran at Guantánamo that were appearing in The New York Times and other papers. Fox was thus able to keep the issue alive in a way that the Bush administration by itself could not have done.

The "Fox effect," as it's called, is apparent at MSNBC, where Joe Scarborough nightly sounds like Bill O'Reilly, and at CNN. In recent years, as its ratings have declined, CNN has devoted more and more of its broadcast day to entertainment, commentary, and soft news. Here one can find a lineup of cautious and vacuous daytime anchors, the predictable attacks on outsourcing and Mexican immigration by Lou Dobbs, and the superficial celebrity interviews of Paula Zahn and Larry King. CNN's coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, including sharp reports on FEMA's shameful neglect of New Orleans's poor residents, shows that the network can still provide exceptional coverage in times of crisis, and in the weeks since CNN seems to be returning to a more serious approach to the news.

The Fox effect has been apparent, too, at the Sinclair Broadcast Group, whose sixty-plus stations give it access to a quarter of the US TV audience. Since late 2002, Brian Anderson observes, Sinclair has fed its affiliates a seventeen-minute news report that uses Fox's slogan about being "fair and balanced." The report includes an opinion feature called "Truth, Lies and Red Tape" that claims to present stories that the established networks "don't want viewers to hear," as a Sinclair executive put it. (One segment derided
the United Nations for "spending more time and money defining the War on Terror instead of fighting it.")

In April 2004, Sinclair directed its eight ABC affiliates not to run a Nightline segment in which Ted Koppel read the names of the more than one thousand US servicemen who had by then died in Iraq. In the ensuing controversy many conservative commentators defended Sinclair's decision, and the discussion on talk radio, cable news, and the Internet helped foster the idea that the mere discussion of US combat deaths in Iraq is somehow unpatriotic. The Sinclair debate complemented the various steps the administration has taken to suppress coverage of US casualties. Only in the last few months, as insurgent violence has intensified and the number of American and Iraqi deaths has mounted, has the coverage of the war grown more skeptical on some TV news broadcasts. (On the same day that Scooter Libby's indictment was announced, CNN chose to rebroadcast an hour-long report, "Dead Wrong," on the Bush administration's false claims about WMD.)

2.

But it is a third, technological innovation that, along with the rise of talk radio and cable news, has made the conservative attack on the press particularly damaging: blogs. These Internet Web logs, which allow users to beam their innermost thoughts throughout the world, take no longer than a few minutes to set up. They first began to appear in the late 1990s, and there are currently more than 20 million of them. As one critic has observed, many are by adolescent girls writing their diaries on-line. Those with any substantial readership and political influence probably number in the hundreds, and most of these are conservative. As Brian Anderson writes with considerable understatement, "the blogosphere currently leans right."

At The Truth Laid Bear, a Web site that ranks political blogs according to their number of links with other sites, eight of the top ten blogs are conservative. The conservative sites include Instapundit (University of Tennessee law professor Glenn Reynolds), Power Line (three lawyers), michelle Malkin.com (a syndicated columnist whose recent book defends the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II), Free Republic (conservative activists), Captain's Quarters (run by a call-center manager), the Volokh Conspiracy (a UCLA law professor), and Little Green Footballs (commentary on foreign policy with a strong pro-Israel slant). Complementing them are a host of "milblogs," written by active-duty military personnel promoting vigorous pursuit of the GWOT (Global War on Terror). (By far the most-visited political blog is the left-of-center Daily Kos; its popularity is owing in part to its community-style approach, which allows registered readers to post their own comments as well as comment on the posts of others.)

In addition to being linked to one another, these blogs are regularly featured on more established right-of-center Web sites such as the Drudge Report (three billion visits a year), WorldNetDaily (which appeals to the Christian right), and Dow Jones's OpinionJournal, which features James Taranto's widely read "Best of the Web Today." These sites, in turn, are regularly trolled by commentators like Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh, who then publicize many of their messages over TV, radio, and their own Web sites. NationalReviewOnline seeks out new conservative blogs and launches them
with great fanfare. And the Bush administration actively supports these efforts. Last December, for instance, Lynne Cheney observed on the MSNBC program Hardball that she regularly reads Instapundit and Power Line—a powerful recruiting tool for those sites.

For these bloggers, the principal target is the mainstream media, or MSM. Every day, they scrutinize the top dailies, the three broadcast networks as well as CNN, and the newsmagazines for evidence of "liberal bias." Over the last year, they have demonstrated their influence. When 60 Minutes ran its segment on the memos about George Bush's National Guard service, Power Line led the way in raising doubts about the authenticity of the documents and the reliability of their source. After CBS apologized, the remaining serious questions about Bush's National Guard service were abruptly dropped by CBS and the press in general.[4]

Last fall, when Wall Street Journal correspondent Farnaz Fassihi sent her friends a group e-mail that bluntly described the deteriorating security situation in Baghdad, right-wing bloggers accused her of bias and demanded her recall. The Journal quickly announced that Fassihi would take a previously scheduled vacation and so remain out of Iraq until after the US presidential election. (She has since resumed reporting from Iraq.) Earlier this year, when CNN president Eason Jordan claimed at the Davos summit that the US military was deliberately targeting journalists critical of the war in Iraq, bloggers exploded in outrage. Within days, a computer software analyst in Medford, New Jersey, had set up a new Web site, Easongate.com, to stoke anger against Jordan on the Internet. From there, the controversy jumped to TV, and soon after Jordan resigned.

Liberal bloggers have had some successes of their own. Partly as a result of their commentaries, for instance, the press has paid more attention to the so-called Downing Street memo of July 2002, in which Tony Blair and his advisers discussed the Bush administration's plans for war in Iraq. In addition to Daily Kos, prominent left-leaning blogs include Talking Points Memo, Eschaton, and, for commentary on Iraq, Informed Comment. While these sites are critical of the national press, their main fire is directed at the Bush administration. What's more, these sites are not supported by an interconnected system of talk radio programs and cable television commentary, and their influence therefore tends to be much more limited.

The thick web of connections among right-wing commentators is typified by Hugh Hewitt. A law professor who once served as the director of the Nixon Library, Hewitt hosts a nationally syndicated radio talk show from a studio in an Orange County, California, mall. In between chats with studio guests, he posts commentary on his blog, hughhewitt.com, which receives about 40,000 visits a day. He contributes a weekly column to the Daily Standard, the online edition of the conservative Weekly Standard. Hewitt is also an evangelical Christian who sees blogs as an effective way to spread the word of Christ. According to World, an evangelical monthly magazine, Hewitt "may well be the world's leading blog-evangelist." An entire Web site has been set up to record the blogs he has helped inspire; it currently lists more than 250. On his own blog, Hewitt regularly flags what he considers to be instances of anti-Christian bias in the press. In mid-June, for instance, when The New York Times ran an article about the growing number of evangelical chaplains in the armed forces and the tensions they
were causing, Hewitt observed that this was the latest installment in the Times's "Drive Evangelicals from the Military" series.[5]

Christian bloggers are part of a growing group of Christian news providers. As Mariah Blake reported in the May/June Columbia Journalism Review, the Christian Broadcasting Network, home to Pat Robertson's 700 Club, today employs more than a thousand people working at stations in three US cities and several foreign countries. Evangelicals control six national TV networks and some two thousand religious radio stations. "Thanks to Christian radio's rapid growth," Blake observes, "religious stations now outnumber every other format except country music and news-talk"—the latter category, as we have seen, also overwhelmingly dominated by the right.

For three years before the Terri Schiavo case got national attention, it was constantly discussed on Christian stations, which sought to frame the issue as one of activist judges who were not upholding the sanctity of life. Soon after Bush was elected in 2000, directors of the National Religious Broadcasters were invited to meet the President and John Ashcroft, and the group has held monthly conference calls with the White House ever since. All in all, Blake observes, evangelical broadcasters have "remained hidden in plain sight—a powerful but largely unnoticed force shaping American politics and culture."

The rapid growth of conservative outlets for commentary has contributed to a siege mentality among journalists. Steve Lovelady, who edits CJR Daily, a blog sponsored by the Columbia Journalism Review, told me that based on the frequent e-mails he receives from editors and reporters around the country, he thinks that newsrooms are in a state of "growing panic." Journalists "feel like they've never been under greater attack," Lovelady says. "Press criticism seems harsher and more accusatory than it used to be."

In addition to feeling under attack from without, Lovelady adds, journalists feel threatened from within. In previous decades, the major newspapers were mostly owned by family-run companies, which usually insulated newsrooms from the vicissitudes of the stock market. Today, most newspapers are owned by large publicly held corporations, for which profit margins are increasingly more important than investment in better reporting. This has sapped news organizations of their ability to defend themselves at precisely the moment they need it most.

3.

The much-discussed fortunes of the Los Angeles Times are a case in point. For more than four generations, the paper was published by members of the Chandler family, who were controlling shareholders of the Times Mirror Company, which, in addition to the Times, owned Newsday, the Baltimore Sun, and the Hartford Courant. In 2000, however, Times Mirror was bought by the Chicago-based Tribune Company, a huge corporation that had become accustomed to 30 percent annual profit margins. (In addition to the Chicago Tribune and the Los Angeles Times, the Tribune Company owns nine other papers, twenty-six television stations, a 22 percent share in the WB television network, and the Chicago Cubs baseball team.)
The purchase came shortly after the revelation that top executives at the Los Angeles Times had approved a deal with the Staples Center to share the advertising proceeds from a special section about the sports and entertainment arena, an arrangement widely criticized as breaching the traditional wall between news and business. At first, Tribune executives seemed committed to restoring the Times's strong reputation, as reflected in their decision to hire John Carroll, the widely respected editor of the Baltimore Sun, as the paper's new editor. And Carroll came through: in 2004, the paper won five Pulitzer Prizes, the second most ever for a paper (after the seven won by The New York Times in 2002). Financially, though, the paper was still feeling the effects of the 2000 recession, with advertising revenue sharply declining and circulation dropping well below its traditional level of more than one million.

The paper continued to be very profitable, but its margins had dipped below the 20 to 25 percent it had achieved in its most prosperous years. At the same time, the paper had come under heavy attack from southern California bloggers such as Hugh Hewitt, who portrayed it as liberal, lofty, and out of touch. According to Ken Auletta, in The New Yorker, more than a thousand Los Angeles Times readers canceled their subscriptions after the paper ran a story critical of Arnold Schwarzenegger just before the 2003 recall election that brought him to office.[6]

Between 2000 and 2004, the Tribune Company extracted some $130 million from the paper's annual billion-dollar budget. Then, weeks after the 2004 Pulitzer Prizes were announced, Tribune executives informed Carroll that further cuts were needed, and over the summer more than sixty staff members took voluntary buyouts or were laid off. The Washington bureau lost 10 percent of its staff, and those who remained were assigned to a new office along with the much-reduced Washington bureaus of the Chicago Tribune, Baltimore Sun, Newsday, and other Tribune papers. The cutbacks have made it harder for reporters at these papers to meet their daily deadlines, much less undertake in-depth reporting. In July of this year, in the face of demands for more cuts, Carroll resigned from the Times.

The developments at the Tribune Company mirror those in the newspaper industry as a whole. For most big-city papers, circulation is declining, advertising is shrinking, and reporters and editors are being let go. The full extent of the crisis became apparent in May, when the Audit Bureau of Circulations reported circulation figures for 814 daily papers for the six months ending last March. Compared to the same period the year before, total daily circulation fell by 1.9 percent and Sunday circulation by 2.5 percent. Sunday circulation fell by 2 percent at The Boston Globe, 3.3 percent at the Philadelphia Inquirer, 4.7 percent at the Chicago Tribune, and 8.5 percent at the Baltimore Sun. At the Los Angeles Times, circulation fell 6.4 percent daily and 7.9 percent on Sundays. Even The Washington Post, the dominant paper in a region of strong economic growth, has suffered a 5.2 percent daily circulation decline over a two-year period.

There are a few exceptions. The New York Times and USA Today, both national newspapers, have had modest circulation gains. Even so, the New York Times Company announced in October that it was going to eliminate five hundred jobs, including forty-five in the Times newsroom and thirty-five in the newsroom of The Boston Globe. (The Globe recently announced...
that it was dismantling its national desk.) The Wall Street Journal has been holding its own in circulation, but its ad revenues have sharply declined.

It is a striking paradox, however, that newspapers, for all their problems, remain huge moneymakers. In 2004, the industry's average profit margin was 20.5 percent. Some papers routinely earn in excess of 30 percent. By comparison, the average profit margin for the Fortune 500 in 2004 was about 6 percent. If the Los Angeles Times were allowed to operate at a 10 to 15 percent margin, John Carroll told me earlier this year, "it would be a juggernaut."

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, when most papers went public, they had little trouble maintaining such levels. Many enjoyed a monopoly in their markets, and realtors, car dealers, and local stores had no choice except to advertise in them. The introduction of new printing technology helped to reduce labor costs and to shift power away from unions and toward management. But papers have since faced successive waves of new competition—first from TV, then from cable, and now from the Internet. Yet Wall Street continues to demand the same high profits. "Of all the concerns facing newspapers," Carroll told me,

I'm most worried about cost cutting. Many CEOs are in a hard place, having to deliver short-term financial results or, most likely, get fired. Newspapers are very profitable, but their growth is slow, which means incessant cost cutting to meet Wall Street's expectations. The cost cutting leads to weaker journalism—fewer reporters, fewer photographers, fewer editors, fewer pages in the paper.

Gene Roberts, a former editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer who left that paper over ongoing demands for cuts in his news operation, says that cutting news budgets to hit profit targets is a form of "systematic suicide." How can newspapers continue to insist on annual profit margins of 25 to 30 percent "and remain appealing to readers?" he asked. He argues that newspapers should respond to the increasing competition by investing more, not less, in newsrooms: "I think most papers could easily get their circulations up—maybe not gigantically, but they could certainly stop the erosion and head in the other direction if they served their readers better."

But many experts on the newspaper business are not convinced. John Morton, a well-known newspaper analyst, points out that some very well-run companies, such as The Washington Post, have hired more reporters, foreign correspondents, and editors, yet continue to lose circulation. The reason, he says, is clear: the disappearance of young readers. "It is the fundamental problem facing the industry," Morton says. "It's probably not going away. And no one has figured a way out."

The full extent of this problem is described in Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News, by David T.Z. Mindich.[7] A former assignment editor for CNN who now teaches journalism at St. Michael's College in Vermont, Mindich writes that while more than 70 percent of older Americans read a newspaper every day, fewer than 20 percent of young Americans do. As a result, he writes, "America is facing the greatest exodus of informed citizenship in its history." Of twenty-three students
asked to name as many members of the Supreme Court as they could, eighteen could not name even one. It is frequently argued that young people are always less interested than their parents in following the news; as they get older, they'll undoubtedly become more engaged. Mindich thinks not. In the 1950s and 1960s, he observes, "young people were nearly as informed about news and politics as their elders were." If young people aren't reading newspapers now, he argues, there's a good chance they won't as adults.

All eyes are now on the Internet. Even as paid circulation has dwindled at many papers, the number of visits to their Web sites has soared. Both nytimes.com and washingtonpost.com rank among the top twenty on-line global news sites; in September, the Times site received visits from more than 21 million different users. Because these sites are mostly free, however, many readers have switched to them from print editions, which can cost several hundred dollars for an annual subscription. But there is no clear indication that young people are more likely to read news on the Internet than in print. According to Mindich, only 11 percent of young adults in a recent survey cited the Internet as a major source of news. Moreover, with the exception of The Wall Street Journal, which runs a profitable subscription-only Web site, newspapers have until now failed to establish an on-line presence for which readers are willing to pay. In September, the New York Times Web site launched "TimesSelect," a new premium service that charges $49.95 a year for access to the paper's archives and select Op-Ed-page commentary (except for subscribers, for whom access is free). But it remains unclear whether such a service will generate significant revenue.

For the Web to become profitable, it will need to be supported by advertising. To date, the returns here have been modest, but they are growing. This year, for instance, latimes.com expects to take in $50 million, with ad revenues doubling in each of the next few years. In the long term, most observers agree, the future of newspapers lies with the Web, where transmitting the news requires no expensive newsprint, delivery trucks, or union drivers. The question is, can the Internet generate revenue—and readers—fast enough to make up for the shortfalls from print?

If the newspaper industry continues to shrink in response to the unrealistic expectations of Wall Street, the loss would be incalculable. The major metropolitan dailies, for all their faults, are the main collectors and distributors of news in America. The TV networks, to the extent they still offer serious hard news coverage, get many of their story ideas from papers such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times, USA Today, The Boston Globe, and The Christian Science Monitor. Even the bloggers who so hate the "mainstream media" get much of their raw material from it. If the leading newspapers lose their capacity to report and conduct inquiries, the American public will become even more susceptible to the manipulations and deceptions of those in power.

The central question, in light of these difficulties, is how the press will respond. The environment in which the press works is often inhospitable, but it's precisely in times of crisis and upheaval that some of the best journalism gets done. Unfortunately, a look at the press's recent
performance—including that of our leading newspapers—is not encouraging. As I will try to show in a subsequent article, news organizations, rather than push back against the forces confronting them, have too often retreated and acquiesced.

—This is the first of two articles.

Notes


[3] The reporting of Knight Ridder's Washington Bureau was one of the few exceptions to this trend. See my articles in these pages, "Now They Tell Us," The New York Review, February 26, 2004; and "Unfit to Print?" The New York Review, June 24, 2004.


