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The New World of News

Louis D. Boccardi

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LOUIS D. BOCCARDI

The New World of News

I am honored to be here with you this evening to join in this series of events that are marking your anniversary and also marking the inauguration of your ambitious new Department of Media Studies and Digital Culture. More about those ambitions in a moment. In looking at your excellent website and reading there about your strong technological base here, I got to wondering if somehow there hadn't been a mistake, and that what you really were inviting me to do is now that I am retired to come and take some courses from you. But I checked the letter again, and sure enough I was invited to speak, so you are going to have to listen to me for a little while.

I never come to an academic setting without remembering something that I recall being attributed to the great violinist, Jascha Heifetz. He once quoted his old violin teacher as saying that he should work hard, study hard, and if he worked very, very hard at being a violinist, one day he would be good enough to teach. I think about that any time that I come to an academic setting. So I come tonight with the greatest respect for your university and its mission, and I say bravo to the expression in your mission statement of the link between your training here and your service to society.

As you heard in the two generous introductions, I am newly retired, and I'm still making some adjustments. After forty-four years on deck, I'm still getting used to not having to absorb before

Louis D. Boccardi was the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Associated Press from 1985 to 2003. This is a lightly-edited version of a talk presented at Sacred Heart University on December 1, 2003, as part of the College of Arts and Sciences Lecture Series on Media and Society.

breakfast the all-news radio and television stations that I have access to

in New York and three daily newspapers. I confess, though, that when a big story breaks, I do find myself getting a little bit jittery. I also find that as a *former* CEO, I'm treated with just a little bit less deference than I had gotten used to. I encountered a member of my former AP staff the other day, and he said, ``Hey, Mr. B, how are you? How are you feeling? I was sorry to hear about your surgery." And I said, ``I haven't had any surgery." And he said, ``Oh, yeh, we heard that you had open heart surgery, so they could put one in!" That's what happens when you are the former CEO.

So you've summoned me here to talk about the media. How are we ever going to fill twenty or thirty minutes: there's so little to say about the media these days! But I'm going to try. I will try, though, to avoid the self-absorption that was captured in a cartoon I saw once of a television talk show host's opening words as the camera flicked on. He said, ``Welcome to all about the media: a show where members of the media discuss the role of the media in media coverage of the media." I'm going to try not to be that self-absorbed. I'm not sure that the public finds us as fascinating as we sometimes seem to find ourselves, but for sure this is an interesting time for us, as we confront an avalanche of change and challenge in virtually all that we do, some of it, but not all of it, driven by technology. The changes and stresses of this moment for us are technological, but also economic, social, legal, ideological, and they all unfold in a faster, louder, more contentious way, and in some circumstances, a more dangerous way than even a few years ago. The peril of journalism in some parts of the world is really a subject for a different talk, but the journalism we are comfortable enough to take for granted here is costing some people their lives.

Now any tour of this landscape that lasts thirty or so minutes is necessarily going to be selective. As we go along, I'm going to drop in a word or two about the Associated Press. To have served ten years as AP's editor in chief and eighteen and a half as its chief executive was a privilege for which I will always be grateful. For the students here, let me say that from the time I was in high school, I knew that I wanted to be a journalist. I started my newspaper career on a New York city afternoon newspaper called the *World Telegram and Sun*. I was a general assignment reporter covering Brooklyn, which in the hierarchy of New York journalism was about as low as you could get on the

journalistic food chain and still be called a New York city reporter. I had no thought then that one day I would lead a global news company, the biggest one in the world, with bureaus in every state and foreign correspondents in more than a hundred countries across the world. Some days as I walked the streets of Brooklyn, I thought I *was* a foreign correspondent.

My dream then was to be an editor: not *the* editor of the Associated Press, mind you, but *an* editor somewhere, and that dream came true. So to the students here I say work hard and dream, because that dream just might come true. And that's the last time this evening I intend to sound like your mother.

So, in our short time together tonight, where do we go from here? The question, where do we go from here recalls a story about Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. He found himself at Union Station in Washington one morning about to board a train, but alas, he had left both wallet and ticket at home. ``Don't worry," sympathetic, respectful railroad clerk said, ``We trust you, Justice Holmes. Just get on the train, and mail us a ticket later." ``Thank you, young man," Holmes replied, ``but that's not the problem. I've forgotten where I'm going." So where are we to go this evening?

Pause for a moment at the door of this figurative media room we are about to enter and look around. Just for the moment, now, don't focus only on the technology. We'll come back to that. But think about this media room that we are about to step into. You see a noisy, intense, fast-moving, sometimes combative climate. Raised voices are the norm. The lines between information and entertainment often blur, and nobody would be surprised to find a compact three-minute national radio news summary that begins with events on the streets of Baghdad and ends three minutes later on the sheets of Paris Hilton. I didn't know if that sentence would work, but I wrote it. (*laughter*)

Our culture of celebrity reaches unerringly into journalism. Infotainment, as it's called, is all around us, as are charges of bias in whatever direction. We are by one view infected and indeed misled by a liberal media elite. Another view finds us such tools of the Bush administration that we can't or won't tell the truth about what's happening in Iraq. And the old economic givens are not so given any more. Newspaper circulation is flat or down; some publishers are experimenting with flashy free tabloids aimed at younger readers; the

ultimate Internet business model remains unclear, although the Internet's reach looms larger every day, and most newspapers have websites as adjuncts to their print products. Meanwhile, in another area of economic change, the television networks continue to lose audience share to cable in a pretty steady slide; publicly held media companies have stock prices and shareholders to think about, not just viewers and readers; and playing out behind all of this have been great waves of social change, of international danger for journalists, and to come to the specific focus of this evening, waves of technological invention that have changed almost everything connected to the media.

A university setting is of course the right place to try to find some perspective. Part of that perspective on the media requires that we keep in mind that for decades now emotional and divisive issues have dominated our landscape, and therefore, necessarily, our media. We have been the messenger of tumult and change, and that doesn't have too much to do with technology. As I look around the room, I recognize that many people here were born in the 1980s or perhaps the late 1970s, but consider with me what our country and its media have been through in, historically speaking, the short period of the decades after World War II. We've had a few enormous social revolutions: civil rights and the women's movement, to name only two. The assassination of President Kennedy, and then Bobby and Martin Luther King struck down; Vietnam and its immense political upheaval; domestically, the shock of Watergate and the social changes that have transformed so much of our society: marriage, home life, campuses, the churches. There's more that I could mention, and except for Vietnam, that's mostly a domestic list. Never mind what's been happening in the rest of the world, from which all of you could readily create another long list on which one would find, among other items, terrorism, the continuing turmoil in the Middle East, the collapse of Communism, and other events of that scope. So we've found ourselves in the news business at a tumultuous and challenging time. And superimposed on all that, or if you prefer the image of lurking behind it, is the march of technology, which has increased the velocity and the volume of everything. Keep that word velocity in mind. It's kind of central, I think, to what we're talking about tonight.

I say to the journalism students in the audience that you are coming into the business, if you come in, at a fascinating time. If you

think of the news business, the business of news and information, as a kind of mosaic out here behind me, almost everything in that mosaic is moving. The technological leaps of the last few years have changed how we gather and how we report, how we distribute, and not at all least, how the audience receives and consumes news information. And how the audience comments on it, and argues about it, and indeed even sometimes writes about it – writes news and information itself, or writes about it – without the mediation of big or even small news organizations. So one clear consequence of the new information environment is that we all have much more information and opinion – sometimes angry opinion – to choose from. Let it all bloom, I say. That's what the first amendment is about.

But I do not agree with those who say that in the new environment, objectivity and fairness have no place. Indeed, I think there's a growing need for places to which a reader or a viewer or a listener can go with a reasonable expectation of as true and fair an account as conscientious people can prepare. Economic changes have brought not just consolidation but mega-mergers, not just cooperation among media forms but convergence as a business model. For broadcasters, the regulatory environment of just a few decades ago is a relic of history, and as you know from the developments of the last few months, the FCC and Congress and the White House are in a debate about even further deregulation of our broadcasting industry.

Let me try to bring this picture of technology home with a microscopic view of the march of technology in one wire service that I know a little bit about. Now I'm going to have to ask the students in the audience to play along with me a little bit and accept the idea that if I talk about something that happened in the 1960s, I'm really not talking about Thomas Jefferson's day or George Washington's, or even Abraham Lincoln's, but almost contemporary history.

The day I walked into AP's newsroom for the first time, Monday, July 31, 1967, we were taking in news from our bureau in Saigon, South Vietnam, at thirty words a minute. And if you are familiar with that old clickety-clack teletype, that means news was coming in click, click, click, like that. Our stories were transmitted by telegraphers punching paper tape, direct descendants of the Morse code operators of earlier years. The day I left that newsroom, Friday evening, May 31, 2003, ten thousand words a minute was our standard speed, and we

could go far faster. Just a few years ago in the early 1990s, it took us thirty minutes to send one color photograph to the newspapers we serve. Thirty minutes. Today, it takes six or seven seconds. With satellite and Internet technology, we can create an instant bureau virtually anywhere on earth, a far cry from the decades during which we routinely commandeered football stadium bathrooms and their running water to use for chemical-based darkrooms for our photographers. Our photographers today can carry digital cameras, laptops, cell phones. A picture snapped can be just seconds away from a picture transmitted in six or seven seconds. Our international video operations, headquartered in London, have just gone digital. And all of this that I've described in the last minute or so is a parochial AP-centered view of the world as seen from 242 news bureaus across the globe, more bureaus in more places than anybody else. That the only commercial I'm going to give you tonight. And that's but a fragment of the technological revolution in communications.

Now, of course, this is the United States of America. We live in the most advanced nation in the world in Internet and other new communications technologies, right? No. Well then, we must be second, right? No. According to the United Nations International Telecommunications Union, the United States ranked eleventh in the world when it comes to access to the Internet and other communications technologies. We, with all our phones, our PDAs, and our beepers and our blogs and our Googles and our smoking guns and all the rest, are eleventh. Again, think of the velocity that I spoke of a few minutes ago.

It would be a mistake of course, to leave you with the impression that Americans are not in the game. Obviously we are. A recent survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 31% of Americans are what they labeled "highly tech savvy," people for whom the Internet and cell phones and handhelds are more indispensable, they say, than TV and landline connections. And as you well know, the number of wired homes has been increasing dramatically, as has high-speed broadband connectivity and of course the wireless technology that lets you sip and study in Starbucks or just about anywhere on some campuses. The most recent figures I've seen say that the percentage of U.S. households that are online grew from 1998 to 2001 from 26% to 50.5%. You can see what a rapid increase

that is.

I'm trying to compress here into about thirty minutes what your new Department of Media Studies and Digital Culture sprinkles across forty-five courses. So let's go back to technology and news and look from the consumer's perspective. Once again, velocity. We can't forget the impact of technology on the consumer, the audience, the people who are all but overwhelmed as targets of all-news cable (global, national, and local), all-news radio, news on cell phones and digital assistants, headlines on screens in elevators, high-decibel talk radio, televised shout shows, entertainment programs that masquerade as news, and news that sometimes masquerades as entertainment. And let's not leave out the newspapers, which reach about 110 million Americans every day. It's little wonder, isn't it, that an overwhelmed public sometimes seems to say, as if with one voice, "Enough already with you media." You know sometimes we like to say that the Internet finally frees us from the constraints of space, from the tyranny of just how much type will fit on the printed page, or how many lines will fit into the script for a newscast. But we forget at our peril that the reader or listener, whatever the media form of his or her choice, doesn't have unlimited time.

What does all that add up to? Well, for one thing, we know that this flood of information is here to stay, and there's no point in thinking about how we're going to cut it down. It's here to stay. The growth of some media organizations into giant publicly held corporations, merged or unmerged, is also a reality we are not going to see reversed. It's difficult to see any significant change in the pattern of flattening, at best, newspaper circulation and declining network share of the viewing audience, and it's hard to see a future in which the Internet is not a larger factor in news and commerce than it is today.

In a summary like this, we should take note of some interesting Internet developments. The *Wall Street Journal* made history a few weeks ago when it reported a 16% circulation gain by virtue of its counting for the first time in the history of newspaper circulation 290,000 paid Internet subscribers, giving the paper a daily count of 2.1 million. Not to be outdone, Gannett's *USA Today*, which reports 2.2 million print copies said, OK, if that's how you want to count, we're at 6.2 million and counting. But that top-dog jousting aside, the development of counting this circulation is significant in looking at the

impact of new media, of technology on the media. The development is significant because it starts the industry toward counting unduplicated paid online circulation as real flesh and blood readers. The *Journal* has, of course, been charging its online readers for some time, but slowly we're seeing more newspapers move, or at least try to move, to a model something like that. Now whether this is going to succeed for something other than a specialty publication like the *Journal*, catering to its upper-business audience, remains to be seen, but for sure we are going to see more testing in this direction.

A prediction that the future of online journalism will include paid content came just the other day from Jack Fuller, a very thoughtful man and an old friend of mine. He's president of Tribune Publishing. He told a meeting of the Online News Association that "I think everyone will move at least in part to a paid model, a model paid by the reader." Then he went on, in what could be a mantra for your studies here of new media: "What we need to do in confronting changes in media," he said, "is experiment, assess the results, and adapt. And then do that over and over and over again. We will," Fuller said, "experiment our way to the future," which is very much the mood in the industry. A slow but clear trend is for newspapers to offer an exact replica, electronically, of the newspaper for a fee. I think that there are only about a couple of hundred across the world doing that, a small group so far. But I think we'll see more newspapers try it. This is another example of the impact of technology on the creation and consumption of media. Yet another interesting development of the moment sees online advertising sales moving up a bit. At \$6 billion or so last year, it's still only about 5% of total advertising spending in the United States, so it's not a huge piece of it. But the trend is important to note.

Now the Internet itself has brought so many changes that it's possible to talk here about only a few briefly. It's become both a universal means of distribution and a prime regular source of news for some of the audiences that we are trying to reach. And it has become a fast and flexible reportorial asset. It can shorten into minutes, even seconds, a research effort that pre-Internet would have taken a reporter or an editor hours, if not days, if it had been undertaken at all. And the internationally capable satellite telephone has made instant communication possible from the scene virtually anywhere on earth.

The Internet has brought us the world of the blogger, and of the instant news feed, like one reporter who used the Internet to raise \$14,334 from 320 Internet readers to pay for a reporting trip to Iraq to cover the war. *Business Week* reported that former *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan raised \$100,00 this way to support his writing. So the Internet has become an enormous new information force in all directions: gathering news, reporting it, commenting on it, banding together to praise or condemn, and all of it at speeds that truly change the game.

Think of the awful crack CBS worked itself into with the bio-pic on the Reagans. The fuss had barely started, mostly from people who hadn't seen the show, by the way, before Republicans set up a website called RealReagan and former Republican Congressional staff members started a site called boycottcbs.com. A *New York Times* editorial and a *Wall Street Journal* column had it about right, I think, when in almost identical words they asked, "What was CBS thinking when it got itself into this mess?" The network now finds itself with no place to hide. From left and from right, they are pilloried for doing the show, they are pilloried for canceling the show, for not really canceling it, for letting Clinton groupie Barbra Streisand's husband star in it, for dishonoring the legacy of the sainted Edward R. Murrow, for producing something Murrow would never have produced, for canceling something Murrow would never have canceled. It goes on and on, and as a media manager, that makes my head hurt. There's no place to hide. And by the way, let's not forget that November was sweeps month, which is what brought you Jessica Lynch, Elizabeth Smart, and the Reagans.

Now, in this sophisticated audience here, I know we all know that those three – Smart, Lynch, and the Reagans – were entertainment programs, done completely independently of the news divisions of the three networks. But come out with me to a street here in Fairfield and let's see how many people we stop who know that, or who respect the distinction that that represents to us. It's the news media again, sensationalizing, grabbing for ratings, showing their liberal bias, or caving in to conservatives, depending on where your sentiment is. These so-called docudramas, with their invented dialogue and dramatizations, all for the sake of storytelling, are perilous ventures that I think risk damage to the credibility of all of us. It may just be the old

objective AP newsman in me, but they've always made me nervous.

I've said very little about events and issues abroad. Iraq would, of course, top the list of current international stories, and I'll take a minute just briefly to describe it for you, because I think perhaps particularly some of the students might be interested in a brief glimpse at what covering this story today means to an outfit like AP. We have a staff of some fifty people who live in and work from the Palestine Hotel, in the center of Baghdad. You've heard the hotel mentioned in news reports I'm sure. The hotel is within a protected zone that houses other major news organizations, such as Reuters and CNN, and other foreign companies that are operating in Iraq. Our staff is a mix of locals, of staff people from elsewhere in the world, and Americans. Around the clock, seven days a week, they produce words, still pictures, radio broadcasts, and video – video for more than 300 network customers around the world – in total, for a customer target of some 20,000 news outlets.

You know, without my belaboring it, that it's dangerous work. It's also very frustrating, with the simplest task sometimes taking hours, aside from the danger. Say you have a story about oil production, and you need a comment from the oil ministry. OK. The local domestic phone system is still poor, though it's improving, and we've reported that it's improving. So you send a staffer over to the oil ministry, where he or she might have to stand in line for hours, waiting for security checks to be completed. Then once inside, you wander the halls in search of the right person. That little episode can take three, even four hours. When there's an incident – which I recognize is a tame word to describe some of what's been happening – in those difficult moments, coverage gets even more difficult. The troops are suspicious. It's very hard for them to know who's legitimate and who's not, and we've had several incidents where our people have been detained and/or had their equipment seized.

Last month, several news organizations, including the Associated Press managing editor's association, sent letters of protest to the Pentagon about these confrontations between American troops and American reporters. In your heart, you want to assume that everybody's trying to do the best they can in an extremely dangerous and difficult situation. You know that the death toll for journalists in Iraq has been high: nineteen dead since the fighting started. And just

last month, the World Association of Newspapers reported that so far this year, fifty-one journalists have been killed on the job or because of their work, five more dead this year so far than in all of 2002. In fact, the whole decade of the nineties was one of the most dangerous for journalists in many parts of the world. AP alone lost eight people in a nine-year span, an enormous sacrifice from a single news company. We and other international news companies have stepped up hazardous duty training for our people. We equip them with armored cars and flak jackets and protective helmets. Nobody takes these assignments without knowing the risks. These assignments are, of course, all voluntary, and it is a courageous service of these people, all in the name of trying to cover the news for you, some news which, yes, makes its way into the *Connecticut Post* or any other paper that you read. That sacrifice and service are often drowned out in a noisy media culture that I spoke of at the start. I'm proud to stand here today and quietly call attention to what those people do.

Elsewhere journalists in Malaysia, Zimbabwe, Morocco, parts of the former Soviet Union, and in other places in the world that I could name, struggle bravely against government control, sometimes to the loss of their lives, and freedom's voices are raised in United Nations' forums where ominous threats are heard now about governments moving to control the Internet. The concept of the press as tool of government, as tool of government policy, dies hard. The head of an East bloc news agency from behind the Iron Curtain once gave me a wonderful snapshot of the change he was experiencing as communism fell in his part of the world. "I never realized what a tough job you have," he said. "You have to make decisions. Before, we sent out what the government said to send out. Now we have to think and decide, and that's hard work." It's an interesting comment about something we take so much for granted in our journalism.

I had an opportunity to travel in eastern Europe shortly after the Berlin Wall fell. It was simply thrilling to meet with the suddenly free journalists there, trying to figure out what to do with this freedom. They weren't sure. Also, they didn't know how they were going to replace the government subsidies that had basically propped up all of the media in these countries. That was a trip, by the way, in which I was able to pay a visit that you might be interested in. I visited the justice ministry in the Czech republic, to look into the case of an AP

correspondent who had been held for two years as an alleged spy during the darkest days of the Cold War in what was then Czechoslovakia – it's now the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Newly free, they said I could examine his file, and there I saw, in minute detail, the plan to frame him, and how Czechoslovakian authorities carried it out. Still in the file were letters his wife had written him which had never been given to him. With thoughts of the later-day Terry Anderson kidnapping in mind, I could only imagine AP's ordeal and our proud correspondent's ordeal at the time that was happening.

I was asked a question earlier about the embedding of reporters, an important topic to discuss while we're trying to sort out the impact of technology on coverage and the impact of that on the people who perceive and receive our news. Embedding is a journalistically controversial thing. I can only tell you my own feeling about it. At the height, we had thirty-two AP people embedded on land and sea, more than anyone else. For sure it wasn't perfect. In war, what is? But overall we thought it worked. Certainly we were able to tell the story of the war from the viewpoint of the fighting men and women in a way that was all but impossible in the Gulf War. It *was* impossible in the Gulf War, for the most part, a decade ago. That some people in the Pentagon probably thought that this would be a good thing for the military is no doubt true. But I don't think that destroys the exercise. Critics are right to worry about an excess of camaraderie, but journalists and soldiers have been through this before. Read some of the World War II coverage if you doubt me. It's not an insurmountable problem. I'm told that at the outset, the idea wasn't universally popular in the Pentagon, where many of the present senior officers were junior officers at the time of Vietnam, and they brought very strong anti-press views, based on their feelings about the coverage of that conflict. So, as I said, we felt that embedding worked for that aspect of the story. But AP also maintained unembedded – it's a terrible coinage, but there it is – reporters and a substantial war reporting staff, all working to assemble the most accurate picture we could.

I want to close with a few words before we go to the questions I hope I've triggered in your mind. A few more words aimed directly at the media and digital culture students in the audience. Our business needs well-trained, talented young people of conscience to work in the exciting time that I've tried to sketch a little bit of for you in the time

tonight. I hope you will leave Sacred Heart literate in all forms of media, and aware of the great challenge and responsibility that are fundamental to the career you have chosen if you choose journalism.

My very last words will be an indication of my liberation from the constraints of being AP's boss and serving everybody, and I will share with you, with apologies to David Letterman, my top ten journalist peeves. Now these may not be our most serious problems. But these things drive me nuts. Giggling local news anchors, who find a cause for hilarity in the weather broadcast after they lead the broadcast with three gruesome but minor crime stories that are leading only because they have footage to go with them. I hate it when a newspaper loses track of a story, and drops a day's developments, so you lose your sense of what's going on. Third, the endless rerunning of twenty-two seconds of the same news footage, because a producer thinks that that's better than simply showing the anchor talking to you. The shout shows, where wind and noise rule. Reporters who feel it's OK to editorialize on some of those shows on the weekend, or in the paper on the weekend, but ask you to believe that Monday to Friday they are as objective as could be. Picture captions in the newspaper that tell you what your eyes have already told you. You know: local man basks in sunshine at beach. Well, you kind of knew that before you went to the caption, didn't you? You've seen it all a hundred times. Anonymous sources allowed to argue and attack in print and on the air, without the courage of their names. Stories that run on and on because no editor had the courage to tell a reporter to put a sock on it. Cheery morning show hosts and hostesses, no matter how gruesome the news of the day. For all of my life, morning has been a serious business. And finally, any story that carries a comment about anything from O.J.

Amid all the technological change, the economic pressures, the intense ideological debate, the distractions of a culture of celebrity, I leave you with the thought that there is a vital place in this stream for fair, independent, objective journalism, for journalism that serves society by helping people understand, and one that helps its audience to enjoy a little bit too. A free and independent press, ennobled by the First Amendment and supported in its mission by a well-informed citizenry, is a goal worthy of every ounce of our energy.