

The Acceleration of News Cycles

by Brandon Keim

February 2006

The study of journalism's history, like any historical pursuit, ought to illuminate modern arrangements of life. While considering topics for this paper, however, I found myself frustrated, no matter my angle of approach, by the problem of defining precisely where journalism fits in the communications ecology of contemporary America.

In this vast informational body where each of us develops amidst friends, family and two hundred and sixty million strangers, arranged like so many cells in an elaborate scaffolding of community and workplace and industry, suspended in a rich nutrient broth of conversation and broadcast and webcast and telecast and email and bartalk and late-night pillowtalk, what does journalism do? In a map of this body social, what would light up when a story hit the evening news and like a firing neuron triggered stories that set off other stories, ideas floating in search of receptors in the public mind? Would we see a system malfunctioning, its signals erratic and lost in transit, or one that has simply taken on a new form, no better or worse than in the heady days of our republic's founding?

Even trying to imagine the parameters and inputs of such a model is literally mind-boggling, perhaps better suited to a Borges than a historian, much less a history student. The analogy of brain and body is fitting; despite the best efforts of modern science, we still have but the haziest understanding of why we laugh or love or prefer green to blue. One might, however, at least characterize the status of some essential condition which proscribes a limit of our social metabolism. This parameter is the news cycle — specifically, the national news cycle, consideration of which may play to our vanity as journalists, but at least provides a place to start.

The term "news cycle" is, unfortunately, deeply imprecise, referring to several phenomena that are interconnected but deserve to be distinguished from one another. There is a rotational aspect to the term, referring to how long stories are featured before being replaced, as well as the somewhat more abstract lifespan of an aggregate story within the public and media consciousness — how long, for example, the attention of journalists and the public lingers on Monica Lewinsky or the Enron scandal. Most importantly, the news cycle also refers to the set of practices by which the contents of news are selected, delivered and consumed — a set of practices which influence, and are influenced by, the cycle's rotational aspects.

It is taken for granted that we now reside within the so-called 24-hour news cycle, a phenomenon birthed by live satellite broadcast uplinks and, more importantly, by cable television news, which replaced the traditional dissemination of news at appointed times — via print in the morning, and television in the evening — with its dissemination at all times of day and night, necessitating its constant and accelerated production. Some argue that the 24-hour news cycle has been so intensified that it is better labeled a perpetual news cycle, in which aspects of the

former — its equation of analysis and editorializing with fact, the substitution of punditry for reporting, a relaxation of hallowed journalistic standards and a fragmented obsession with the momentary — dominate and threaten to destroy journalism.

The difference between the 24-hour and perpetual news cycles is essentially semantic. Whatever one names it — I prefer the former — certain elements are indeed unprecedented, in degree if not nature, and dangerous. It is important, however, to place the 24-hour news cycle at the end, though certainly not the conclusion, of a historical continuum in which they have become shorter and more rapid as communications technologies have evolved.

Journalism was once conveyed solely by a single medium, the printed page, composed of information carried by hand and mouth. Early newspapers often contained accounts of events that took place months earlier; stories were arranged in the order of their arrival. While the papers' heavy reliance on advertising, as well as editorial and political content provided by press owners, prefigured later commercial and content trends, they were essentially pre-modern.

In 1837, Samuel Morse patented the electrical telegraph, permitting information to be sent at near-instantaneous speed over long distances. James Carey has noted that the telegraph's introduction has received far less attention than deserved, for it prefigured both the technology and the influences that are considered modern.¹ The quantity of information tapped, dash by dash and dot by dot, was a trickle compared to what is now conducted by satellite and fiber-optic line, but the telegraph still compressed space and time towards the instant. The owners of the railroad track which conducted those electronic messages, as well as the machines that encoded and decoded them, gained the power to select and shape the news — not an absolute power, perhaps, but still dominant.² The organization formed to gather and transmit news became the Associated Press, and its main competitor became Reuters.

Print was soon joined by radio, which NYU media theorist and historian Mitchell Stephens describes as the next significant transformation in journalism.³ Beginning with a humble Mexican station broadcasting from Tijuana into Los Angeles and San Diego in the late 1930's, radio was the first form of mass communication to which one could turn at any moment and expect a fairly regular briefings.⁴ Rather than writing for the eye, radio journalists wrote for the ear, striving to compress even further the brevity and efficiency of telegraphically-carried print journalism, where per-word transmission prices had discouraged the ornate prose of early newspapers.⁵ Radio news was compressed to fit a smaller format, with some of what may have warranted coverage inevitably jettisoned to meet the needs of a medium so intrinsically less information-dense than text.⁶ This style would eventually become the news radio so perfectly embodied, to pick an especially infamous station, by New York's WINS. "Give us twenty-two minutes," asks their slogan, "and we'll give you the world."

Though radio news continued to gain prominence — and its significance, in an America rapidly reconfiguring itself around the automobile, is probably underestimated — print remained the nation's primary news source. In the early- and mid-twentieth century, people read newspapers with a universal avidity that today is found in the habit of watching entertainment television. Most communities had at least one newspaper, many had more, and new editions were printed throughout the day as well as in the morning.⁷ In terms news production rates, the news cycle had certainly accelerated from its newsweekly roots. While printing editions at multiple intervals was not equivalent to the presently incessant production of news, the wire service infrastructure anticipated it; reporters for the Associated Press and similar organizations filed stories throughout the day and, to a much lesser degree, the night.⁸

Print remained the dominant source of journalism into the latter half of the twentieth century, when it and radio were joined by television news. Early TV journalism was delivered, like print, at precise intervals, with special attention paid to the early-evening network broadcasts. Leaving aside questions about the intrinsic effects of television as a medium on minds and relationships, TV soon proved itself an effective journalistic medium. Coverage of McCarthy-era red-baiting and the Civil Rights Movement prompted changes in policy and culture, and that of John F. Kennedy's death underscored TV's communal and emotive potential. However, it was not until the mid-1970's that television exerted a fundamentally novel influence on the news cycle.

Portable videotape was first used in the 1976 presidential campaign, and in coming years shrunk the gap between news events and deadlines.⁹ Reporters, editors and producers rushed stories to air, often increasing the chance of mistakes and, in certain cases, making nuanced, substantive coverage difficult. Portable satellite uplinks allowed live coverage from around the globe, placing even more emphasis on instantaneity — and the live experience, which however mediated has always been alluring, became even more seductive on television.¹⁰ These changes were not necessarily welcome. "Putting someone on the air while an event is unfolding is clearly a technological tour de force," said Ted Koppel, "but it is an impediment, not an aid, to good journalism. To simply train a camera on a complicated event is not journalism, any more than taking someone out on a boat and showing them a stretch of the coastline is cartography."¹¹

The next historical phase, which shaped journalism into a form fully recognizable as modern, is difficult to arrange chronologically. It contains several phenomena that took place simultaneously and synergistically. The first of these, and most often cited, was the emergence of cable television news. Amidst telecommunications deregulation that would expand the reach of cable television from ten million subscribers in 1975 to forty million just ten years later, media mogul Ted Turner launched the Cable News Network in 1980.¹² Initially derided by network television journalists, it survived and eventually thrived amidst a rapidly changing cultural and economic terrain.

In tandem with the emergence of CNN, the growth of the entertainment industry,

effected a subtle but significant shift in the minds of citizens: they became media consumers, with journalism just one in a vast array of entertainment choices. Of course, it is not as if movies and TV shows and books had never existed before, but they suddenly existed — television choices in particular — in an unprecedented profusion, all of which competed for audience attention and, as would soon become more apparent, audience money.¹³ News organizations were also owned to an increasing and equally unprecedented degree, by an ever-smaller number of corporations, who benefited from mid-1980's easing of regulations and — in a way that is harder to quantify but just as important — were shaped by an economic and political culture that favored the aggregations of commercial entities into behemoths of a size unseen in nearly a century.

The Disney Corporation, for example, now owns or has significant stake in no fewer than fourteen book publishing imprints, fifteen magazines, one major television network, twelve cable networks, ten television stations in large population centers, thirteen international networks, four television production and distribution companies, eight movie studios and sixty-seven radio stations — to say nothing of its internet sites, music labels, video game studios, theme parks and sports teams.¹⁴ In such an environment, it was inevitable that ownership would conceive of journalism more and more as a means to a bottom-line end, with ratings acquiring the incontrovertibility of gospel.¹⁵

It is not, of course, as if the profit motive was novel. Newspaper advertisements are as old as newspapers themselves. But the long-fruitful tension between profit and the public interest, which had provided a beneficial balance between, so to speak, medicine and candy, was dramatically decided.¹⁶ Market logic pervaded news production with a near-absolute ubiquity — and it was within this environment that cable news and other producers of journalism were forced to compete. Cable survived by adopting journalistic practices that ultimately affected their competitors, many of whom responded — and not necessarily willingly — by mimicking those behaviors.

It is in reference to this and subsequent periods that we encounter mention of the 24-hour news cycle, a phrase which occurs no fewer than 16,800,000 times on Google — about one-fifth the pages returned by "Jesus Christ." There is, as mentioned earlier, a rotational aspect to the term: after the passage of a day and night, it is expected that the primary newsmakers will produce a wave of stories building upon and replacing those of the previous day. At the same time, however, it is perpetual; stories on cable television, and now on our digital information networks, are introduced constantly, with only a tiny allowance made for sleep. Like radio, cable television news did not appear at scheduled intervals throughout the day, but was always on; unlike radio, it became a primary news source, and had considerably greater influence.

The cycle of breaking news followed by response and analysis, which had once taken days, was compressed by cable news into a matter of hours. As a result, stories are rushed onto air — and, in order to compete, into print — before they are ready, and often before the facts have been authenticated.¹⁷ A feeding frenzy

ensues; newsmakers mob one story, and as soon as another appears — which, at a moment when novelty rules, takes less and less time — they jump to the next, leaving the first unexplored.¹⁸ It is a behavior that existed in the latter days of wire service reporting, and was accelerated exponentially by the influence of television.

At the same time, the vastness of the 24-hour television 'news hole' — the time and space that needs to be filled — and the fact that talking heads are cheaper than quality reportage resulted in a news culture dominated by punditry and analysis, as well as a narrow focus on a limited number of stories, particularly those involving the ever-appealing themes of celebrity, sex and violence.¹⁹ This too both predated and was exacerbated by television. As Michael Schudson wrote, "CNN's ratings would soar and slump with the ebb and flow of events: Americans rarely turned in unless there was a blockbuster event like a war or a verdict in a high-profile crime case" — and during the particularly high-profile O.J. Simpson case, cable newsmakers learned that such "news" was essentially a free story which could be encapsulated with a courtroom camera feed, a reporter standing outside to repeat what happened, and a panel of guest "experts" telepresented into the studio.^{20, 21}

Such an approach, naturally, discouraged substantive news coverage. "Because the pattern of the modern press is to swoop in, set up camera stands and then try to fill the time and hold an audience," wrote Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel after the 2000 Presidential election, "the press is oddly reactive, depending on news conferences and statements by campaign officials. The never-ending news cycle gives 'reporters' little time to actually go out and report. So we see a tendency to jump on small, incremental events and treat them as if they were momentous."²² By the late 1990's, when MSNBC and Fox News joined CNN, the hallmarks of modern cable news were firmly established: distantly qualified talking heads trafficking unsubstantiated allegations and scarcely informed opinion, so-called breaking updates from scenes which hadn't changed since the last report a half hour earlier, and a near-monomaniacal focus on the scandal of the moment. The archetypal example is the execrable coverage of President Bill Clinton's sexual involvement with intern Monica Lewinsky, which Kovach and Rosenstiel examined in their seminal *Warp Speed: American in the Age of the Mixed Media Culture*.

"This particular crisis," wrote David Halberstam in the introduction to *Warp Speed*, "has been coming for more than a decade, as the power of cable television and the effect of it on the mainstream media have gradually changed the natures of what constitutes television broadcasting, giving us an ever escalating diet of tabloid reporting. . . . It was simply that in the past year the new media culture reached deeper into the nation's bloodstream, and more traditional barriers were dropped at even higher levels in the profession."²³

Mainstream coverage of the Lewinsky case embodied all the worst aspects of the accelerated news cycles that attended the rise of cable journalism: the casual passage of rumor and allegation, the disempowerment of journalists in the face of incessant deadlines, a favoring of argument over reporting, a blockbuster mentality. The story broke on a Saturday, after *Newsweek* had deemed it too poorly sourced to publish, on the website of gossipmonger Matt Drudge; it was discussed, and

therefore validate, on the Sunday news shows; by Tuesday the headlines read, "CLINTON ACCUSED OF URGING AIDE TO LIE; STARR PROBES WHETHER PRESIDENT TOLD WOMAN TO DENY ALLEGED AFFAIRS TO JONES LAWYERS" — and that was based only on "sources close to the investigation."²⁴ By then the story had already dominated the mediasphere, and on Wednesday night Ted Koppel, having apparently changed his mind about training cameras on events and calling it journalism, proclaimed that the crisis "may come down to whether oral sex does or does not constitute adultery."²⁵

Three weeks into the scandal, the Committee for Concerned Journalists surveyed network news, newspaper and cable reporting. They found that more than two-fifths of all reportage in the first six days was not factual, but instead commentary and punditry, and more than a tenth was either attributed to other news organizations or unverified — in short, more than half of the news was simply not news. "While we know of no other story that has been analyzed quite this way to offer a statistical comparison," wrote Kovach and Rosenstiel, "we think it is fair to assume that such levels of commentary and repetition of other's work are unprecedented."²⁶

So it went, with minor ebbs and flows, for the next twelve months — and sense it never stopped.

When I first conceived of this paper, I had hoped to answer, after contemplating the acceleration of news cycles and their effect upon news content, one basic question: whether Watergate — that iconic event in the history of journalism and American politics, a name encompassing both the initial robbery and the larger extent of Richard Nixon's police-state project — would have the same outcome if covered today. Implicit in the response to this question, I thought, would also be the answers to another question: whether by focusing on megastories and elsewhere moving ever-more-quickly to the next story, stories that deserve coverage are ignored, while those that are covered are forgotten too quickly to have any effect. In short, I wanted to know whether the link between journalism and the public interest is broken.

The Watergate question, however, does not lend itself to rigid analysis. There are too many variables to compare it with some contemporary story of equivalent heft. Answering it is a matter of opinion — and, among the historians and journalists with whom I spoke, that opinion is divided. Likewise, whether important stories are ignored or passed over too quickly would require exhaustive and as-yet-unperformed data analysis. Until then, the answer is also a matter of opinion — though, more troublingly, there seems to be a wider agreement that this is, in fact, the case.²⁷

However, while the pressures of the 24-hour news cycle are corrosive, the situation is perhaps not so bleak as it seems. For all that cycle predominates, it is not hegemonic nor wholly trivial. National Public Radio, which has largely eschewed the 24-hour news cycle, is more popular than ever.²⁸ Magazines still have power; testimony to this is the effect of the *New Yorker's* investigation into use of torture by U.S. troops. Coverage of the incompetent handling of Hurricane Katrina was widely acclaimed, and now, months later, continues. The most widely covered news story of

the last year is the war in Iraq, and in recent months coverage has been dominated by belated but thorough investigations into ethical transgressions by those who led the country into war.²⁹ Indeed, the mainstream media is enjoying something of a mini- renaissance, displaying more skepticism and courage than at any time since the attacks of September 11, 2001. The internet — or, to be precise, high-bandwidth electronic transfer of archived information — has in some ways created an alternative news cycle, in which the flame of stories that seemed dead burns quietly until the mainstream press returns to them.

By enabling the coordination of far-flung communities, the internet has also made it possible to ask another question: whether the mechanism of change, which I feared broken, has simply mutated. Perhaps, just as news cycles have always been in flux, so too have the means by which the public interest is maintained. Perhaps change originates, in a nation of two hundred and sixty million people, not in massive, concerted effort, but instead in the focus of small, interested groups. Perhaps it originates in some way as yet unknown. If so, those new forms of change will require an understanding 24-hour news cycle and its history. Once the behaviors of that cycle are understood, and it is seen in its cultural, economic and technological context, its effects might be mitigated, and journalism someday reclaimed.

FOOTNOTES

1 James W. Carey, "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph," in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. New York, 1990.

2 Paul Starr, "The First Wire," in *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*. New York, 2004.

3 Telephone conversation with Mitchell Stephens, NYU media theorist and historian.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Telephone conversation with David Abrahamson, Northwestern University journalism professor and historian.

8 Telephone conversation with Steve Isaacs, Columbia University journalism professor and historian.

9 Michael Schudson and Susan E. Tifft, "The Press," in *American Journalism in Historical Perspective*. Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, editors. Oxford University Press, 2005.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Museum of Cable Television website. <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/U/htmlU/unitedstatesc/unitedstatesc.htm>

13 Telephone conversation with Mitchell Stephens.

14 *Columbia Journalism Review* website. <http://www.cjr.org/tools/owners/disney.asp>

15 Telephone conversation with David Abrahamson.

16 Ibid.

17 Telephone conversation with Rem Rieder, *Editor of the American Journalism Review*.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Michael Schudson and Susan E. Tifft, "The Press," in *American Journalism in Historical Perspective*. Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, editors. Oxford University Press, 2005.

21 Telephone conversation with David Abrahamson.

22 Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, "Hearing Too Much and Learning Too Little." *New York Times*, November 17, 2000.

23 Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Warp Speed: America in the Age of the Mixed Media Culture*. Century Foundation Press, 1999.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 In addition to the aforementioned telephone conversations, I also spoke with David Thorburn, director of MIT's Communications Forum; journalism historian William David Sloan; and Jeffrey Dvorkin, National Public Radio's ombudsman.

28 Telephone conversation with Jeffrey Dvorkin.

29 *The Tyndall Report*. <http://www.tyndallreport.com/yearinreview.php3>