Head: Sharing the News: The Transformation of Journalism in the Digital Age.

Deck: Bringing a sharing economy to the newsroom is the most significant transformation wrought by the digital news revolution.

We know that the transformations wrought by revolutions often take decades to manifest. That will probably be true for the news revolution as well. Already, if we peer beneath and behind the frantic efforts of legacy media to simply stay alive, we can see the roots of a news economy that will look very different from the one we have today, one better in so many ways.

The media we think of as providing our daily news in the United States—TV stations like CBS and CNN, newspapers like the LA Times or Washington Post—arose in a competitive economy in which winning the distribution battle would lead to a monopoly over an audience. That economy provided so much profit that owners were able to invest in journalism while keeping their audiences entertained with sports, weather and happy talk.

The digital revolution—and particularly the rise of social media—has replaced the competitive economy with a sharing economy. In this new economy, audiences rather than publishers control what they see and hear, and share these stories with each other. Distribution is horizontal rather than vertical.

Most of the large corporate media have not fully understood this new economy, or If they do understand it, have opted to profit by offering infotainment rather than journalism. However, we see two important strands of the current ecosystem that are truly transformative and may point towards the future of news: the rise of community journalism and the growth of a network of shared content among niche outlets. As these two trends merge, journalism will be transformed.

**An Era of Competition**

The newspaper era was defined by competition. Each newspaper could reach only as far as its area of distribution, so it fought to gain a monopoly there. By the early twentieth century, most major cities had at least two major papers, a morning and an evening edition, battling for audience.

These battles over the newspaper business also drove editorial sensibilities. The watchword for early journalists was the “scoop.” Whoever got the story first could get more readers. The fight for the scoop led to such practices as “ambulance chasing,” as journalists rushed to find out where the nearest fight had taken place, who was involved, who was hurt.

In this competitive economy, breaking the news first won awards. To ensure that their journalists would get to the news first, the largest newspapers opened field offices not only within their own regions, but across the world. The only shared content they used was through a trusted third-party source, the Associated Press or Reuters, both of which promised to be completely neutral in the newspaper wars.

The advent of radio and then TV news did not change much. The Big Three television stations fought with each other for Nielsen shares, as did their local affiliates. Radio stations vied with each other to be first on the scene, the channel to which you would stay tuned as big stories unfolded. Whether local, regional, or national, each newsroom thought of itself as a fiefdom that needed to be protected and expanded.

The digital revolution changed all that.

**Digital Disruption—Moving from Competition to Sharing**

What makes the internet so revolutionary is that anything posted to the internet becomes accessible to anyone anywhere in the world. The video blog I post with my own personal musings can become an international sensation (e.g. [jennamarbles](https://www.youtube.com/user/jennamarbles/) ). The internet shatters fiefdoms, as newspapers quickly found when they tried to put paywalls around their content.

The biggest change this new revolution has wrought has come in the area of breaking news. Now, with the exception of government news, almost all stories are first broken by people who are not professional journalists. Anyone, anywhere with a smartphone becomes a journalist when they see something happening, snap a photo, and upload it to Twitter or Facebook. Breaking news stories from car crashes to oil leaks are mostly “broken” now by you and me, using our phones.

Social media in fact has become the key driver of all the news, the place where news is first produced and the place where it is consumed. A recent [study](http://pewrsr.ch/1M8rcq2) by the Pew Research Center shows that 63 percent of Facebook and Twitter users find their news on these social media. Increasingly, news organizations are discovering that no one goes to their “home” pages anymore. Instead, we find our news by listening to our friends, and then click through to the story page on a news organizations’ website.

News organizations that cling to the competitive model, hiding their content from these social sharers, are quickly losing readers and viewers. The new news economy is a sharing economy, in which news is created, distributed, and consumed by friends reaching out to other friends.

**Challenges of the Sharing Economy**

The new sharing economy has created a number of challenges for the news industry, all of them ultimately linked to the business of producing the news.

In the competitive economy, news organizations gained monopolies over distinct geographical areas, which gave them unfettered access to all the advertising dollars in those areas. In the new sharing economy, advertisers are turning mainly to social media, which is where most of the people are looking for their news. Advertising dollars flow to Google search and to Facebook, with even the biggest news sites a very distant third. Advertisers want big audiences, and audiences are no longer held captive by geographical distributions. So for news organizations that rely on advertising dollars, that has meant they must chase audiences.

The sad fact is that this chase for dollars has led many news organizations away from the kinds of news stories we associate most with professional journalism: deep investigative pieces, in-depth profiles and features, clear explainers and ambitious attempts to locate solutions to complex problems. Those kinds of pieces take time and money to produce, and don’t always appeal to mass audiences.

Over the past five years, the biggest news organizations have responded to this dismal set of economic facts by dismantling much of the infrastructure that made their journalism excel. National new providers including CBS, NBC, ABC, FOX, the LA Times, Washington Post and New York Times have cut both foreign and local bureaus. The number of working journalists has been [cut in half](http://www.niemanlab.org/2015/07/newsonomics-the-halving-of-americas-daily-newsrooms/) since 1990—from 56,900 to 32,900.

A serious result of these cutbacks has been a decay in local news reporting, as local news sites cannot compete with national ones, and national ones no longer see a reason to invest in local news. Areas that once had two or three major newspapers now may have none (viz Seattle). Areas that had thriving TV and radio news now find that the local news show is actually just a [rehash of national news](http://www.freepress.net/blog/2012/07/03/10-ways-tell-whether-your-local-news-has-been-outsourced), sent in via corporate headquarters. [News “deserts,”](https://michelleferrier.wordpress.com/category/media-deserts-project/) areas without any local news at all, are now growing.

Many had hoped that new “native” digital sites would emerge to replace these older institutions. That has not, by and large, happened. The one attempt at a digital network of local sites, Patch, failed miserably. On the national level, digital “natives” have not made as many inroads as one would have thought. The fact is, however, that eight of the top ten digital sites are run by legacy media. The only two digital “natives” on the list are Huffington Post and Buzzfeed.

A quick look at Buzzfeed and Huffpo show that these sites are not filling the hole left by legacy news media. Buzzfeed did not even begin as a site devoted to journalism, and infamously has [built its audience](http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/aug/11/21-things-you-need-to-know-about-buzzfeeds-success) via funny cat videos, lists, and quizzes. Huffington Post grew via aggregation and search engine optimization. It did expand into journalism briefly in 2013, but after being purchased by AOL a significant number of its reporters left. Said Peter Goodman, quoted in [Politico](http://www.capitalnewyork.com/article/media/2014/05/8545018/huffington-post-nine-years), "There is a widespread sense on the team that the HuffPost is no longer fully committed to original reporting; that in a system governed largely by metrics, deep reporting and quality writing weigh in as a lack of productivity," he wrote in the memo.

From the standpoint of mass media, the story of the digital revolution looks bleak.

**Opportunities Created by the Sharing Economy**

Ironically, what legacy news outlets and even most mass-media digital natives have not learned how to do in this new economy is to share. They understand that their audience shares content, and work hard to make sure that their content gets into that stream. All of these organizations now have hired whole departments of people who monitor social media, using complicated metrics to analyze what headlines, key words and photos make a post more “shareable.”

Yet what these outlets are not doing is actually working with members of the community or with each other to share in the production of their news content. For them, “sharing” is a business issue, a distribution issue, that dictates what content will look like and when it will appear. They don’t think of “sharing” as a whole new way to develop, research, write, and produce new stories.

Yet, it is the creation of news via sharing that is the truly transformative aspect of the new news economy. This sharing is currently happening in two ways: via members of the community who are creating their own news, and via news outlets that have realized the benefits of working with each other.

**Community Journalism**

“Community journalist,” a phrase coined by Josh Stearns, is now widely used to describe a non-professional who breaks a news story, usually via a photo or video. If you attend protests or other events, you have probably seen a community journalist in action—or been one. In fact, breaking news, once the heart of journalism, has now been almost completely outsourced to the person on the street. See something happening? Snap a photo with your phone, upload it to twitter or facebook, and you’ve made news.

 #Ferguson and the #BlackLivesMatter movement could not have come into being without the deeply distressing videos bystanders made of police violence against black men and women. And not only made—for the first time ever, news content like this could be uploaded instantly to an untold number of viewers, making it possible for local news to reach an international community. Immigration reform and the movement for a $15 minimum wage have been sped along by community members posting video of protests from their phones. From school board meetings to car accidents to oil spills, what happens now can be told by anyone with a camera-equipped phone and a wi-fi connection.

The fact that anyone in a community can tell a news story has literally changed the face of journalism in the United States. It is a well-known (and much bemoaned) fact that most professional U.S. journalists are white. In 2013, for example an ASNE census of U.S. newsrooms found that only 12.37% of all professional journalists were people of color. Quote.

However, when we look at the pool of potential community journalists, we see much greater diversity. More blacks (70%) and Hispanics (71%) own smartphones than whites (61%), which means the playing field is level for people of color participating in newsgathering via phone.

News organizations always said they represented the public. Yet they never did, really. The voices of the poor, the oppressed, the minority, were rarely heard or seen in mainstream media. The rise of the community journalist changes all that. Now, if you know where to look, you can find the stories of any community. News finally has the potential to become truly democratic.

**Community and Independent Outlets**

Some news outlets do lift up these stories that the mass media never saw. Foreign language, Latino and Black newspapers voice the news of their respective communities. Issue-based outlets like Earth Island Journal, Ms. magazine, and Rethinking Schools dig deep into topics like environmental justice, gender, and education that mass outlets often slide right by. Outlets like this one, Kosmos Journal, and Yes! magazine, have focused on solutions to longstanding problems, while outlets like Mother Jones, PR Watch and In These Times have investigated corruption.

In the past, however, audiences for these outlets had no way of interacting with each other—nor did the editors, really. In a competitive news economy, in fact, many of these outlets fought each other to “break” stories, even though they really had no competing business interests. By staying focused on their own content, within their own silos, both news producers and news consumers lost out on seeing the bigger picture.

The new sharing economy has given these outlets the opportunity to become more intersectional in their approach to stories. This is where my organization, the Media Consortium, has been able to support them. We organize editorial collaborations around different issues so that editors can work together and audiences can easily access and share this joint content.

One of our biggest successes was a collaboration we organized around GMO seed grown in Kauai. Monsanto, Syngenta and Dow all create seed genetically modified to withstand herbicides and pesticides. They grow this seed on the island of Kauai, where there are four growing seasons a year. To test the seeds’ resistance, they spray extra amounts of herbicide and pesticide. The seed fields are, in some cases, only yards from schools and homes of indigenous Hawaiians.

In our collaboration, Earth Island Journal and Cascadian Times researched the potential dangers of these herbicide sprays; PR Watch and the Hawaii Independent investigated how the chemical companies had paid off politicians to look the other way as the spraying intensified; Making Contact interviewed the indigenous people, who were caught between fears over their health and good-paying jobs; and Yes! magazine sought out solutions such as organic farming that would give locals an alternative livelihood. When the collaboration was published, politics changed on Kauai. Activists were energized and passed law 960 (later overturned by the courts) to ban spraying near homes and schools. The fight became internationalized with activists travelling from Kauai to Switzerland for the Syngenta corporation’s annual meeting. And it continues today. By sharing their work, these outlets were able to provide an intersectional look at the Kauai situation that changed politics on the ground.

**What’s Next?**

To truly transform the news ecosystem, we will need to take positive action. Both community journalism and collaborative newsmaking face their own challenges.

Community journalists can post their content, but increasingly Facebook and Google control who sees content online. Their algorithms determine what appears when you look at your feed or search a keyword. Too many stories are still hidden because we simply can’t hear the voices of the people telling them.

Community media has a resource problem. They never were and will never be mass media, but they also need to figure out viable sustainable revenue streams and for that will probably need to increase their audience sizes. They also have a diversity problem—the same diversity problem that plagues mass media. While these outlets have begun talking to each other, too few of them (Kosmos being one of the few exceptions) are inviting audiences to participate in content creation.

The new sharing ecosystem surely will require that community journalists and community media merge in some way. Journalism outlets must hire journalists who come from the communities they wish to reach and who are willing and able to connect with these individuals in an authentic and open way. When they do so, members of these diverse communities will be more likely not only to share their own news, but also to share the news the outlets produce, creating larger audiences for the outlets.

We also must continue and deepen the sharing between outlets. When outlets work with each other on stories, they deepen the depth and value of their reporting, creating stories that fully manifest the complex intersectionality that we recognize as authentic to our lived lives. They also, by working together, teach each other about their different communities, whether those are regional, ethnic, racial, or issue-based, and in that way expand the ability of each other to reach out to increasingly diverse community members.

What we imagine is a fully horizontal networked mesh of professional editors and reporters working hand in hand with members of communities to tell the stories that matter. That is the truly transformative vision of the sharing news economy.