The rise of the internet has transformed the way we get our news. Newspapers are being replaced by websites, the TV news hour by streaming video and Youtube. Increasingly, we don’t even get our news via our [computers](http://pewrsr.ch/1zbGqpc), but from apps on our phones. 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.

Talk about a transformation! In this digital and now mobile revolution, old corporate media titans like Hearst and Gannett, which ran newspaper chains across the United States, are crumbling. CNN and MSNBC have been dropping viewers [since 2008](http://www.ijreview.com/2015/02/247232-msnbc-hits-decade-low-ratings-cnn-suffers-fox-dominates/). Old news is replaced by feisty, provocative corporate online/mobile sites like Buzzfeed, Vox and Vice.

There is no doubt that the institution of the press is being transformed. But what kind of transformation are we witnessing? Is our news getting better—more informative, more investigative? Are journalists better able to speak truth to power or to amplify possible solutions to our pressing problems? In other words, is this transformation truly “transformative”—life-changing in a positive sense?

The answer is… complex. What is truly transformative is that anyone can now access a publishing platform and become a journalist. Yet, with the exception of #BlackTwitter, most of these individual voices are unheard. And for many kinds of stories, we still need the more polished work of professionals.

Yet when we look at the new corporate news sites, we find that the digital revolution has changed the medium but not the message. Corporate news still has to prioritize making profit in a mass market—that’s how those companies are organized. But some kinds of newsgathering are not financially profitable, or may not appeal to a mass market . That’s why, even in this digital era, we still need news media that are independent—that value stakeholders rather than stockholders. We need news outlets that will provide an alternative to the corporate media.

**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.

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. These numbers have been born out when we look at news that has recently been generated by community members.

#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.

Most of these stories, however, don’t end up reaching hundreds, let alone thousands of viewers. Facebook’s algorithm makes it difficult to see content from anyone who does not have a very large following (especially if they don’t pay to promote their content). Locating relevant news on Twitter turns out to be very challenging for many people. And Snapchat, Instagram, and other social media still are not widely used as news sources.

**Mass Media is Mass Media**

Even if we could find a way to disseminate community journalism more widely, it’s become increasingly clear that community journalists can only do so much. While they excel at breaking news, most members of a community don’t have the time, ability or interest to investigate corruption; explain complex social problems or practices; provide context for the actions of institutions, people, or movements; or seek out solutions to longstanding problems. We still rely on professional journalists, and on news media sites, to provide us with that kind of information.

Yet it is in these areas that many of the new for-profit corporate media outlets fail us. These outlets think of their audiences as consumers of a product.. That’s certainly how NBC explains its mission, given in part here:

“We provide something for every news consumer with our comprehensive offerings that deliver the best in breaking news, segments from your favorite NBC News shows, live video coverage, original journalism, lifestyle features, commentary and local updates.”

What NBC doesn’t reveal in its mission statement is that the consumer is not the end-user NBC cares most about. They need to keep their audience coming back for more so they can attract the advertisers who are their true clients. That’s why a company like NBC must put “original journalism” to one side and focus on offerings like “lifestyle features” that will bring in the largest numbers of viewers. They need to put the “masses” into mass media.

But NBC is now old media. What about new media? First, old media still dominate online sites. A 2015 [Pew study](http://pewrsr.ch/1Kseij1) shows that the top 10 online news sites measured by their number of unique visitors are: ABC, CNN, NBC, Huffington Post, CBS, USAToday, New York Times, FOX and the Daily Mail (British).

A look at the top 10 native online sites, also from the Pew study, may be more informative. Huffington Post and Buzzfeed are far and way the largest, followed by the sport-oriented Bleacher Report and the business-oriented Business Report and CNET. Mashable is next, followed by Slate, Vice, Gawker, and Vox.

Sadly, for-profit new media as well must answer to advertisers. There is a reason that Buzzfeed has become known mostly for cat videos; cat videos are widely popular on Facebook, which is where Buzzfeed finds most of its readers. Once HuffingtonPost was bought by ABC, its editorial became filled with celebrity gossip, fashion, and food stories (and, yes, cat pics—see the Mammals section). To get advertisers, these sites need lots of people to click on stories, which means that getting those clicks has to matter most to them.

In many ways, what’s new is old again when it comes to the mass media.

**Preserving and Fostering Innovation**

Of course, all news providers want to grow their audiences. As long as the focus is on the audience, and not what the audience means in terms of advertising dollars, a larger audience means editors are doing their job well. Some of the digital native news sites, particularly Vice and Vox, are great examples of the way the digital revolution can have a transformative effect on how we tell the news.

Vice has gained viewers in part through its video-centric focus, proving that just as TV news trumped print and radio, video-based news is likely to dominate podcasting and text-based news online. Vox’s use of graphs and charts to explain complex phenomena has demonstrated that “infographics” is a valuable as well as highly popular new journalistic field. These sites, as well as Slate, Huffington Post, and others, have tossed away the old idealistic standard of journalistic objectivity and have replaced it with the more honest acceptance of point of view journalism. All of these innovations have been transformative.

One reason Vice and Vox have been able to innovate is that they have received a [massive infusion](http://blogs.wsj.com/venturecapital/2014/09/04/vice-raises-500-million-to-become-media-powerhouse-on-every-screen/#?mod=wsj_valettop_email) of venture capital money. Venture capitalists, however, will not long be satisfied with strong content and sizable audiences; they will want sizable advertising dollars. They want the biggest return on their investment, not necessarily the best editorial content.

So, given that new digital media is always in danger of reverting to emphasis on profit that diminished old mass media, we should be focusing at this moment on how we can preserve and foster all this is good about the digital revolution. How can we capture the very best innovations of the new digital mass media? How can we strengthen community journalism and the diverse voices it embodies? How do we grow what is truly transformative about the digital revolution?

**Mission-Driven Community-Based News**

There is a segment of the news media that is perfectly positioned to build upon the innovations that the digital revolution has brought: the independent and community media. These news organizations, whether for-profit or non-profit, are set up to put their mission first, whether that mission is to inform and engage their community, to educate the public about a particular set of issues, or to provide new perspectives on complex problems.

While many of these news outlets, like Kosmos Journal, began in print, they have swiftly migrated online. All that keeps them from adopting the rich video of a Vice of the infographic power of a Vox is money needed to hire the specialists, pay for online programming, and especially for video, cover the costs of data storage. Soon, however, these technological innovations will become more affordable and we should see them spread to every outlets.

The bigger opportunity for these outlets is to take a cue from the emergence of community journalism. The greatest problem most mission-driven outlets face is a lack of resources, in part because they are driven by mission rather than profit. Journalism by members of the community fills a hole by inviting readers to tell their own stories—as Kosmos Journal regularly does.

However, if mission-driven outlets are only speaking to the readers they already have, they will miss out on opportunities for deeper and richer stories, and for the diversity that community journalism promises. Outlets can transform themselves by thoughtfully hiring new reporters and staffers who come from divese backgrounds—for example, if an outlet’s staffers are exclusively male, the outlet should look into hiring women and transgendered people; if staffers are predominantly white, the outlet should hire people who are asian, latina, and black.

Outlets can also transform themselves by taking advantage of the sharing economy the digital revolution promotes. In the days of TV, print and radio, outlets jealously guarded their turf because the size of your distribution area equalled your ability to make money. Each outlet wanted a complete monopoly. The digital revolution changed all that. Today, any outlet can have a global reach; and on the flip side, having a global reach does not ensure that you will make money. No one can dominate a particular space anymore. Instead, each outlet has to work hard to reach as many readers/viewers as possible, hoping some will find a real connection with the outlets and return.

In this digital world, outlets benefit from sharing their content and readers with each other. For example, say a woman named Judy comes to the Nation’s site to read a story about climate change. But they are not really interested in the Nation’s other stories about politics or labor. If the Nation happens to be promoting a story by Grist, an environmental site, along with its own climate change story, than Judy may go to Grist, and find that Grist is exactly the site she was looking for. Conversely, Sara may go to the Grist site to read a story about Hillary Clinton’s latest pronouncement on climate change. But perhaps Sara really cares about politics, and if she sees a story Grist is promoting that originally came from the Nation, she will be so happy to have found the Nation. Instead of two people who might have wandered onto their sites and left, Grist and the Nation, by sharing, will have each found a devoted and engaged reader.

These kinds of cross promotions can happen between outlets that focus on different topics, or different modes of news delivery (i.e. video vs radio) or that reach different communities. There are great opportunities for local and national news providers to promote each other, or for outlets serving white, black, and latino communities in the same region to promote each other’s stories.

At the Media Consortium, where I work (and where Kosmos is a member), we have been experimenting with just this kind of cross promotion. Over the past

Outlets like this magazine, Kosmos Journal,