

**Seminar discussion question:** Tim Porter suggests that some of the newsroom's prized values are contributing to journalism's decline. He lists 16 current values that need to be given up, and suggests new values to replace them. Is Porter's thesis correct: journalists have values that don't match the values of their readers? Has Porter identified the right values to rethink? What about his suggested replacements? Are there other newsroom values standing in the way of creating great journalism that readers want? (Porter's blog can be found at <http://www.timporter.com/firstdraft/> )

## First Draft by Tim Porter

Ink-Stained Kvetches About Newspapering, Readership & Relevance

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### NEW VALUES FOR A NEW AGE OF JOURNALISM

Are some of **the newsroom's most prized values contributing to journalism's continuing decline in credibility**? What should replace these values to better reflect the complexities of modern media yet still embrace the core principles of journalism? What should be the standards of credible journalism in an age when all definitions of news are up for grabs?

The scoop, for example - beating all other perceived competitors to a story - is so highly valued in most news organizations that a story of otherwise middling importance might be elevated to the front page or to the lead of a newscast by its exclusivity. The words "the Daily Bleat has learned" or "Eyewitness News has determined" can trigger a Pavlovian salivation among editors, who respond to the stimulus by awarding the "scoop" prominent placement.

Daniel Okrent, the now **lame-duck** public editor for the New York Times, **dissects the paper's** Page 1 play of a March 31 report that Columbia University cleared its professors of charges of anti-Semitism, a report obtained a day before its public release by the Times writer **with the promise of not seeking "reaction** from other interested parties," presumably those students who leveled the charges initially.

Wafting from the process - and the motivations - that moved the Columbia story from press release to front page is a "slightly fishy smell" that Okrent attributes to **the routine propensity of scoop-driven reporters** to make deals for exclusivity and result in less-than-fully reported stories or, worse, leaks (he cites the Valerie Plame case) that play the reporters like "Silly Putty."

The scoop mentality, says Okrent, is out-dated in these times of omnipresent news. I like his Darwinian description and dismissal of those who defend the "so-and-so-has learned" mindset:

"Some newspaper people seem to regard beating the competition as the opposable thumb of journalism, an essential characteristic that distinguishes winners from losers. I think **it's more like the tailbone, a vestigial remnant** from the era when reporters were still swinging from the trees - that distant time when New York had

eight daily papers, and newsboys in knickers prowled the streets shouting 'Extra!' whenever their papers had something the other guys didn't."

It's important to distinguish, as Okrent does, between faux scoops like the Columbia story, which is **all about a powerful institution controlling the presentation of news**, and real investigative work. The former involves deal-cutting; the latter source-making. The former serves only the reporter and the newsmakers; the latter serves the community and can protect the people from the powerful.

The **current newsroom value system should be shelved**, dropped into the desk drawer with the pica pole, the Royal and the eyeshade. A new set of standards is needed to differentiate journalism from the glut of celebrity, opinion and minute-by-minute media that is often masquerades as journalism in the mind of an unwary public.

Let's demarcate, again, the line between the **elements of journalism** and the values of the newsroom. Often, as practitioners know, they are quite different, with "real-world" demands and rewards of the newsroom regularly taking precedence over the ideals outlined by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenthal.

What is valued in the day-to-day activities of newsrooms today? **How should these values change** in order to contribute to credibility and separate journalism from the media pack? Here's my list:

**Old Newsroom Value: Competition.** The obsession with being first leads to a buffet line of bad journalistic behavior - deal-cutting (Okrent), anonymous sources, lop-sided stories (with follow-ups often receiving lesser play than the original, errors, out-right chicanery and plagiarism.

**New Value: Context.** Thoroughness serves readers, not sources. Information, with more reporting, becomes education. Transparency trumps anonymity.

**Old Value: Speed.** A relative of competition, the one-day news cycle of newspapers is the remains of a bygone era when readers waited the arrival of the Daily Blat to learn the news. Speedy reporting, writing and editing have their place for breaking news - on the Internet, not in the paper. Telling complex stories quickly, with few sources and in tight space creates the abundance of mediocre, mid-length institutional reporting that fills more local news papers.

**New Value: Discipline.** Today's news today - or even tomorrow - is useless to readers if they can't make sense of it. Break the news tight; go longer, more-layered in the next pass to tell it right. Mid-length he-said, she-said reports provide neither.

**Old Value: Individualism.** The one-reporter, one-story, one-editor paradigm is inflexible and contributes to the flow of mediocrity. Daily messages about what's important are often mixed; managers pull in opposite directions; good stories go understaffed while lesser ones use up valuable resources.

**New Value: Collaboration.** Cluster a mix of journalists (word, visual, digital) around the best daily stories. Use editors as hands-on producers, not just traffic cops. Set reporting priorities for the day, the week, the month, the year and allocate teams accordingly.

**Old Value: More.** Editors place a premium on a high story count from most reporters and want bigger news holes even though they might not have the resources to fill it with quality work. The result: Editing by the numbers and column inch; bland stories and photos needed to fill sections; addiction to routine, institutional events because it guarantees "news."

**New Value: Less.** Five to 10 well-reported, better written, fully illustrated stories are better than 20 run-of-the-mill reporters. Use the teams to "produce" news packages. Brief the rest. Less leads to depth, context and layering.

**Old Value: Words.** Newspapers are run primarily by "word" people - former reporters or metro editors. Stories still typically are told in traditional formats. There is no Pulitzer for graphics or for design or for online. In most cases, despite two decades of forced integration between visuals and text, words still rule.

**New Value: Layers.** Use all the components of modern journalism to tell stories - words, photos, graphics, online. "Long" is a relative term. "Long" compared to what? This requires teamwork (see above) and "producers" not just "editors."

**Old Value: Authority.** Journalists have access to powerful institutions and officials the public does not. Many journalists confuse this entry into the backrooms of policy for authority or expertise when in fact it is only a day pass granted because the powerful find the news media useful. From authority comes arrogance, and from arrogance disregard for the opinion and, eventually, the goodwill of those journalists are supposed to serve, the members of the community.

**New Value: Interaction.** Don't cover the community, be the community. Get the reporters and editors out of the building; bring the citizens in. Enable community participation online and in print. [Read: **Don't Reflect the Community, Be the Community.**]

**Old Value: Answers.** News stories are supposed to provide answers, to assign reward or blame, to leave no ends lying loosely about. Journalists search for facts to explain complex issues, but facts alone are often not enough to provide readers with understanding.

**New Value: Questions.** Sometimes there are no answers to difficult and persistent issues like poverty, racism, religious and moral differences or the role of government in private lives. Journalists have the opportunity to explore the questions, air the differences and enable civic debate. Those tactics are more likely to provide "answers" than an array of facts alone.

**Old Value: Objectivity.** The standard for the last half-century of journalism, objectivity emerged as an antidote to the partisan press but grew to become a cherished recipe for blandness and a form of stenographic story-telling that eschews passion in favor of the emptiness of he-said, she-said, one the one hand, on the other and yet on another constructions.

**New Value: Truth-telling.** Get the fact, yes, but foremost tell the truth. I'm borrowing from **Dan Gillmor** to say: Replace objectivity with thoroughness, accuracy, genuine fairness and transparency.