

The Triple Crisis of Politics and the Media

John Lloyd

This symposium has in its first day been rich in the use of the word crisis. All of you, at least all who have spoken, have been in different degrees certain that Israeli politics is in crisis; and many of you have claimed that that crisis is present in all democratic states. The decreasing interest and engagement of citizens with politics, the much higher levels of distrust and cynicism, the reduced capacity of the state to fulfill the tasks demanded of it—all of these have featured in a narrative which, some of you have said, could mean a breakdown of states' order.

Journalism has its own narrative of despair; and though it has distinct features, it is, I believe, linked to the malaise of politics, and to the withdrawal of citizens in developed states from the way in which politics is both practiced and reported. The main components of our—journalists'—despair are:

- a) We are losing readers and viewers for news and current affairs;
- b) We are losing sufficient resources to do news, especially foreign news, properly;
and, more to the point of this seminar—
- c) We are in a vexed and uneasy relationship with the political systems in our countries, marked by a discourse of a lack of trust.

The provision of news suffers from three overlapping crises. The first and most obvious is the financial crisis. In the short term, it shares that with most other sectors of the economy.

The financial crunch has caused advertising budgets to be slashed. Advertising budgets are the largest funder of news—thus news suffers. Newspapers, unable to raise capital and with their companies' stock prices plunging, are closing or thinning. Broadcast news and current affairs, which depends on advertising, are scaling back, dropping foreign news (and thus shutting foreign bureaus), and turning to lighter and more popular subjects. Though there are national differences, something of this kind is happening in every advanced democracy in the world.

But unlike other sectors, there is no expectation that news will recover when the economies do. Or at least—we should be clear on this—not the news *business*, as we have known it in newspapers for some 200 years, and in broadcasting for most of the period since the war.

Newspapers, once they had made the long transition from being political and polemical sheets into being commercial enterprises in the nineteenth century, married two distinct identities into one, both indispensable to the other.

In the first place, they carried news—of foreign affairs and domestic crime, of parliamentary triumphs and commercial failures. The content and style of the news increasingly varied according to the audience the proprietor and editor wished to attract; but common to it was that it was *new*, that is, it was a description of events that had happened if not the day before, then recently.

In the second place, they were the indispensable intermediaries of a burgeoning commercial and consumer world. Everywhere, newspapers were the vehicles of commerce for populations that were becoming mass consumers. As Judith Flanders (2006) writes in

her history of Victorian commerce, *Consuming Passions* “it was on the basis of . . . relentless advertising that newspapers achieved the financial stability that, in the nineteenth century, enabled expansion into ever-growing markets.” This stability was achieved for the most commercial of reasons: it produced the most public of outcomes.

That outcome was the provision of news at a price which was—more and more in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—well below the cost of producing it. Paul Starr (2009) has put it succinctly: “[F]rom the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, many newspapers were politically subsidized directly by governments or through political parties. Then, as consumer markets expanded, newspapers increasingly sold not just news to readers, but also readers to advertisers. And the more advertisers they gained, the less they were dependent on any single one.”

The public service, which car companies, department stores, lonely hearts advertisements, and airlines have rendered through their search for readers’ attention, is now, in its classic form, diminishing, perhaps ending. At the very least, there is presently not a secure enough income from advertising to sustain the powerful newspaper institutions which every developed and wealthy state has taken for granted for generations. *The New York Times*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Le Monde*, *The Times*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Toronto Globe and Mail*, *El Pais*, *de Volkskrant*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *The Irish Times*, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Politken*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Le Soir*—all of these have histories of influence and power, are part of the political and social struggles and trends of their countries and, in many cases, of the world. All, in different measures, are threatened with cutbacks, even disappearance.

As these great institutions fall into crisis, we see more clearly than we could in the good times how dependent were our notions of “public service journalism”—that is, reporting which covered issues

of politics, foreign affairs, social trends and culture in some depth and with some care and expertise—on private consumption. As that falls, and more seriously for newspapers as it seeks other more efficient ways to advertise its wares, so the ability to sustain such journalism is heavily compromised.

Commercial broadcasting is in the same position. For nearly six decades television, which has not been supported by the state in some way, has grown rich on a long advertising boom. Roy Thomson, the Canadian entrepreneur who owned commercial TV stations in Canada and the UK, once described his properties as “a license to print money”—and, with part of the limited electromagnetic spectrum allocated by the state and either a regional monopoly or limited competition coupled with huge audiences, this was a modest boast. Here, too, either because the state demanded it or the owners were public spirited or both, the big channels poured money into news and current affairs programs, with some—as the three main US networks—becoming world news media powers, commanding interviews with everyone who counted, from world leaders to terrorist commanders; influencing politics and politicians; setting cultural trends.

Now they too are shrunken. CBS, for long the acknowledged leader among US networks in news and current affairs, had 24 foreign bureaus: it now has six. Britain’s independent TV stations are ceasing to provide regional news, leaving it to the state-sponsored BBC. In France, the main private channel, TF1, has largely ceased to do serious news: its CEO, Patrick Le Lay, said in 2004, “Let’s be realistic: basically, TF1’s job is helping Coca Cola, for example, to sell its product. What we sell to Coca Cola is available human brain time. Nothing is more difficult than obtaining this availability. This is where permanent change is located. We must always look out for popular programs, follow trends, surf on tendencies, in a context in which information is speeding up, getting more diverse and trivialized.”

According to Markus Prior (2007), that period when most people would watch some news and current affairs most days—because there was little choice—has ended. Where a household, often with multiple TVs, can choose from 100 to 200 stations has meant that the audience for serious TV has dropped dramatically. At the same time, says Prior, a small portion of the audience watches more news and current affairs, surfing the cable news channels to garner as much information and as many views as possible. The result has been an information equivalent of the growing disparities in income—a much greater gap in knowledge than before between “news junkies” and “news dropouts.”

At present, there is no easy answer to this crisis, the effects of which is already being felt and will deepen in the course of 2009/2010. Advertisers—especially classified advertisers, on which local papers depended—are finding the Internet a better medium than newspapers. Whole classes of previously big advertisers—such as car companies—are now in acute difficulties. While TV will remain for the foreseeable future an attractive medium to advertisers, it will be more limited, and as Patrick Le Lay suggests, it will have to concentrate more of its time on “looking out for popular programs, following trends, surfing on tendencies.”

Second, the news media have a crisis of trust. According to the Edelman/Financial Times Trust Barometer for 2008/09, taken over 18 countries, trust in television news coverage dropped from 49% to 36%, and trust in newspaper articles fell from 47% to 34%, both over the previous year, 2007/08 (Edelman 2009, 12). An Ipsos-MORI poll from 2008 put journalists (in the UK) at the bottom of a list of 16 professions for trust, with only 19% of the public expressing trust in them; a YouGov poll (2008), also for the UK, showed trust in upmarket papers dropping from 65% in 2003 to 43% in 2008. Though British media score comparatively low in terms of trust, these falls

are consistent across other countries in Europe and North America. A report by the Media Standards Trust says that a large majority want more regulation of the news media by the state—in order both to stop intrusion and to secure greater accuracy (Dickson et al. 2009).

Why there should be this drop in the trust people are prepared to place in news media is less clear than the results. An obvious conclusion would be that they have become less trustworthy—more sensational, fuller of mistakes, less concerned to report the facts. There is some evidence for this: Tabloid papers (in which trust is lowest, even though circulation is highest) have tended to drop hard news in favor of more gossip, scandal, and celebrity features, as has some broadcast news. But other newspapers and TV news channels have taken greater care with accuracy.

A more likely explanation is that audiences have become more demanding and more discriminating and that they have lost, not so much their trust that newspapers are accurate but that they have the right to describe the world in the way they do. In a world in which almost all professions have had to become more accountable and transparent, news organizations—which lead the calls for accountability and transparency—have bucked the trend. Onora O’Neill, the Cambridge philosopher, said this about the media:

The media, in particular the print media—while deeply preoccupied with others’ untrustworthiness—have escaped demands for accountability (that is, apart from the financial disciplines set by company law and accounting practices). This is less true of the terrestrial broadcasting media, which are subject to legislation and regulation. . . . Newspaper editors and journalists are not held accountable in these ways. Outstanding reporting and accurate writing mingle with editing and

reporting that smears, sneers and jeers, names, shames, and blames. Some reporting “covers” (or should I say “uncovers”?) dementing amounts of trivia, some misrepresents, some denigrates, some teeters on the brink of defamation. In this curious world, commitments to trustworthy reporting are erratic: there is no shame in writing on matters beyond a reporter’s competence, in coining misleading headlines, in omitting matters of public interest or importance, or in recirculating others’ speculations as supposed “news.” Above all there is no requirement to make evidence accessible to reader. (O’Neill 2002)

It is, perhaps, once more a matter of choice. Where there are multiple sources of information, and the ability to check is readily available, the news media may suffer even if they have not grown more careless (indeed, even if they have grown more careful). But in one sense, it matters little what the cause is: the effect is that the news media are not regarded, for the most part, as a trusted way of seeing the world. Their financial decline is paralleled by a decline of esteem.

This adds up to a third crisis: that of the media and democracy. The decline of news sources, the shrinking of serious and analytical news, and the recoil of citizens from the news media as trusted guides has implications far beyond the industry itself. As the Reuters Institute’s report, *“What’s Happening to Our News”* put it:

[T]o varying degrees, news brands are therefore being “hollowed out”: the underlying civic function of news publishers—to gather information and inform society—is steadily being replaced by a softer, more lightweight model that is dependent on the personal views of a

relatively small coterie of heavy-weight commentators and celebrity journalists. Stories and news events are increasingly draped in a celebrity veil in order to capture the attention of the audience; frequently with the assistance of communications and public relations professionals. (Currah 2009, 130)

The decline of trust on the part of the public is mirrored by that on the part of politicians and other public figures. Politicians are becoming more guarded in their interaction with the media, which increasingly demands instant comment and opinion around those issues that do achieve space in the news agenda. Because of a tendency to distort and sensationalize, the news media as a whole are finding it harder to obtain public comments from senior figures. In many cases, a press officer now handles comments to the media, adding a further degree of distance between journalists and politicians, and increasing the chances of misunderstanding. Those who do speak directly to the news media carefully manage their message and profile—sometimes in ways that can obscure the debate or bypass known “ambush points.” This phenomenon varies in different countries: in some—as in Italy—the penalties for speaking freely to the media are light. But in all, the use of screens—in the form of press spokesmen and image consultants—between public figures and journalism is commonplace.

Peter Riddell, a former political columnist on *The Times* and chairman of the Hansard Society (a political education and research institute), told the Reuters Institute’s study that:

[N]owadays, MPs are more discriminating in who they talk to and also more Janus-faced. They often say what they don’t really think on TV, as they no longer have the option of not responding and mistakes are punished.

There is far more reluctance to float a tentative idea, which may have value in sparking wider debate, due to fears of being shot down or stigmatised. There is a real public policy loss as a result of the 24/7 culture. (Currah 2009, 136)

The economic dynamics of the news media favor the compression of political stories into a more audience-friendly package, which by necessity tends to detach questions and issues from the messiness of political debate and related policy research. The sensationalist tendencies of the news media do little to help the clarification or resolution of complex social and economic issues. A compounding issue is the remarkable lack of continuity in news coverage; a topic may get coverage one day, only to be sidelined from the agenda the next, with no further information easily available on its development. In theory, the Web has the capacity to address this issue. Coverage of public interest and otherwise marginal issues can now be continued and extended online, with links to related coverage and other publicly valuable data. However, both the news media and the political establishments everywhere are still some way from achieving that degree of visibility, interactivity, and transparency.

In a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 2006, John Carroll, the former editor of the *Los Angeles Times* (dismissed for refusing to make further cuts than those he had already made in editorial staff—cuts ordered by the new owners of the paper, the Chicago Tribune group—now bankrupt) said that journalism was now undergoing “a crisis of the soul.” He pointed his finger, especially, at newspaper owners who, he said, were increasingly private capital companies who had one criterion: making money. Thus newspapers which were seen to have no long-term future were “harvested” for high returns over a short time period. He deplored the

“shrinking of newspapers’ social purpose,” and said that “restoring the balance between financial performance and public duty is probably impossible under present ownership.” The job of journalists now was “to save journalism itself . . . to ensure the existence long into the future of a large, independent, principled, questioning, deep-digging cadre of journalists in America, regardless of what happens to our newspapers” (Carroll 2006).

In his *New Republic* article from 2009, the social scientist Paul Starr writes of newspapers (the same point could be adapted for broadcast news) that:

News coverage is not all that newspapers have given us. They have lent the public a powerful means of leverage over the state, and this leverage is now at risk. If we take seriously the notion of newspapers as a fourth estate or a fourth branch of government, the end of the age of newspapers implies a change in our political system itself. Newspapers have helped to control corrupt tendencies in both government and business. If we are to avoid a new era of corruption, we are going to have to summon that power in other ways. Our new technologies do not retire our old responsibilities. (Starr 2009)

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