

Opening Remarks of Arianna Huffington for the Senate Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, and the Internet's Hearing on "The Future of Journalism"

Chairman Kerry, Ranking Member Ensign, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to be a part of today's discussion on the future of journalism.

Like any good news story, let me start with the headline: Journalism Will Not Only Survive, It Will Thrive.

Despite all the current hand wringing about the dire state of the newspaper industry -- well-warranted hand wringing, I might add -- we are actually in the midst of a Golden Age for news consumers.

Can anyone seriously argue that this isn't a magnificent time for readers who can surf the net, use search engines, and go to news aggregators to access the best stories from countless sources around the world -- stories that are up-to-the-minute, not rolled out once a day? Online news also allows users to immediately comment on stories, as well as interact and form communities with other commenters.

Since good journalism plays an indispensable role in our democracy, we all have a vested interest in making sure that our journalistic institutions continue producing quality reporting and analysis. But it's important to remember that the future of quality journalism is not dependent on the future of newspapers.

Consumer habits have changed dramatically. People have gotten used to getting the news they want, when they want it, how they want it, and where they want it. And this change is here to stay.

As my compatriot Heraclitus put it nearly 2,500 years ago: "You cannot step into the same river twice."

The great upheaval the news industry is going through is the result of a perfect storm of transformative technology, the advent of Craigslist, generational shifts in the way people find and consume news, and the dire impact the economic crisis has had on advertising. And there is no question that, as the industry moves forward and we figure out the new rules of the road, there will be -- and needs to be -- a great deal of experimentation with new revenue models.

But what won't work -- what can't work -- is to act like the last 15 years never happened, that we are still operating in the old content economy as opposed to the new link economy, and that the survival of the industry will be found by "protecting" content behind walled gardens.

We've seen that movie (and its many sequels, including TimesSelect). News consumers didn't like them, and they closed in a hurry.

And the answer can't be content creators attacking Google and other news aggregators.

No, the future is to be found elsewhere. It is a linked economy. It is search engines. It is online advertising. It is citizen journalism and foundation-supported investigative funds. That's where the future is. And if you can't find your way to that, then you can't find your way.

Online video offers a useful example of the importance of being able to adapt. Not that long ago, content providers were committed to the idea of requiring viewers to come to their site to view their content -- and railed against anyone who dared show even a short clip.

But content hoarding -- the walled garden -- didn't work. And instead of sticking their finger in the dike, trying to hold back the flow of innovation, smart companies began providing embeddable players that allowed their best stuff to be posted all over the web, accompanied by links and ads that helped generate additional traffic and revenue.

When I hear the heads of media companies talking about "restricting" content or describing news aggregators as "parasites," I can't help feeling the same way I did in 2001, when I was one of the cofounders of The Detroit Project, and watched as the heads of the auto industry decided that instead of embracing the future they would rather spend considerable energy and money lobbying the government for tax loopholes for gas-guzzling behemoths, fighting back fuel efficiency standards, and trying to convince consumers through billions in advertising that SUVs were the cars that would lead America into the 21st century.

Instead of trying to hold back the future, I suggest that media executives read *The Innovator's Dilemma* by Clayton Christensen, and see what he has to say about "disruptive innovation" and how, instead of resisting it, you can seize the opportunities it provides.

And that's why it's imperative, Mr. Chairman, that Congress and the FCC make sure they have in place smart policies that bridge the digital divide, ensure competition among Internet service providers, and protect innovators and consumers from attempts to undermine net neutrality or impose unjustified charges -- like metering -- on Internet users.

Digital news is a classic case of "disruptive innovation" -- a development that newspapers ignored for far too long.

Even so, I think all the obituaries for newspapers we're hearing are premature. Many papers are belatedly but successfully adapting to the new news environment. Plus, it's my feeling that until those of us who came of age before the Internet all die off, there will be a market for print versions of newspapers. There is something in our collective DNA that makes us want to sip our coffee, turn a page, look up from a story, say, "Can you believe this?" and pass the paper to the person across the table. Sure, you could hand them your Blackberry or laptop...but the instinct is different (and, really, who wants to get butter or marmalade on your new MacBook Pro?).

I firmly believe in a hybrid future where old media players embrace the ways of new media (including transparency, interactivity, and immediacy) and new media companies adopt the best practices of old media (including fairness, accuracy, and high-impact investigative journalism).

This hybrid future will include nonprofit/for profit hybrids, like the Investigative Fund the Huffington Post recently launched.

As the newspaper industry continues to contract, one of the most commonly voiced fears is that serious investigative journalism will be among the victims of the scaleback. And, indeed, many newspapers are drastically reducing their investigative teams. Yet, given the multiple crises we are living through, investigative journalism is all the more important. For too long, whether it's coverage of the war in Iraq or the economic meltdown, we've had too many autopsies and not enough biopsies.

The Investigative Fund is our attempt to change this -- backed by nonprofit foundations interested in giving freelance reporters, many of whom have lost their jobs, the ability to pursue important stories. Others, like ProPublica, The Center for Public Integrity, Spot.US, and The Center for Investigative Reporting are pursuing different not-for-profit investigative models. More will follow.

We will also see more citizen journalism – not as a replacement for traditional journalists, but as a way of augmenting their coverage.

"Citizen Journalism" is shorthand for a collection of methods for producing content by harnessing the power of a site's community of readers, and making it a key element of the site's editorial output. These engaged readers can, among other things, recommend stories, produce raw data for original reported stories, write original stories themselves, record exclusive in-the-field video, search through large amounts of data or documents for hidden gems and trends, and much more. By tapping this resource, online news sites can extend their reach and help redefine newsgathering in the digital age.

In the process, they will also expand their online community -- which, in turn, will attract more users and help build a more viable business model.

For too long, traditional media have been afflicted with Attention Deficit Disorder -- they are far too quick to drop a story -- even a good one, in their eagerness to move on to the Next Big Thing. Online journalists, meanwhile, tend to have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder... they chomp down on a story and stay with it, refusing to move off it until they've gotten down to the marrow.

In the future, these two traits will come together and create a much healthier kind of journalism.

The discussion needs to move from "How do we save newspapers?" to "How do we strengthen journalism -- via whatever platform it is delivered?"

We must never forget that our current media culture led to the widespread failure (with a few honorable exceptions) to serve the public interest by accurately covering two of the biggest stories of our time: the run-up to the war in Iraq and the financial meltdown.

That's why, as journalism transitions to a new and different place, the emphasis should not be on

subsidizing what exists now but on how to rededicate ourselves to the highest calling of journalists -- which is to ferret out the truth, wherever it leads. Even if it means losing our all-access-pass to the halls of power.

Unfortunately, this is a concept that has fallen out of favor with too many journalists who, like Pontius Pilot, wash their hands of finding the truth and instead are obsessed with a false view of "balance" and the misguided notion that every story has two sides. And that the truth can be found somewhere in the middle. But not every story has two sides and the truth is often found lurking in the shadows. The earth is not flat. Evolution is a fact. Global warming is real.

The most exciting thing for both journalists and news consumers, is the fact that technology will continue to give readers more and more control over what kind of information they get, and how that information will be presented. The days of publishing pooh-bahs dictating what is important and what is not are over. And thank goodness. As the legendary journalist I.F. Stone once said of a leading newspaper of his time: it's a particularly exciting paper to read because "you never know on what page you will find a page-one story."

We stand on the threshold of a very challenging but very exciting future. Indeed, I am convinced that journalism's best days lie ahead -- just so long as we embrace and support innovation and don't try to pretend that we can somehow hop into a journalistic Way Back Machine and return to a past that no longer exists and can't be resurrected.