

# VINEYARD GAZETTE

## Journalism and New Media: Finding the Balance

By JEFF SCHEUER

**U**NLIKE THE FARMHOUSE I RENT on Middle Road, or Binty, the horse who whiles away her dotage in the meadow adjacent, I am not yet ancient. So what is it exactly that scares me about new media — aside from the fact that I need my children to help me download apps to my iPhone?

This isn't an idle question, as I've spent part of my 56th summer on this Island preparing a lecture on new media and journalism, and I know a bit more about the latter than the former. Perhaps someone will read this and set me straight (or at least offer a stimulating idea) in time for my date with oratorical oblivion at a nearby university.

I did attend a four-day seminar a few months ago, at a media institute in Florida, which helped frame the question. I was there along with some twenty-something bloggers (and assorted journalists, activists, etc. of more advanced years) trying to make sense of the changing media landscape. It was quite an experience.

Those upstarts were by far the smartest group of people I've been in a room with since college more than a generation ago. They were bright-eyed and full of themselves. Some of what they are full of is really good civic stuff. Down deep, I think, most of them care about journalism and journalistic excellence.

But while I'm no apologist for the MSM (mainstream media), and I think a lot of it should be scrapped, I was troubled by how much they shared my view — without the humility, experience and effort it took me to attain it. I was terrified by their arrogance about journalism, at least in some cases. The idea seemed almost to be: journalism is so 20th century.

If that's the case, then democracy's a goner too. What we need to do is encourage these Internet toddlers, but also guide them with the values that democracies need — truth, accountability, explanation, watch-doggery — whether it be e-journalism or otherwise. If informed citizenship came in a cream form, we wouldn't need journalism at all; but it's still in the concept phase.

Facebook, MySpace, Twitter — well, they may eventually prove their journalistic worth; in Iran, Twitter may have helped to channel unrest and report about it but that story is still breaking. What really matters is no mystery. It's the journalism, stupid.

The problem with defining or ex-

plaining journalistic excellence is that most people don't have time to read through back issues of the Vineyard Gazette or the books of Henry Beetle Hough. I don't propose to explore excellence here, except to say that our information supply, (including both education and journalism), like our food supply, is too important to be left entirely to the commercial sector.

But consider what Hough wrote 42 years ago, in the opening chapter of his *Vineyard Gazette Reader*: "I distrust most of all the love affair with the electron, which has even led some communicators to rejoice that they have, to some pioneering extent, substituted images for words, and in the exploitation of which the individual is relegated to a dead past. The inevitability of the more and more advanced forms of electronic communication is apparent, but an indecent rush to break as completely as possible with the past is surely an offense against humanity. Where is the journalism of the future which will continue to recognize the individual, his initiative, his dignity, his tastes, his separateness, instead of contriving to skim off that part of him that can be generalized into a convenient mass?"

I both do and do not share Hough's distaste for the electron. I certainly understand where he was coming from as a country newspaper editor. We need to be very critical, and very media-literate, first of all in distinguishing our tools from our stories, and looking to improve those tools only for the purpose of improving the stories. Quality counts: the quality of information available and accessible to every citizen. You may also enjoy social networking, but it won't drive democracy.

If new media destroy traditional journalism, and replace it with something better, bring it on. But it should be accurate, reliable, explanatory, not afraid of complexity (or technology) but disdainful of complexity or technology for their own sake. We need an era of clean news in this country, untainted by either government or corporations. But first, please show me the money. Henry would want to see it too.

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