

# The Gatekeepers or the Barbarians?

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**P**RESUMING — and this is no minor presumption — that multimedia journalism becomes widespread, just who will research and collect and display this unprecedented wealth of information — this combination of video, text, photographs, animations, graphics, voice, and who knows what else? Will it be computer wizards? Cyberspace entrepreneurs? Librarians?

The fact is, it had better be journalists.

The best journalists — I have been lucky enough to know many of them over the last three generations — share a common denominator: they trust only what they dig up themselves. They insist on always seeing things firsthand, on taking nobody's word for anything, on approaching everything and everyone sceptically. They assume a missionary's role: they must protect their public from the charlatans.

Many of those superior journalists reacted with disdain and distrust a generation ago when people called researchers set foot in newsrooms. But researchers quickly proved to be of immense value in finding information, so most journalists welcomed their help. And journalists still controlled what to look for, how to recognize it, and what to do with it. They provided the critical element — news judgment.

Now, as new forms of media emerge, good journalists will again need to adapt to new kinds of help while still insisting that in the broad sense, no one else can do their job for them.

That means that remaining a superior journalist is about to become umpteen times harder than it has been. But if good journalists fail to take on this new and formidable challenge, the computer whizzes and champions of glitz may in effect capture journalism and become the real masters of the universe of media in an ever-blossoming media age. The stakes are enormous.

The fact is, the new computer entrepreneurs are itching for the existing, dedicated journalistic entrepreneurs to leave an opening.

Among those itchy fellows is one named Bill Gates. His breathless little company, the Microsoft Corporation, not long ago hired a former journalist as its director of news. Likewise, Bell Atlantic, Pacific Bell, AT & T, Tele-Communications, Inc., Viacom, you name it, are all now watching and getting ready.

What will the good journalists need to learn to ensure that they are the ones doing the journalism that underlies those big bucks?

They will need to know what's available out there in cyberspace; to know what's appropriate to link to the subject on which they're reporting; to know how to find it, and link it, and display it. To know how to structure stories in new ways that take advantage of this new blend of media forms.

Here's an example:

We are covering the OJ Simpson case. The issue becomes the reliability of the testing of deoxyribonucleic acid — the macromolecule known as DNA. Instead of just reporting the surface (what's said in court, what this or that expert says in a short quote or even shorter soundbite, etc.), we can show our public how the testing of DNA actually happens. We can assemble a series of stories ranging from the very simplest inverted pyramid model, six or eight paragraphs long, to (just click here) stories mixed with graphics and full-motion video that allow our audience to take its time and in effect see documentaries and peer through microscopes and scanners and read dozens and dozens of articles.

Instead of just listening to sound bites from this or that expert, our readers/viewers will be able to see and hear actual interviews in full at a pace at which they want to read and hear and absorb. For those who want the surface, it is there. Those who want to pursue more deeply can do that, just as far as they wish.

I started doing a bit of research into DNA in cyberspace the other day. I used one of the browsing devices for what passes for an information superhighway right now — the Internet — and simply specified the three letters DNA.

Within five seconds, my computer screen was displaying the titles of hundreds of recent articles about DNA from a broad range of publications. I started reading one article after another — researching a story the "old" way in the last quarter of this century.

The difference is that with the tools now available, I can bring relevant parts of this research into my new media story, and flag them by little icons (click here) where appropriate. The parts that are so flagged may lead to photographs, animations, video, sounds, interviews, etc., which can pop on the screen if and when the reader/viewer/listener designates.

This new journalism ought to be able to demystify complex subjects, subjects even as complex as DNA matching.

So back to the question, who will control this process?

Will it be men and women like those who run the best of today's journalistic enterprises, people steeped in a tradition of journalistic goals, of public service and of commitment? Or will it be people with more limited priorities, mainly a nice chunk of those billions of dollars?

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