

(Lecture delivered by Laurie Oakes at Curtin University on September 25, 2014.)

Will they still need us? Will they still feed us?

Political journalism in the digital age.

Good evening.

It's a genuine privilege to be here to help celebrate 40 years of journalism at Curtin University. Journalism matters in our society. It's fundamental to the operation of our democratic system. It's a noble craft. Maybe more than that.

I came across an interesting line in a *Huffington Post* article recently. It read: "Someone very sexy once told me journalism is a sexy profession."

I'd have to say I can't quite see it myself, but maybe I'm wrong. If journalism WAS sexy it might help to answer a question that's been puzzling me.

Why are so many really bright young people still enthusiastic about studying journalism when career prospects these days are so uncertain? Why does including the word "journalism" in the title of a course apparently continue to guarantee bums on seats? I'm pleased that people still want to be journalists. I can't imagine a better job. But it must be obvious to everyone by now that we're producing many

more journalism graduates than are ever likely to find jobs in the news business in its present state.

A well-known American academic and commentator on media issues, Clay Shirkey from New York University, has attacked in quite stark terms people who encourage false hope among young would-be journalists at a time when so much of the industry is battling for survival. He wrote: “Pretending that dumb business models might suddenly start working has crossed over from sentimentality to child abuse.”

It's self-evident that, under attack from new technology, print is in retreat everywhere. Earlier this year an American ambassador, Washington's new envoy to Switzerland, chose to take the oath of office on a Kindle. Last year, recruits to the Atlantic City Fire Brigade were sworn-in using a Bible app on an iPad. If even the Bible isn't sacred, what hope do newspapers have?

The answer is, in the longer term, not much. But they're not on their own. Eventually, the idea of television signals being transmitted through the ether will be just as redundant as print on paper. That almost certainly goes for radio as well.

Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull describes what the Internet is producing as “a universal uber-platform”. Everything will be on the net; all on this uber-platform accessible from any device anywhere anytime.

What this will ultimately mean for journalism is still very cloudy. As you'd be aware, there's been a lot of pessimistic commentary about the future of journalism—especially quality journalism. I've engaged in my share of it. Cost-cutting and job losses have seemed to vindicate the pessimism.

I want to say to you tonight, though, that I'm starting to feel more upbeat about where journalism might be going.

My more hopeful attitude is based to a considerable extent on what's happening in the US. I watch American developments in journalism and the media closely, not out of any cultural cringe but because it's a way of predicting what will happen here. A crystal ball, if you like, that makes it possible to look a little way into our future.

To illustrate the lag: newspaper advertising revenue peaked in 2005 in the US, here in 2008; mass redundancies hit Australian newspapers three or four years after the job-shedding tsunami struck the American newspaper business. So watching trends there is a useful early warning system for us in Australia. It can also give us advance notice of encouraging developments.

Before I go into Pollyanna mode I want to talk about a couple of issues that come into the "early warning" category and which, in my view, have serious implications, particularly for political reporting. The first is the growing ability the digital revolution gives politicians—and others, for that matter-- to

bypass journalists. The second is the near impossibility of political and investigative journalists being able to protect sources in the digital age.

In an article earlier this year, John Lloyd, director of journalism at the Reuters Institute at Oxford University, described how Barack Obama won the 2012 US presidential election by speaking to millions via social media. Lloyd then asked pointedly: “Who needs the press?” It’s an even more sobering question when you consider how Obama, having revolutionised campaigning, is now pioneering the use of social media and digital technology in governing.

Lloyd’s conclusion was: “Journalism now has to fight another threat which is as stark as falling revenue—irrelevance.” I’d moderate that just a little. Irrelevance is too strong. But we do face the threat—indeed, the inevitability-- of reduced relevance.

Malcolm Turnbull is the Australian politician who best understands this sort of thing. (Remember, Tony Abbott’s assertion that Turnbull “virtually invented the internet in this country”? I guess that puts him up there with Al Gore.)

Speaking at the Australian National University two months ago, Turnbull declared that media power is declining. Politicians should not complain about the media any more, he said, because they no longer need journalists as intermediaries between themselves and the public in the way they used to.

“Politicians,” he said, “have now got their own megaphones.”

Kevin Rudd showed the way. To a considerable extent, in the period between being deposed as Prime Minister by Julia Gillard and then returning to the job as the desperate last hope of a doomed government, he kept his profile up through what amounted to do-it-yourself coverage. He was his own media outlet. It’s open to any smart politician to do the same thing.

With Twitter, Facebook, and his own YouTube channel, plus a staffer with a cheap video camera and a laptop for editing, Rudd could deliver what was effectively news content to a substantial audience without having to rely on media organisations. And it helped him to get coverage from mainstream media organisations as well. They quite often took his material off YouTube and used it themselves.

I’ve looked closely at the Obama operation—not just reading about it, but also talking to people in Washington connected with the White House. It’s really impressive. But, if you believe in the importance of watchdog journalism to the working of our democratic system, it’s also of concern. Not that there’s any possibility of turning back the clock.

Two years ago, in a Walkley Centenary Lecture predicting that politicians would assume journalistic functions in the digital age, I said: “They’ll be our competitors, as well as our subject matter.” In Washington, it’s happening in a significant way. A *New York Times* article, published under

the headline ‘The YouTube Presidency’, put it this way: Obama’s team has “led the pack to become the new media on the White House beat”. The writer added: “Does that strike anyone as unsettling?”

Certainly it’s unsettling if it results in less contact with media that’s not in-house. It’s unsettling if independent journalists have their access curbed or cut off. It’s unsettling if it enables the Administration to limit its exposure to the kind of probing by which governments are held to account. All of which, it seems, is coming to pass.

Let me tell you what I’ve learned about the engine room of the YouTube Presidency—the White House Office of Digital Strategy. It is, in reality, a reasonably substantial news operation. It has a staff of 20-plus. Some are from journalism, some are computer nerds, some are policy wonks. There’s a unit producing video, with the videographers having unprecedented access to the President and everything he and others in the Administration do. There are staff who specialise in social media—Twitter, Facebook, Google-plus, Vine etc.

There’s an analytics unit gathering and studying data to work out how best to reach people and get them to engage with the Administration. There are people writing blog posts and scripting videos and other content. And there’s a team responsible for website design and infographics.

I'd say that mix is pretty much what the typical newsroom is becoming in the digital age. Malcolm Turnbull would be pleased to know that the President calls the office "my megaphone". He tells staff he wants it to get his messages through to the American people "unfiltered". In other words, bypassing the media is a key aim. The White House website says the office "uses digital platforms to amplify the President's message and engage with citizens around the country online".

The product is pretty polished. If you want to get a taste of it, download the White House app on your smart phone. (It's free.) Tap the app and you'll see a Blog—including photographs and videos-- that covers most of what is happening at the White House.

Tap the app menu and you can go to what's called the Briefing Room to access all White House press releases, transcripts and so on. The app offers a separate section of photographs of President Obama taken by the White House's own photographic staff, often of events or informal activities to which the mainstream media don't get access. Ditto a whole lot of videos. It's entirely flattering, of course. You're not going to see a tired or stressed or cranky President here.

There's a section where you can watch Presidential news conferences and other events streamed live. There's a favourites button, so you can save your favourite articles,

photos and videos. And the app is being developed further. Just as some news organisations now send notifications to your mobile phone about breaking news or developments you might be interested in, the White House is going to do the same. If there's a breaking news development the Administration wants to talk about you'll get a message on your smart phone.

The Office of Digital Strategy produces regular video messages from the President. At times the White House uses it to make public announcements via social media rather than to the press corps. It's responsible for a number of sophisticated websites. Also, it has launched White House Web channels. An example was a community channel on BuzzFeed starring Vice-President Joe Biden and dealing with Obamacare. The State of the Union Address has been live-streamed through an iPhone app which then invited questions from viewers so the President could answer them in a White House-produced YouTube interview a few days later.

And there's *West Wing Week*. It's effectively a news bulletin put out every Friday looking back at what the President has done in the previous seven days. It's on YouTube, on the app, on the website. One experienced White House correspondent has described it, somewhat bitterly, as "five minutes of their own video and sound from events the press

didn't know about". That's not strictly true. Public events are covered too.

But what makes *West Wing Week* so effective—and so annoying to the White House Press corps-- is the way the White House's own videographers are able to capture one-off, candid moments that the independent media don't get to see, as well as events that the mainstream media used to see but now get shut out of or aren't even told about.

It would be only a small step to turn *West Wing Week* into a daily newscast. Watch this space.

A Washington insider who has seen the operation up close told me: "We are the first administration to have the opportunity to tell our story exactly as we want to tell it, instead of having to go through ABC or NBC or CNN or Fox News to tell that story."

Politicians have yearned for a way to sideline journalists and communicate directly with voters. Now, with digital technology, they have the means at last.

To put it bluntly, politicians and governments can report on themselves. They are much, much less reliant on journalists than they used to be. And, because of that, they can be much less constrained about ignoring reporters or making it more difficult for them to access information

The White House Press Corps is starting to feel the hot breath of irrelevance that John Lloyd talked about. This was

reflected in a report published late last year. Titled “The Obama Administration and the Press”, it was commissioned by the US Committee to Protect Journalists and prepared by Leonard Downie Jr--an award-winning investigative reporter before a 17-year stint as executive editor of the *Washington Post*.

Digital technology, according to Downie, gives government many new levers for controlling the message. He wrote in his report of “a strategy, honed during Obama’s presidential campaign, to use the internet to dispense to the public large amounts of favourable information and images generated by his administration, while limiting his exposure to probing by the press”.

Barack Obama joked about all this at the annual dinner of the Gridiron Club, a journalistic institution in Washington. “Some of you have said that I’m ignoring the Washington press corps—that we’re too controlling,” the President told the assembled media luminaries. “Well, you know what? You were right. I was wrong. And I want to apologise in a video you can watch exclusively at whitehouse.gov.”

As I said earlier, my interest in what happens to journalism and the media in the US derives from the fact that it’s like looking into a crystal ball and seeing what will happen in Australia. There’ll be a time lag. But the Obama approach will be reflected here. No one should have any doubt about that.

Just before he stepped down as White House press secretary a few months ago, Jay Carney said it would have been malpractice for him and others responsible for media strategy in the White House not to take advantage of the possibilities offered by social media and digital technology. He's right. Don't expect our politicians and their minders to be guilty of that malpractice, either.

We journalists can whinge all we like. But the technology is there for politicians to change the game, and they'd be mad not to use it.

The Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, almost since he took office has been at war with the national media. In fact, he's said openly he wants to bypass them. In January this year he announced a new video magazine called *24 Seven*, a week in the life of the prime minister which, he said, would keep Canadians "in the know"—so Ottawa is well on the way.

We know Tony Abbott is not a tech head. He's the bloke who dismissed social media as "kind of like electronic graffiti", and attracted scorn when he said: "It's pretty obvious that the main usage for the NBN is going to be internet-based television, video entertainment and gaming".

But there are undoubtedly people around our prime minister who have been taking notice of what's happening at the White House. Very early in the life of the Abbott Government a videographer was hired by the prime minister's office—

Josh Wilson, a cameraman and video editor who learned his trade in the Nine Network Canberra Bureau, in fact, so he's pretty good. He also takes still photographs.

Josh, because he's with the PM all the time, inevitably gets access to stuff—private events—that outside media don't. He shoots and edits a weekly video address by the PM that goes up on YouTube and is available to any media organisation that wants it. He produces between 10 and 15 other prime ministerial video messages a week—things for sporting clubs, charities and other groups the PM wants to reach out to.

And he is involved in the Abbott office's social media strategy—which predominantly means Facebook. Facebook has become very important for political messaging. And the effectiveness of Facebook depends on strong images. Stills and video.

If you watch *Insiders* on the ABC you've probably caught a glimpse of Josh in the titles—in a quick shot of Mr Abbott and President Obama in the Oval Office. One of his tasks is to making sure no-one wanders into shot when the PM is being filmed or photographed. But in the Obama-Abbott pix there was a straggler in the background. Josh. He accidentally photo-bombed the PM and the President.

He can laugh about it now.

The Abbott operation is not primarily about bypassing the Press Gallery. Not yet. The justification is that adding

someone with Josh's skills is part of the evolution of a more professional media office. But this IS just the beginning.

We got a look at the future yesterday morning, in fact. The prime minister, flying to New York to attend the United Nations, had a brief refuelling stopover in Honolulu. Back in Australia a teenage terrorism suspect had stabbed two police officers in Melbourne. There was no media on PM's plane, but Josh Wilson was there.

Mr Abbott spoke with ministers and security officials on a secure line. Then Josh set up his camera, stuck a microphone on the prime ministerial lapel, and Mr Abbott made a statement about the incident. There was even a backdrop with the Australian coat of arms and two Australian flags—presumably part of Josh Wilson's luggage. The result was uploaded to YouTube, the PM got back on his plane and as he took off the transcript plus video and audio were being sent out to media organisations by his press office in Canberra.

Who needs journalists indeed.

John Howard tried to use talkback radio to bypass the Press Gallery. But radio hosts are intermediaries too. He could only dream of a day when it would be possible for governments to get out unfiltered messages by producing and distributing their own news content.

Not only governments, of course. There's nothing to stop an opposition doing an Obama as well, and some Labor Party

politicians are quite aware of the possibilities. One of them offered the view in a private conversation recently that opportunities provided to Labor by digital technology, combined with the damage that technology is doing to newspapers, meant the party would be able to stop worrying about the Murdoch press within two election cycles—six years.

Gough Whitlam saw no such light at the end of the tunnel when he incurred the disapproval of a certain newspaper proprietor four decades ago. Bill Hayden, one of his ministers, commented: “If Gough had walked across Lake Burley Griffin, one of our leading national newspapers would have published the story under the headline WHITLAM CAN’T SWIM.”

There’s another point to be made in the context of digital technology wrecking media business models and fragmenting the industry. Weakened media organisations, having cut journalistic staff in a frenzy of cost-cutting, are bound to be less scrupulous than they might once have been about using subsidised content--material produced by others that doesn’t cost them anything.

So some material from Obama’s Office of Digital Strategy or produced in-house by Tony Abbott’s infant operation or by the Labor Party as it gears up to bypass News Corporation can be expected to find its way into the mainstream media. Beggars are not going to be choosers. That, too, strengthens

the hand of politicians vis a vis journalists and feeds into the relevance discussion.

Anything that reduces the relevance of political journalism is bad for the health of our democratic system. Power won't hold itself to account. Government is hardly likely to face difficult questions from its own media. Politicians will only use the new opportunities available to them to distribute information on things they want the public to know about.

The only way I see for journalists to deal with what will be a growing challenge is to apply traditional journalistic skills—particularly the cultivation of sources—with renewed vigour. Consistently digging out what politicians and others in positions of power don't want revealed is the best guarantee of continued relevance.

Which brings me to the second matter of concern that I mentioned at the start—the increasing difficulty journalists face in this digital era in protecting sources. If we can't protect them, of course, they're highly unlikely to talk to us in the first place. And without leaks, without whistleblowers, democracy can't work very well. They're absolutely necessary to keep the bastards honest—the bastards being our political masters.

Again it's instructive to look at what has happened in the US. The Obama Administration has been marked by leak inquiries and prosecutions—far more than under any previous President. Journalists have been in the middle of them, often

subpoenaed to face demands that they reveal their sources. Refusal to do so, of course, carries the threat of gaol.

In mid-2011 at a conference on government secrecy involving journalists, lawyers and intelligence officials the journalists raised the matter of a proposed shield law to protect reporters from being forced to reveal their sources.

According to Lucy Dalglish from the US Reporters' Committee for Freedom of the Press—quoted in Leonard Downie Jr's report-- the response from the government legal team was: "You can get your shield law, but you've probably seen your last subpoena. We don't need you any more."

In other words, it's no longer necessary to drag journalists into court to try to get the names of their informants. Sources can be identified these days by other means. Our contacts and movements can be monitored by the digital trail we all leave.

Phone and email records, internet activity, credit card information, airline booking records, toll road payments and so on. They are all accessible. And our mobile phones serve as GPS trackers. Julian Assange of Wikileaks fame likes to refer to the smartphone as a surveillance device that also makes calls.

Let's talk about phones for a minute.

There was an outcry in the US last year when it was revealed that federal investigators involved in a leak hunt had

obtained two months of phone records of reporters and editors at *Associated Press*. The Justice Department secretly obtained a subpoena to compel AP's phone company to provide the records. Details of thousands of newsgathering calls by more than 100 journalists were seized--a veritable harvest of information about communications with confidential sources across all of AP's operations.

It was widely condemned as judicial over-reach, and the angry media reaction compelled Obama to tighten the rules under which such action could be taken. I'll tell you something sobering, though. It could happen here without any judicial involvement at all. No need for a subpoena. And we're not just talking national security, which was the excuse for the action against AP.

In this country enforcement agencies—as well as ASIO—can get information from telecommunications companies without needing a warrant as long as it is for the purpose of enforcing the criminal law or a law that imposes a pecuniary penalty or is for the protection of the public revenue. In other words, it goes well beyond police forces and crime commissions and anti-corruption agencies. The RSPCA fits the definition of an enforcement agency under the Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Act.

And the Act IS used to hunt journalists' sources. A few years ago, after I'd reported details of a Cabinet document that embarrassed the then government over a botched plan to

monitor petrol prices, an Australian National University academic got a knock on her door. She'd been a friend of mine for over 40 years, and had nothing to do with politics, the government, or the public service. But two detectives were there from the AFP demanding to know why she'd spoken to Laurie Oakes on his mobile phone at such-and-such a time on such-and-such a date. Who knows how many other people I'd been in contact with got the same visit from the wallopers?

Information handed over is restricted to metadata—who you communicate with, when, for how long, where from—that sort of thing. Not just for phone calls, but emails and internet activity as well. In the debate going on in this country at the moment over new national security laws that would compel telecommunications companies to retain such metadata for two years, the fact that the contents of communications would not be accessed is presented as a reassurance. But it's not very reassuring for journalists. Or shouldn't be.

As my expert witness on this I'm going to call Edward Snowden, sometimes referred to as the most wanted man in the world. Snowden-- a computer expert, former CIA system administrator and counter-intelligence trainer-- is the American National Security Agency contractor who leaked thousands of classified documents, mainly to *Guardian* journalist Glen Greenwald, exposing mass electronic

surveillance programs. The US wants him on espionage charges. He's been granted temporary asylum by Russia.

Whether you think he's a traitor or a whistle-blower, he certainly knows about surveillance. Here's what he said about metadata in an interview in Moscow with *The Guardian*.

“Metadata can be analogised to the details that a private eye produces in the course of an investigation. For example, the private eye might follow you to a diner where you meet a friend, you meet a lover. They see who you meet, they see where you meet, they see when you went there and they may even know the broad details of the topics of your conversation.” Replace “friend” or “lover” with “source”, and you see the problem. Obviously journalists can't do their job properly with a digital private eye following them and watching their every move.

Here's what Snowden said specifically about journalism in the digital age. “An unfortunate side-effect of the development of all these new surveillance technologies is that the work of the journalist has become immeasurably harder than it has ever been in the past. Journalists have to be particularly conscious about any sort of network signalling, any sort of connection, any sort of licence-plate reading device that they pass on their way to a meeting point, any place they use their credit card, any place they

take their phone, any email contact they have with the source.”

It's an important issue. However, with the threat of terrorist attack being used as justification for the sort of electronic surveillance and tracking I'm talking about, journalists' concerns will inevitably be heavily discounted. Because of this, media organisations seem reluctant even to raise the matter for discussion. But we shouldn't be reluctant. We should press the case for anti-terrorism laws that, as far as possible, don't infringe press freedom.

Bernard Keane from *Crikey*, who has taken a strong interest in this issue, has written that journalists, editors and producers need to get a working knowledge of basic encryption, surveillance techniques and IT hygiene so sources can contact them with confidence and information can be stored safely out of the reach of authorities. But there are simpler actions we could consider as well.

I was reading recently about how a German parliamentary inquiry set up to investigate electronic eavesdropping now protects itself from online snooping. It's acquired a manual typewriter for the preparation of confidential documents and sensitive messages. Maybe using typewriters is the sort of novel idea journalists will have to think about. There's not much doubt we do need to return to some of our old ways, at least.

Richard Baker and Nick McKenzie, the star investigative reporters from *The Age*, talked about this in an address at the Walkley Foundation's Press Freedom Dinner last year. They said: "With surveillance technology increasing, it is harder than at any time before to contact a whistle-blower over the phone or a computer without leaving a trace."

Meeting over a beer or coffee, face to face, was the safest form of contact with sources, they said. But even those meetings have to be set up, and one call or text message from your office phone or mobile can be enough put a source's job or even liberty in jeopardy.

Baker and McKenzie described what they called "today's tradecraft" for journalists. Use a public phone if you can find one, but good luck with that these days--and you can't call a phone box back anyway. Better to use a SIM card bought under a fictitious name. Or Skype your contact from an internet cafe.

An American judge, in a leak case a few years ago, said: "Reporters might find themselves, as a matter of practical necessity, contacting sources the way I understand drug dealers to reach theirs—by use of clandestine cell phones and meeting in darkened doorways."

This is what it has come to.

Forty years after Watergate we're probably back to signalling sources by moving pot plants around a balcony and night-

time assignments in underground car parks. Sorry. Scrub that. These days the car park would probably have CCTV.

A long time ago I had a source in the Defence Department who, when he wanted to pass on information or a document, would get a message to me saying “The Red Duck Flies By Night”-- which meant I had to meet him that night at a particular spot on the shore of Lake Burley Griffin. Back then I think he did it that way for the excitement. If Red Duck was around now it would be necessity. And we’d both need to leave our phones/ GPS beacons at home. Otherwise he’d be Dead Duck.

Despite all that, I’m feeling, as I mentioned earlier, a bit more positive about some aspects of the transformation that’s occurring in the craft I’ve been engaged in for more than 50 years. And I’m not Robinson Crusoe.

The most recent State of the News Media report from the Pew Research Centre in the US says in the opening paragraph that there is “a new sense of optimism—or perhaps hope—for the future of American journalism”. I believe that applies in this country too.

Increasingly it’s possible to see a way ahead by which real journalism, journalism of substance rather than the click-bait or McNugget variety, will survive and perhaps even flourish eventually in the on-line world.

Let me give you half-a-dozen reasons why I'm feeling a little more up-beat about where journalism might be headed. In the digital era I think this is called a "listicle", though I'd suggest the pre-digital Bible beat *Buzzword* to listicles with the Ten Commandments.

REASON FOR OPTIMISM NUMBER 1. Newspapers are still with us. At an international symposium on online journalism earlier this year, the executive editor of *The Washington Post* Marty Baron exulted: "We've survived. We're still here."

Baron had the comfort of knowing that Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon and therefore somebody who understands the Internet, had bought the *Post* for a quarter of a billion dollars and was investing heavily to try to ensure it has a digital future. But the point is right. Newspapers have proved more resilient than many expected.

It's more than five years since Malcolm Tucker, the foul-mouthed Scottish spin doctor in the brilliant TV series *The Thick of It*, said: "These are hard times for print journalists... One day you're writing for the papers, the next you're effing sleeping under them".

But, for the time being, newspapers here and overseas are hanging on while they adapt to, and find ways to finance journalism on, the uber-platform.

There's now encouraging evidence—largely from overseas, but with some corroboration here-- that part of the newspaper market is rusted-on and surprisingly unaffected by price rises. There's a hard-core of newspaper addicts who will stick to the habit even if it costs them more.

Newspapers, particularly quality papers, it seems, can raise their cover price quite significantly without losing these print loyalists.

REASON FOR OPTIMISM NUMBER 2. Despite the bad news we keep hearing about declining advertising revenue, falling newspaper circulation and job losses, good journalism, quality journalism, is still being produced. A lot of it.

Carl Bernstein, who along with Bob Woodward uncovered the Watergate scandal and brought down a President, asserted with some passion in a recent lecture that vibrant journalism is being done every day in newspapers, online, in magazines and on television. He was talking about the US, of course, but it applies here, too.

I know that because, for three years until last May, I chaired the Walkley Advisory Board, which oversees the Walkley Awards and conducts the final round of judging. It was a privileged position because I got to see the best of the best in all forms of media from all parts of the country. It included brilliant investigative reporting that, in just those three years, led to: a royal commission on

institutional sexual abuse of children; a senate inquiry into dodgy dealings among Commonwealth Bank financial planners that cost thousands of Australians their life savings; a bribery trial involving foreign subsidiaries of a major Government institution; corruption inquiries that rocked—and keep rocking—both sides of NSW politics; a string of inquiries into sexual abuse in the defence force. And so on.

The assumption has been that investigative journalism in particular would suffer badly from the new media reality—diminishing resources combined with a speeded-up news cycle and the requirement to produce for multiple platforms. But investigative journalists are still doing great work.

Why? Well, if I can quote Carl Bernstein again: “The instinct of reporters is to report.”

REASON FOR OPTIMISM NUMBER 3. Paywalls are starting to give hope. This is really important. The matter of money has been at the bottom of much of the pessimism about journalism. With traditional business models broken, how was journalism to be financed? While it was being given away, the future looked bleak indeed—except, perhaps, for an operation like *The Guardian* backed by a charitable trust; or for media outlets able to depend on philanthropic supporters; or for publicly funded media organisations like the ABC or the BBC.

So when *The New York Times* had a breakthrough in 2011 with its metered paywall—allowing some free access but charging for unlimited use-- the whole industry breathed a sigh of relief. Various kinds of paywalls have now been tried, here and overseas, some of them quite inventive, and a number seem to be yielding encouraging results.

The prominent American news industry analyst Ken Doctor says: “From Minneapolis to Columbia to Hamburg, traffic often begins to grow markedly after the initial shock of a paywall. It may take months or a couple of years but traffic is essentially reset and can be rebuilt.”

The way Malcolm Turnbull put it when he launched *The Saturday Paper* in February this year was that many media organisations are using porous paywalls to slowly train people to start paying for content.

Paywalls are certainly not the entire answer to the problem of funding good journalism into the future, but they're part of it. And charging for journalism provides what has been called “a quality imperative”. If you're giving news away and simply relying on high traffic volumes to attract digital advertising revenue, then what works best is large quantities of click-bait and crap. But if you want to sell something it has to be worth buying.

It's early days, but it could be that media organisations that gave redundancies to their best story-tellers and

allowed investigative resources to wither will come to regret it.

REASON FOR OPTIMISM NUMBER 4. Concern for quality is now affecting on-line outlets that used to scorn traditional journalistic standards and values.

There used to be a deep divide between the traditional view of journalism and the new online approach. Because the Internet is all about speed and informality and democracy, it was argued, ideas about getting things right, checking facts before you published, providing context, were old-fashioned. What mattered was to get stuff out there quickly. Things could be checked and changed later. If you posted something that was wrong people would let you know. The Internet was self-correcting. Truth would emerge eventually.

Well, that sort of attitude is less in evidence these days. The brash start-ups and digital natives seem to have decided credibility matters after all. Traditional values are being embraced in online newsrooms. An obvious example is *Buzzfeed*.

Originally *Buzzfeed* was all entertainment—its big thing was cat videos that went viral. Anything that was fun, big on the web, was core business. Now, after eight years, it's getting to well over a hundred million people a month and it is becoming a news organisation that packs some punch after hiring Ben Smith, a serious journalist from *Politico*, as

editor-in-chief. The cats and gossip and listicles are still there, but serious journalistic aspirations sit alongside them.

Ben Smith talked about the culture change he's trying to bring about in an interview with the *Columbia Journalism Review* in March. "People used to see *Buzzfeed* as a place where you could find really fun stuff, but not really a place you could trust", he said. "Now they're seeing it as a place where you can get your news."

Buzzfeed has hired a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter to head a new investigative unit. *Buzzfeed's* narrative features and investigations will be edited, copy-edited and fact-checked, Smith says. As of last month it employed 550 staff in New York, London, Paris and Sydney. It recently sacked a staffer for plagiarism.

The lesson: Rubbish that makes money on the net can be used to build a platform for more serious reporting.

REASON FOR OPTIMISM NUMBER 5. The idea that people would access raw information on the net without the need for journalistic involvement has proved overblown. In the book *Out of Print--Newspapers, journalism and the business of news in the digital age*, George Brock describes how the founders of WikiLeaks believed that information spoke most powerfully if not mediated by journalists. But they found that, when material was presented online raw,

without commentary or explanation, much of it was incomprehensible and so hardly made an impact.

Brock, head of journalism at City University London, writes: “Their disclosures only reached an audience of any size when picked up by mainstream media”. Assange eventually adopted the technique of partnering with well-known newspapers. The WikiLeaks experience showed that information needs to be distilled put into context and explained. Journalism is required to sift, edit and give meaning.

This is encouraging evidence that journalists remain relevant.

REASON FOR OPTIMISM NUMBER 6. The storytelling capabilities and techniques available to us are greater than ever. New journalistic tools provided by digital technology are astonishing. Sig Gissler, administrator of the Pulitzer Prizes in the US for 12 years, said when he retired early this year: “In many ways, we’ve entered the golden age of journalism”.

I balked at the phrase “golden age” when I first read what Gissler had said, but the more I think about it the fewer reservations I have.

I table, as Exhibit A, Google Glass.

As you probably know, this is something still being tested by Google-- essentially a tiny video camera, computer and

screen built into a pair of spectacles. An American journalist named Tim Pool, who does what he calls “mobile first person” journalism, got access to it through an early-adopters program and tweaked it so it runs apps that meet his journalistic needs.

He can live stream video from his Google Glass camera, access his desktop computer at home from wherever he happens to be and have files displayed in his field of vision, use a voice translation app when he’s in a non-English speaking country, see and talk to his producers back at HQ from thousands of kilometres away, and chat with people on social media—all while he’s broadcasting.

Pool has used Google Glass to cover riots in Istanbul and the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York. He can do it all hands-free, which is important when he’s in the middle of a violent demonstration or dodging plastic bullets or suffering the effects of tear gas and can’t afford to be distracted by peering into a camera. The viewer sees and hears what he sees and hears, in real time.

It’s almost enough to make an old hack like me wish he was just starting out again.

But the fundamental change we’re seeing, and will see a lot more of, is a marriage of traditional journalism and computer science. Have you heard the phrase “hacker journalism”? It doesn’t relate to anything illegal, nothing to do with *The News of the World*.

Hacker journalists use computer science skills, not just to provide expertise in the presentation of information online, but more importantly to access and interpret data in new ways, uncover truths and report them—a core journalistic task.

Combining computer science and journalism degrees will be the new in-thing in institutions like this one--especially in light of the need for journalists to learn IT hygiene and encryption techniques to outsmart Big Brother and protect sources.

Thank you.