

# Seven Steps to Salvation

by William Powers

Let's assume that the news media, collectively, have a soul—that somewhere beneath their tawdry, moronic surface dwells a kind of pure being whose intentions are good. Let's further posit that this soul is, at present, a lost soul. Once, long ago, it had high principles and a clear sense of purpose. Now it's at sea, buffeted by one scandal after another—plagiarism, payola, bias, and garden-variety sloppy work. These troubles, for which it is often abused by fierce bloggers attacking from every side, have shaken the soul's sense of purpose, and now the poor, addled thing is questioning its very reason for being.

But if the news trade's self-image is bad, its public image is worse. Every year, Gallup conducts a poll on the ethics and perceived honesty of various professions. In the most recent survey, journalists ranked below auto mechanics and nursing home operators. They came out ahead of car salesmen, but one wonders how long they'll hold even that position. Various studies show that young people, the audience of the future, are not patronizing traditional news outlets (i.e., newspapers and TV networks) as previous generations did—in part because they don't trust those outlets and view the news as another highly packaged product pushed by big corporations.

Just 30 years ago, establishment newspaper reporters were authentic popular heroes, thanks to the Watergate story and the book and movie *All the President's Men*. Last winter, when a scandal-scarred Dan Rather announced that he would step down from his position as anchor of the *CBS Evening News*, there was semiserious talk in haute media circles that perhaps the job should go to Jon Stewart, the comedian who, on his popular program *The Daily Show*, mocks both politicians and the journalists who cover them. Anyone trying to identify the moment when the news business really hit bottom need look no further.

Is there anything the old media can do to redeem themselves, to restore their public standing and sense of self-worth? Maybe. I would prescribe the following recovery program:

1. **Relax.** All this hyperventilating isn't getting you anywhere, and it's unattractive. Nobody likes a whiner, particularly one who doesn't know how lucky he is. You've been around for centuries, and you're more powerful now than ever before. Your words make great leaders quake. And you're certainly not going out of business anytime soon, not as long as your core product, information,



*It seemed funny when Dan Rather gave GO's "Voice of Reason" award to Jon Stewart of The Daily Show in 2003, but less so when the comedian was mentioned as Rather's replacement.*

is the driving force of civilization. Stop obsessing about your troubles. Calm down and get back to work.

**2. Enjoy yourselves.** Apple Computer's wildly successful iPod comes wrapped in an elegant black box, and the directions inside are sealed with a sticker bearing a single word: "Enjoy." Almost any iPod user can testify to how easy it is to follow this instruction. The ingeniously crafted device is so satisfying merely to hold that it's easy to imagine the pleasure Apple's engineers and designers experienced as they created it. And their pleasure begets ours.

If only your news products were put together in the same spirit of exuberant creativity. Sadly, traditional news outlets have become joyless things. Most American broadsheet newspapers are dull, fearful creatures. There's little effort to be different or original, whether with Washington news or the latest tawdry true-crime trial. Pack journalism rules, because it's safe. Even political cartoons, once a font of delightful wickedness, have grown timid and conformist. It's not unusual to hear that a newspaper killed a cartoon or a comic strip installment that was deemed a bit too controversial. Starting controversies used to be the point of newspapers. Now they all want to please.

Television news errs in the opposite direction, with a cynical reliance on sensation that's become automatic and, in its own way, moribund. The networks are stuck in ratings-driven formulas — addicted to celebrity, serial killers, and once-over-lightly coverage of politics. Local TV news is so idiotic and tabloid-like that one doesn't mention it in polite company.

In contrast, blogs and other online news sources often possess an attractive, intelligent vibrancy, a sense that all news—including the most serious of news—is thrilling because it connects us to the great throng of humanity. One reason *The Drudge Report* gets so much online traffic is that it seems alive to the world, darting here and there with an infectious brio and an appetite for

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the truly novel. Google News offers an assortment of items gathered from thousands of unusual sources around the world. Though the selection is performed by machine (or, as Google puts it, “solely by computer algorithms without human

intervention”), the constantly updating site has more vitality than many old-media products put together by live hominids.

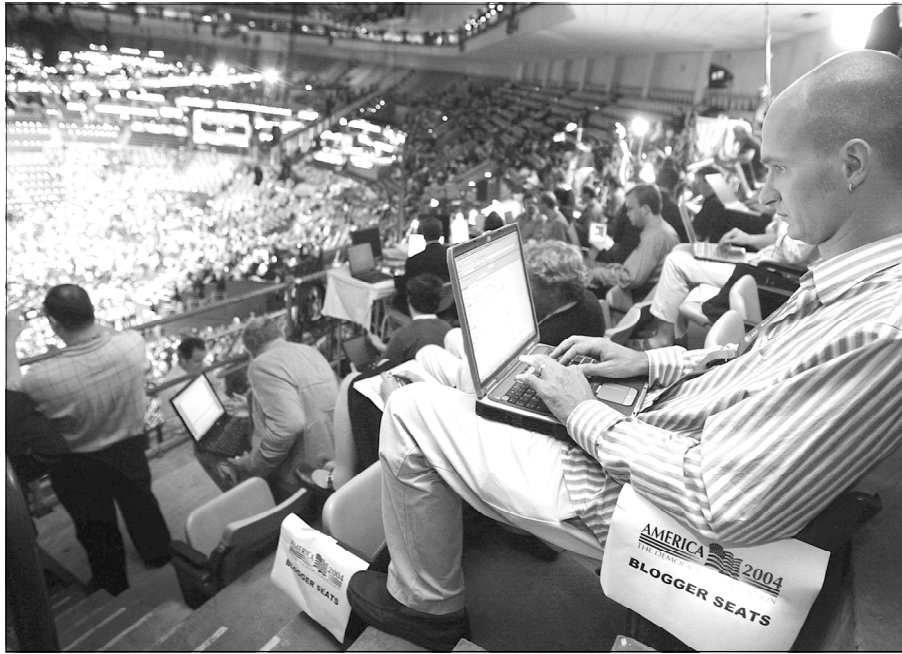
**3. *Be natural.*** Enough already with your pretensions to objectivity and neutrality. Everyone has leanings, passions, and, yes, biases. By claiming to be superhuman—bias free—you come off as weirdly subhuman. In all honesty, sometimes you have the public personality of an android. Striving for perfect fairness is a fine goal. Just don’t act as though you achieve it on a regular basis.

Individuals have opinions. We’re all drawn, often unconsciously, to those who share our own sensibilities, political and otherwise. That’s how news organizations from CNN to Fox News to *The New York Times* acquire their particular ideological tinctures. The process is not evil, it’s organic. Listen to those in your audience who complain about it, and when they have a point, acknowledge it forthrightly. Tell them: “We’re people, and we have points of view, and sometimes they really do shape our work. We’ll try to do better next time.” Candor is the better part of bias.

**4. *Don’t patronize.*** One reason young people say they avoid newspapers and other traditional news media is that what’s offered by those outlets has no apparent connection to the world they live in. To them, the news doesn’t look or sound like life but rather like some false approximation of it. Sadly, sitcoms and other TV shows that couldn’t be more packaged or synthetic often strike the young as more “real.” This is partly their own fault—some of them really are twits—but it’s also yours for not reaching more of them.

I know what you’re going to say: You’ve tried to speak to them in their own language. *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, and other big newspapers have launched free youth-audience tabloids designed to draw in young readers. Cable and network news programs put younger journalists on the air, who report and comment on topics supposedly of interest to their generation. During the 2004 presidential campaign, it

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*In a bow to the rising influence of new media, bloggers were given some of the highly prized seats in the press section at the Democratic National Convention in Boston last July.*

wasn't unusual to turn on the TV and encounter a twentysomething chirpily reporting what was happening out in the très hip blogosphere.

Alas, such efforts almost always have an affected quality. When fiftysomething editors and producers hire twentysomething writers to juice the product with trendy pop inflections, they're not being journalists, they're being marketers. As Brian Orloff, a young reporter for the newspaper industry trade journal *Editor & Publisher*, wrote recently of those giveaway tabloids, "What appears to be an earnest attempt at tailoring the news to multitasking readers often comes across as pandering. Young readers have hectic lives. But we don't need to be bombarded with painfully hip references, or silly euphemisms masking as section headlines (such as 'Hot Topics' instead of 'News' in the St. Pete *Times'* free weekly tabloid)."

Herding young viewers and readers into little media ghettos will not win them over. Young people recognize demographic targeting—they grew up with it. Rather than patronize them with endless "youth" sections and segments, why not include young reporters and commentators throughout your pages and broadcasts? In particular, the opinion columns of America's great newspapers are the Sun Cities of journalism, where older journalists go to live out their golden years. They need fresher perspectives. Meanwhile, because the nightly network newscasts tend to draw an older audience, the networks skew the content toward the interests of the elderly—that's why we see all those "Your Health" segments about new cures for wrinkles and arthritis, high blood pressure and low libido. Such tactics are driving the young away from everything you do.

Swear off demographics. Hire journalists of all ages, and deploy them in unexpected ways. In journalism, there's no such thing as generationally correct work. Have an octogenarian cover blogs. When David Broder retires

from *The Washington Post*, give his column to the sharpest 27-year-old you know. The results could be strange and wonderful.

5. **Make trouble.** It's a fact: Nobody respects a suck-up. The more you try to please readers and viewers by pseudoscientifically studying and catering to their tastes and habits, the less they'll want you in their lives. Over the past few decades, you've become a prisoner to focus groups. Zoned editions and "viewer-friendly" segments don't win you any friends. So stop making nice, and start making mischief. Media consumers have always been drawn, first and foremost, to troublemakers—people who report whatever ugly facts they dug up yesterday,

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or who say whatever is on their minds, public opinion be damned. Investigative journalism, the really dangerous stuff, is too rare these days. After a brief period of renegade glamour in the 1980s, it got institutionalized in *60 Minutes*, *Dateline*

*NBC*, and all those multipart newspaper series journalists sometimes call "Pulitzer bait." When you institutionalize troublemakers, you enervate them. Why did it take the surprise attack of 9/11, and a war launched partly on the basis of bad intelligence, for you to wake up to the problems in the U.S. intelligence agencies? That story was an investigative journalist's dream, and you missed it. You were probably in a strategy meeting about how to regain all those eyeballs no longer trained on you.

6. **Only disconnect.** There's a widespread sense in the news business that contemporary audiences want their news delivered strictly in quick hits: Nothing too thoughtful or lengthy, thank you very much; who has the time? This may be true at the moment, as consumers try to adjust to the proliferation of news sources. But content that can be downloaded on a cell phone and digested in a moment isn't very nourishing, and a day will arrive when the public hungers for more. Though this diet of news niblets is initially appetizing, people will inevitably realize that they'd do better to push away from the buzzy grid and seek more substantial nourishment elsewhere. The baby boomers are about to start retiring, and they're going to have a lot of time on their hands. Tiny news bites won't fill the hours or satisfy their need.

Remember how surprised Hollywood was in the 1990s when intelligent, artsy movies began to draw huge audiences, knocking out the mindless big-studio productions? Something like that is going to happen in your business. Just as the "slow food" movement grew out of general discontent with the quality of what's come to pass for meals, news consumers will crave a respite from the madness, a sense of distance and calm disconnection—a sort of spa version of the news. The surging audience numbers that National Public Radio has notched in the past decade are a leading indicator of this trend, and it's only a matter of time before new

little magazines of ideas and brainy Charlie Rose-ish chat shows become all the rage. You old-media types can wait for someone else to make this happen—bloggers? the BBC on cable?—and then do your usual head-slapping shtick about this “surprising new trend” in the culture. Or you can get out ahead of the curve right now.

7. *Don't give up hope.* When television started to take off after World War II, radio seemed doomed, and nearsighted futurists confidently wrote the medium's obituary. Fifty years later, here we are, still listening. Indeed, thanks to rapidly growing satellite radio companies, we have more to listen to than ever.

Many observers have linked the woes of the mainstream media to the general retreat of Americans from the public square. Just as voting dropped off sharply in the final decades of the 20th century, so too did patronage of the mass print and TV outlets that encouraged public discourse and democratic participation. But there are some countertrends. Last year's presidential campaign debates drew surprisingly large television audiences, and the voter turnout in November was the largest in several decades. If great numbers of Americans watched serious political debates and then went out to vote, can all hope really be lost?

It's worth noting, too, that as audiences exit certain outlets, such as the TV networks, they're gathering in others where real news and issues are still the order of the day. Fox News and NPR have their critics, but neither could be confused with a reality show.

As for those young citizens who are not consuming serious news the way their parents did, let's not forget that we're living through a revolution in life expectancy. In the second half of the 20th century alone, the average lifespan worldwide grew by about 20 years. Many Americans who are in their twenties today can confidently expect to live into their eighties, and perhaps beyond. Marriage and childbearing now come later in life, and, for many, youth itself has been extended into the thirties. Could it be that young people are not reading newspapers because many of them are not yet at a stage in their lives when they see the point of doing so?

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There's a chance that you traditional media will get another shot at this supposedly lost generation of news consumers. If you play your cards right, you might even turn “serious” newspapers and news broadcasts into badges of maturity and arrival. Just as the joys of parenthood, good wine, and old jazz are best appreciated by a grownup sensibility, so too regular news consumption may emerge as a cool dividend of midlife, a token of acquired wisdom.

But there's one way you can guarantee that this will never happen: Continue dumbing down your product. That's a sure dead end. Instead, defy the mavens of media marketing. Live dangerously. Be bright and sophisticated. And people may surprise you. □