Making News at The New York Times

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Introduction

THE TIMES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The new New York Times building that stands blocks away from its namesake Times Square is a fifty-two-story, Renzo Piano-designed office tower between Fortieth and Forty-first streets on Eighth Avenue. The ground floor of the building is dedicated to a New York Times auditorium, rented out for events and used by The Times for “Times Talks,” where New Yorkers have the chance to meet their favorite Times critic or other public intellectual—or in some cases, a baseball player for the Yankees. The building itself is, as the leasing office proclaims, the first “high rise curtain wall with ceramic sunscreen to be built in the United States.” Practically, what this means is that the glass-walled building has light-sensitive blinds that open and shut of their own accord, based on passing clouds or bright afternoon sunlight. The magic of this system wore off quickly for many of the staffers inside, who learned to look up when the loud flaps move and promptly reconfigure the blinds to their liking.

The new building is a great contrast to the paper’s home since 1913 on West Forty-third Street. The old building was a dour, sparsely windowed gray stone edifice hidden on a side street away from the bustle of Times Square. Known to generations of journalists as “the factory,” it surely contributed to the paper’s image as the “Gray Lady” of American journalism. The new home of The New York Times for the digital age, though, is smack-dab in the middle of its audience. You almost have
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to pass the building to get between the Port Authority and the Times Square subway stop. Journalists who happen to be eating lunch in the fourteenth-floor cafeteria, or simply looking out the window, can see the city in endless motion.

This new building is the symbol of a collection of promises: the start of The Times as a fully integrated Web newsroom; The Times as a shining glass beacon for innovation in news; The Times as a stamp upon the New York skyline, marking its continued relevance. And it is, at the same time, a symbol of the challenge inherent in achieving each of those aspirations.

The architecture itself tries to embody these hopes. Over each of the three entrances to the building hangs a The New York Times sign in the distinctive font that has been the legendary banner of the newspaper for decades. Each sign is bold enough to inspire tourists to take photos, but the entrances are not foreboding; in fact, each one is open to the public. People are invited inside the sun-soaked lobby to admire the public art and the glass atrium, though of course they are stopped by security should they try to go inside the elevators leading to the actual newsroom. All the glass, all the open space—the entire interior look of the newsroom is intended to signal a new era for the newspaper in the digital age.

Inside, the three main floors of the newsroom are all connected by red, painted stairways with a big, wide gap for everyone on the fourth floor to peer down at people working on the second and third floors. The most important seats in the house are on the third floor. Here, The Times has deliberately tried to place the people charged with deciding the most important print stories of the day directly next to the people who make the up-to-the-minute decisions about what goes on the Web page. The top brass—the executive editor and two managing editors—sit next to the two most prominent members of the online staff.

Gathered in a few cubicles located in the center of the newsroom is the locus of production for the home page and the hub of the Web operations. The cubicles, a medium wood, are situated low enough to make it easy for people to have conversations with each other. This cluster is home to the continuous news desk editor, the domestic and global home page editors, and the Web photo editors. The Web opera-
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tion, then, is supposed to be a centerpiece of the newsroom, and symbolically, it is also close to the powerful people charged with setting the entire editorial strategy of the newsroom.

But seating plans and architecture do not mean that people will actually talk to each other. During my five months immersed in the newsroom, the activities of the home page editor were generally ignored by executive and managing editors, who, at least on a daily basis, remained preoccupied by deciding what would go on Page One—the front of the physical print paper. Yet just one of these rotating Web producers was responsible at any given time for what more than thirty million unique visitors would see each month.

Those in the newsroom justified the “noninterference” between print and online—a polite way of saying lack of engagement—this way: “These people are chosen because they have great news judgment, are great copy editors, can work quickly, and rarely make mistakes.”

The relationship between print and online is bundled with contradictions: the new reality of online work in the digital age at The New York Times simply doesn’t mesh with the essential character of the daily, print newspaper. It has only been since 1996 that The Times has had a Web site of its own, a blip in its 160-plus-year history, and print still pays the bills and builds egos. On the other hand, “traditional” print journalists do write for the Web—in fact, almost everything they will write appears online. They are accustomed to writing breaking news stories on tempo with the latest developments. Their long-form features appear online, often with multimedia complements. Top editors routinely proclaim in missives to the newsroom and to the public that nytimes.com is the newsroom’s future.

The challenges facing The Times in 2010 were more than just about the relationship between print and online news. In a 24/7 news environment, The Times tried to produce and display a rapid stream of content online while still hoping to set an agenda and have a final say. The newspaper was also caught up in the process of trying to build multimedia and interactive graphics, both as new forms of storytelling and as ways to keep readers on the page longer—another way to build clicks and then dollars. And as social media flourished across the Web, The Times as an organization tried to capitalize on the momentum,
while journalists debated whether to add another tool (or obligation) to their jobs. The question before The Times and its journalists was one bound up in the new realities of economic pressure, changes to professional practices, and technological innovation: Just how should The Times create content for the Web when simply pasting text online was not enough? What should the process and the values defining news production be in this new era?

In practice, the answer proffered by the nation’s premier news organization in 2010 was a bit like the buffet at a Las Vegas casino, with editors, executives, and journalists trying to make The Times offer everything to everyone. The print paper would continue to set the agenda, but the Web site would be continually updated, and reporters on deadline would write for that immediate push. The Web site would be filled with interactive and multimedia content, and the newspaper would aggressively pursue a social media strategy. But as one journalist put it to me, “We can’t keep doing all this shit—blogging, videos, and writing for the paper. We can’t be great at everything.” Still another journalist, however, editor Susan Edgerley, told me, “We will succeed in the digital age because The New York Times likes to be the best. At everything.” Herein lies the great tension at The Times: the reality of what journalists were able to do versus the larger aspirations of the newspaper—the quest to be the best online, as it felt like it was in print. Though this book is history now, in an ever-evolving story of newsroom change, it offers a step back to consider The New York Times and its story in 2010, caught in one moment between the legacy of its past and what it saw as its future. At the time, The New York Times was arguably the most influential journalism outlet in the United States, and it had the most-trafficked newspaper Web site on the entire Web. But stats tell us one thing about the newsroom, and what was happening inside the newsroom tells us another story—about an institution and its journalists adjusting to digital change.

The purpose of this book is to provide an inside portrait of The Times that shows how journalists attempted to negotiate the challenges of creating online and print content according to emergent online journalism values: immediacy, interactivity, and participation. This window into The Times, between January and June 2010, comes from
the five months and over seven hundred hours I spent inside the news-
room (principally stationed at the business desk). In this book, you
will see how journalists tried to negotiate the challenges of working
in an on-demand, instant news world, attempting to iron out routines
that would make it possible to keep up with the pressure of constantly
feeding a Web site that was ever-hungry for fresh content. You will see
the opportunities and challenges journalists faced as they encountered
new demands for interactive content, from video to online graphics.
This book also documents how journalists reckoned (or didn’t) with a
now-active audience able to talk back and create content, thanks to so-
cial media. From my experience inside the newsroom, I saw how these
three core values of online journalism—immediacy, interactivity, and
participation—emerged as points of tension and change. This book,
then, offers an analysis and chronicle of how The New York Times dealt
with these three values.

My key argument is this: there are new values orienting journalism
practice in an online journalism world. Journalists must reckon with
how to adjust to the demands of a 24/7 news cycle, an environment
of interactive engagement, and a world where one-to-many has been
upended. The result has been a restructuring of news routines, albeit
in a contested way, which has led to the emergence of new news values:
immediacy, interactivity, and participation. In turn, these values are
ordering news work and professional practice. The “old” news values,
ones that also emerge out of routines and internal and external forces,
are still present. Objectivity is still a strategic ritual and a vaunted pro-
fessional aspiration, for instance. But front and center, journalists are
now adjusting the ways they incorporate their workflow and profes-
sional aspirations in an entirely different working environment from
the past.

This work, then, shows the puzzling battles being fought over the
front lines as journalists were caught between tradition and change.
The austere Gray Lady, where journalists fought to be one of the five
most important stories of the day and strove to be on Page One, also
had to be nytimes.com, the leader in the world of newspapers online.
This meant that journalists struggled to embrace new imperatives in
their work: getting fresh content out on the Web while still working
for those Page One victories, making the Web site for users to explore stories beyond text, and reaching out to readers across social media platforms. These “musts” became the new reality; whether journalists liked it or not, these values were emerging to order newswork and set standards for journalism at The Times. Whether these values were liked is less important than whether they functionally signified a reorientation of journalism. What we see here is this battle over the meaning of these values, and their place in the newsroom, through the daily lives of journalists in the newsroom.

These values of immediacy, interactivity, and participation emerge from the routines that were (or were not) in place at The Times, and they are overarching terms that help categorize the new priorities, goals, and felt imperatives organizing news production at this time. In turn, these values shape the structure of the book and help us interpret the underlying dynamics at work inside the newsroom. The values are embodied by journalists as they attempt to structure their understandings of what news ought to be—and how it ought to be made. They map onto the relationship between print and online, the drive for multimedia, and the push for social media engagement. I also use these terms because they are resonant with a legacy of theoretical work on both the networked digital environment and scholarship about journalism. With immediacy, interactivity, and participation as a backdrop, a study of The New York Times in 2010 can also be placed in dialogue with many of challenges facing other newsrooms at the time. However, before moving forward to introduce these values in the context of The Times and journalism more generally, I offer some reasons why studying this particular case offers important insights for journalism studies as a whole.

Why The Times?

The Times is a pivotal institution in American democracy. Since 1851, it has shaped the contours of elite political discussion and provided substantive reporting from across the world and the nation. Though it is not a perfect paper and can be judged for many failures throughout its history, the Gray Lady continues to retain its gravitas. There are a
number of jokes one can make about the future of the news industry; one says that there are two rules: First, all discussions about it must reference *The New York Times*. Second, anyone invested in the larger project of changing journalism ought to stop with *The New York Times* obsession. But here we have an account of *The New York Times* as it underwent a period of digital change—not a remarkable disjuncture marked by organizational overhaul, but rather the fine-tuning of adjustments to the pace of news in 2010. This story about the future of the news is already an account of the past, but it deserves to be recorded because it shows how this tremendous institution grappled with the pressures of doing newsworx under social, economic, technological, and professional pressures unique to this moment in journalism.

So why should we care about *The Times*? Fundamentally, *The New York Times* is a special place; its stature, its size, its place in the public imagination, and maybe even its sense of its own importance make its transition to the digital age notable. It has won more Pulitzer Prizes than any other newspaper (over one hundred and ten and counting). And at least for now, publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr., though controversial for his lack of business acumen, remains devoted to keeping the newspaper inside the family trust. Despite claims by *New York Magazine* that the Sulzberger children of the fifth generation will sell out to corporate interests, the two-tiered stock structure that keeps the Sulzberger family in control of the newspaper’s direction means that there has been at least some insulation from layoffs. Sulzberger’s willingness to spend money on journalism that ostensibly does not make the newspaper a profit (e.g., covering Iraq and Afghanistan) was seen as proof to some that he remained committed to an ideal of public service journalism.

There have been some pretty terrible moments for *The New York Times* in recent memory; two such moments, in particular, tarnished the newspaper’s image. One was the Judith Miller scandal, where the reporter’s erroneous reporting on weapons of mass destruction may have played a significant role in leading the United States into the war in Iraq—or at least pushing the Bush administration’s claims to the top of the news agenda at the time. Prior to this, reporter Jayson Blair fabricated enough stories to merit a fourteen-thousand-word public “mea culpa” in the Sunday *Times*. But I am not alone in arguing that
The New York Times is a formidable institution with tremendous journalism muscle that has staying power, as well as the eyes and ears of decision makers, the elite, and increasingly the ordinary public.

Reams have been written about The New York Times as an institution. Much of it has personified the people and publishers who have led the newspaper, noting how their visions shaped Times coverage. For instance, consider Gay Talese’s The Kingdom and the Power, where he reminisces that Eisenhower once asked of the top editor at the newspaper, “Who the hell does Reston think he is, telling me how to run the country?” Chroniclers Susan E. Tifft and Alex S. Jones, in The Trust, offer a different perspective—how The Times owners, “America’s most powerful family”—created a global imprimatur for the newspaper.

Even for critics, The New York Times remains the most important newspaper in the United States. In fact, William McGowan’s Gray Lady Down: What the Decline and Fall of “The New York Times” Means for America chronicles how an institution beset by credibility problems and a penchant for more tabloid journalism may destroy the very watchdog fabric of quality journalism that is necessary for a strong democracy.

Thus, The New York Times is special in many ways—its size, its publisher (for better or worse), its reputation, its ego. At the same time, The Times is facing the same kinds of challenges faced by all newspapers: how to create and inform users in a networked information environment. For this reason, the values that I suggest are influencing newswork at The Times—immediacy, interactivity, and participation—are also found elsewhere. But what happens as the journalists who work there adjust to these new values and change their practices has profound consequences because of the stature of The New York Times. Thus, it is important to take a closer look at each of these values in the context of The Times, as well as in the context of larger debates and observations about journalism generally.

Immediacy: The Times and Beyond

At any one point from my main vantage spot on the business desk at The Times, a variety of news production processes were happening all
at once. The business desk was spread over nearly half a floor, with about one hundred journalists at work. At any one moment, journalists could be writing for the daily paper, thinking about long-term news series, blogging, or continuously updating content for the Web. Immediacy reigned, even when the 24/7 pressure didn’t seem to be staring down journalists. On January 20, 2010, Diana B. Henriques had a daily deadline to work on a big story about an FBI sting and big businesses that had been bribed to sell guns to presumed African warlords. The story was headed for A1, and she was free to spend the day pursuing it without worrying about the Web. Yet the next morning, when a source called to ask where the story was on the Web site, Henriques couldn’t find it without some dedicated searching; on nytimes.com, it had vanished into the netherworld of small headlines on the business and national pages of the Web site. Her story had fallen victim to the constant churn of demand for new news on the home page.

Other journalists were entirely dominated by the forces of the Web. Online editor Mark Getzfred remained so glued to his computer refreshing the Web site with new content that he barely had time for a single morning meeting. His days were generally spent with this kind of constant intensity: looking for stories from the AP and from Times journalists that would respond to the imperatives of more, now, new to feed the hungry Web. He kept the business Web page filled with updated content, even if it meant that, early in the morning, he might be promoting a minor story from Europe or an obscure development with the US Federal Reserve. Only at four p.m., when he got ready for the massive email blast of the day’s top stories, which was sent out to Times readers, would he sit down to gather his thoughts about the most significant stories of the day.

Within the newspaper were many conflicting rhythms and routines for creating news in the Web world. Immediacy—or “fresh” and “freshness,” as Times journalists called it—t ook on a heightened level of prominence whenever the Web was involved. The dynamics for creating Web content for an ASAP world were grueling and unyielding. Though The Times prided itself on avoiding the production of commodity news, or news that everyone else would have, and instead hoped to find “value-added” content that only Times journalists could provide, the reality was often more complicated.
To journalists, immediacy may actually be considered a core, defining value of news—not just now, but always. Scholar Mark Deuze notes that “from its earliest days, journalism has relied on certain forms, archetypes, themes and routines enabling its practitioners to manage an ever-increasing volume of information within the confines [sic] of continuous deadlines.” Immediacy has a legacy in the long history of news: the Romans and Han Chinese can be credited with pioneering daily news. The printing press allowed for the rapid dissemination of what were then called newsbooks and later pamphlets, which recorded major events like earthquakes and voyages to the New World. By the 1600s, European merchants had begun publishing weekly newspapers. Even then, the demands of content and speed wore upon journalists. One Venetian publisher complained that he simply couldn’t keep up with the demand for fresh news on this weekly basis.

More recent history continues to tell the story of journalists’ collective relationship with immediacy. With the telegraph, for instance, we saw the rise and development of the Associated Press, as well as the first reliable and speedy wartime correspondence, during the Civil War. The advent of the telephone made it possible for journalists to relay detail-heavy stories to editors and also to reach people beyond geographical boundaries, opening up the potential for new information gathering and stories with greater breadth for readers. To remain commercially viable and relevant, the form of news (and news organizations) simply had to adapt to changing technological conditions for the spread and distribution of information.

Radio brought the capacity for instant mass communication into people’s homes for the first time, perhaps best illustrated by the Munich Crisis in 1938. For the first time, people got live broadcasts of news as it was happening, or at least as fast as journalists on the scene had time to process it. Newspapers responded to radio by continuing to publish multiple editions throughout the day, but they struggled for differentiation from this new medium. Multiple deadlines and multiple editions helped newspapers compete, but this was ultimately unsustainable, as distribution outside of the suburbs became more complicated. In fact, the afternoon paper, once a way to respond to the day’s news, all but died with the rise of the evening news broadcast, local TV news, and a changing suburban landscape.
Morning newspapers then hoped to retain their position of authority based on the sheer number of correspondents and the advantage of a longer news cycle to provide more comprehensive coverage. Immediacy (or timeliness) for newspapers took on a different meaning: newspapers were the place to go for the historical record and the big story, and, hopefully, this edge in reporting muscle would lead to the scoop. The rise of event-driven cable news signified two things: the demand and desire for immediate news and the special function newspapers now fulfilled as a way to provide context and depth beyond all of the noise on cable (and network) TV. Each medium had its own deadlines and purpose, as well as its own sense of time.

But all of this changed with the fundamental revolution in Internet communication technology and the rise of the networked information environment. Manuel Castells, a scholar of global flows, argues that the emergence of high-speech communication technology has brought about a tremendous change in the speed and exchange of information. The monetary value of instant information alone is significant. Bound up in this technological revolution are the spheres of commerce, social life, politics, and the like. Theoretically, anyone who has access to this networked information environment can demand access to information at all times.

The changes, then, were quite significant: The deadlines for ALL news organizations became NOW! As all news organizations had Web sites, the question became one of differentiation. What made any one news outlet different from any other news outlet? And increasingly, social media sites became not just places to congregate and discuss news events, but the very sources of breaking news. In short, news organizations themselves were now part of the culture of the immediacy of the networked information environment. And audience demands about immediacy were not just imagined but actually had significant impact upon the potential revenue of a news organization.

Thus, at the dawn of the 2000s, something new was added to the idea of immediacy for journalists—this was now going to be an overarching, defining feature of online journalism, a value that would define and orient journalism practice; it would reverberate among the profession and among consumers. By 2010, one of the implications of the speed of online news was that journalists were constantly produc-
ing online journalism. The result is that the process of journalism was laid bare, mistakes and all: news items were published before they were ready in their final print- or broadcast form, and there was radically diminished time between the production and the consumption of news.\textsuperscript{16}

Immediacy has become part of the normative culture of online journalists, whether they like it or not. In an overview of scholarly studies on journalists’ perceptions of immediacy, Swedish scholar Michael Karlsson notes, “A somewhat divided conclusion from these studies is that immediacy is an important and sometimes esteemed trait of the online journalist.”\textsuperscript{17} In American journalism, journalists have resisted an occupational value that seems forced upon the newsroom. At the heart of this frustration lies a larger comment about the idea of journalistic authority and autonomy—whether journalists still have the ability to tell the story and shape the narrative or whether the pace of the story and the felt demand for constant churn destroy journalists’ control.

Life in newsrooms obsessed with immediacy has been compared to that of hamsters—the “hamsterization of journalism.” As Dean Starkman of The Columbia Journalism Review put it, journalists had become little more than hamsters running on a wheel: “The Hamster Wheel isn’t speed; it’s motion for motion’s sake. The Hamster Wheel is volume without thought. It is news panic, a lack of discipline, an inability to say no.”\textsuperscript{18}

The emphasis on getting more news out faster and faster had the effect, as one editor put it, of “everyone running around like rats.”\textsuperscript{19} The hamster wheel is a metaphor for news production in the digital age, where speed is more important than fact checking, and quantity is more important than quality. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) noted the impact of immediacy on news production in one of its quadrennial reports, suggesting that instead of reporting quality stories, journalists were responding to constant, rolling deadlines.\textsuperscript{20}

In many newsrooms, Starkman argued, this “news panic” resulted from the compulsion that journalists felt to work faster and harder, lest they risk economic failure. Writing more stories with faster turn-around had financial rewards: bumps in Web traffic that could then prove the case for higher rates for online ads. Newsrooms were thus
rewarding work that was generating bumps in Web traffic, rather than the kind of substantial reporting once found on Page One or in investiga
tive features. Generally, journalists at The Times were not obsessed
with economic failure in the same way that plagued other newsrooms,
but, at times, they certainly did appear to be running around like the
hamsters Starkman and others have described. At the same time, these
journalists also had to reconcile their work with their simultaneous de-
sire to have the final say and be the final authority on the daily news
cycle—both manifested in the guise of the print paper. Immediacy ori-
ented and motivated news production at The Times in conflicting ways,
signaling a larger debate about the importance of first and fresh versus
the authority of the journalist, the quality of news, and the enduring
news story.

Interactivity: The Times and Beyond

Sewell Chan was hard at work on The Times’ first big profile of Federal
Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke in May 2010. In fact, the interview
with Bernanke had been the first long interview Chan had been able
to have with the chairman since starting the beat earlier in the year.
But as part of putting together that week’s Sunday business profile,
Chan was also doing something other than massaging text—he was
digging around for material for an interactive timeline of Bernanke’s
life to accompany the story. In fact, he had actually managed to find
the Fed chairman’s high school and college yearbooks. Along with Web
producer Danielle Belopotosky and a few others, Chan, a straight-up
traditional reporter, worked to craft “A Fed Chairman’s Life” to bring
pictures (and bad moustaches), dates, anecdotes, and context to the
otherwise serious story. For journalists like Chan, it was additional
work—work he didn’t mind, but extra work nonetheless—and for Be-
lopotosky, it was a pretty serious undertaking to accomplish in about a
week’s time. The Monday after the story ran, she acknowledged to the
other Web producers that she was exhausted.

This effort was the sign of another imperative in the newsroom:
an avowed focus on interactives, including multimedia, interactive
graphics, photo slidshows, and audio. For every story that required serious planning, someone, either a Web producer assigned to the business desk or journalists on bigger teams with more resources like the programming whizzes and documentary film experts, was likely to be involved. Each potential Pulitzer story (“special project”) for the year involved a sit-down meeting not just with the reporter, top editors, individual editors, and the photo and graphics desks, but with people from desks with names like multimedia, interactives, and video. They would help the story come alive on the Web in ways beyond words.

From an editorial perspective, interactivity emerged as a contested value, one that structured, ordered, and influenced newswork and journalists’ role perceptions. Traditional journalists saw the importance and, generally, the value of interactive journalism, but they were conflicted by the changes to their old routines. And aside from Pulitzer projects, there was little clarity about who these “new people” in the newsroom were and what the process was for creating a Web interactive.

Though none of the lower-ranking journalists I spoke with talked about the business merits of interactivity, top management did. For top newsroom executives and people on the business staff, *Times* interactive journalism was about “engagement.” By this, they meant that people not only got a richer experience of a story but also stayed on the page longer. And time spent on a page is an important measure for Web metrics, one that can be fed to online advertisers as justification for higher rates.

Though newspapers have used photography since 1855, dating back to its first major appearance in reports on the Crimean War, photography online has the capacity to be something different. For example, in the case of an online audio slide show, there is something that is distinct from broadcast, both visually and as an auditory experience. The user sets the pace, generally, and the distinct media of sound and photography complement each other. While newspapers have also used infographics in print for decades, with an interactive online graphic, the user can have a multilevel experience of a dynamic graphic that responds to the pace he or she chooses. Multimedia, then, offers a variety
of ways to tell stories with the user central to the experience of controlling and direct her way through content.

Interactivity has meaning for online journalism far beyond The Times. Interactivity has long been a part of the way people think about online content. Before there even were Web browsers, in the dawn of the early Internet, Ithiel de Sola Pool hypothesized that electronic publishing would be

more and more like an electronic game, permeated by lights and sound along with words. The players will initiate and the machine will answer back, in an interactive conversational process. It may be for fun, for management, for daily life, or for work.\textsuperscript{23}

de Sola Pool accurately predicted a world of online video, audio, and multimedia content.

And as interactivity became part of the online journalism world, a cultural change was taking place that manifested itself on many levels. Entirely new forms of journalism would be created. Journalists could (and would) be compelled to think about news as moving beyond simple text. Nontraditional journalists with skills in Web design, programming, video, and photography would be elevated to greater importance in the newsroom—as they were at The Times with the creation of the multimedia desk in 2005 and the interactive news desk in 2009.

The term \textit{interactivity}, though, is pretty muddy. It can mean interactive experiences between users, or it can mean interactive experiences between the user and the computer. When I talk about interactivity in the newsroom, I mean this user-computer interaction. The definition I use comes from Erik Bucy, who writes that interactivity is “the control that users exercise over the selection and presentation of online content, whether story text, audiovisuals, or multimedia, and other aspects of the interface.”\textsuperscript{24} While users might have the sense that they are, indeed, participating in a two-way exchange, they may never actually achieve control over the content or perform an observable communication behavior with online computer interaction, as Bucy
points out. This is very different from both user-to-user communication and actual content creation, activities that are encompassed much more directly by the term (and underlying journalism value of) participation.

Some scholars also agree with the more practical notion that interactivity is constitutive of design on the Web—that it is embedded as a property of multimedia. In fact, interactivity is a core value of Web design and creation now, as Web guru Jesse James Garrett notes prolifically across the Web. If you look in any of the Web programming or user interface textbooks starting from around 2000, you will see that the idea of user experience is fundamentally oriented around giving people a reactive and immersive environment. This is moderated by two concerns common to journalism: getting content to users immediately and keeping users on a site. Journalists largely talk about interactivity as “multimedia.” However, describing the normative value that emerges from their focus on this work as interactivity encompasses the growing depth and sophistication of storytelling techniques, the presence and rise of programmers and so-called interactive news designers, and the focus from the top on the idea of “engagement” (keeping users on the site).

In contrast to immediacy, interactivity suggests a different set of routines and practices. As Steen Steensen, a Norwegian journalism studies scholar, points out, work on interactive projects forces newsrooms to pause from their 24/7 routines to focus on something “more creative, even more agential.” Here, people theoretically have time to experiment, to play, and to create new types of newswork. However, one can also see these spaces for creating interactivity as an institutionalized routine for experimentation—in part, because it takes on the mythical status of a site of innovation.

In the past, though, most observers have argued that newsrooms have largely failed in their efforts to implement multimedia journalism into their daily workflow. In fact, interactivity has been called an “uncomfortable myth” of online journalism. Studies in the United States, Germany, Belgium, and Ireland have all suggested that there is a gap between the perceived opportunity of interactivity and its actual use and implementation. However, this work has noted that interac-
tive journalism influences role perceptions, job descriptions, and work routines. Internal pressures from editors, and more external pressures like corporate demands, influence a drive toward interactivity in US newsrooms.

At The Times, the manifestation of interactivity in newswork remains contested, as some journalists see its value, while others view it as an imposition. In another vein, interactivity has a way of both flattening hierarchy and enforcing top-down mandates. And the contrast between interactivity and immediacy became clear in my research at The Times: interactivity was simply so much harder to do—from planning to process—that it was largely reserved for off-deadline stories. At The Times, we will see how some journalists make interactivity part and parcel of their daily work, document the rise of these interactive journalists (multimedia, Web, and interactive specialists), and look at the variable nature of work routines associated with interactivity. But to be sure, interactivity is coupled with another important value: participation, or the experience of actually creating content and communicating with other users.

Participation: The Times and Beyond

Micheline Maynard, or @MickiMaynard, could—and would—tweet every ten or fifteen minutes during the news day. Stationed in Detroit, Maynard put out a regular stream of tweets about the car industry and her airline beat, as well as news about her beloved Detroit sports teams. For her followers on Twitter (about ten thousand), she could leverage her tight network of sources in the airline industry to let them know about a flight delay even before an airline would announce it formally. As she put it: “With Twitter, now I think: How’s that [news] going to be my thought on Twitter? . . . What a great way to promote links to stories to these people following you and interested in what you are saying. One of the interesting things about the airline beat is that with snowstorms, I can give them information about delays where a blog post might take hours. And some of the personality of tweeting is kind of fun.”

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Not everyone shared the same impressions of Twitter, Facebook, and other forms of social media. Bill Keller, then executive editor of The Times, had a Twitter account, but despite having almost fifty thousand followers, he had only tweeted 205 times on his own—and even then, there was little commentary or personality with his tweets, which generally offered links to Times articles. Publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr. didn’t practice what he preached about getting journalists onto social media platforms: he wasn’t on Twitter, and if he was on Facebook, his profile was blocked from public search.

There is a powerful recalibration, at least in theory, happening between the journalist and the audience. Thanks to the affordances of Web 2.0, a philosophical and technical vision of the Web that provides ordinary people with the capacity to produce their own content and share it across social networks, journalists are dealing with the “people formerly known as the audience,” as scholar Jay Rosen noted in 2006. The discussion in journalism about participation mirrors a much larger discussion about the rise of social media, the importance of the “writeable web,” as Yochai Benkler puts it, and the potential redistribution of actors from a hub-and-spoke model of content distribution to a more networked model of information content creation and sharing.

With smartphones, Facebook, and Twitter, ordinary people have captured dramatic moments, from the landing of a commercial airline on the Hudson River, to gripping scenes from Iran’s “Green Revolution,” to the wide-ranging efforts across social media platforms surrounding the Arab Spring. These “acts of journalism,” as Clay Shirky calls them, suggest that there is a public ready to engage in covering news. A “participatory logic,” in Seth Lewis’ terms, suggests that media creation is “unregulated, distributed and outside the bounds of institutional control”—and that, in fact, participation has actually become a fundamental value of online journalism.

Participation challenges the traditional norms of journalism by suggesting that anyone, at any time, could become a reporter. Journalistic authority is transformed, as both journalists and users are now creating media content that may be equally newsworthy. Some note the promise of this fusion: as London School of Economics professor Charlie Beckett imagines, “professionals and amateurs [are] working together
to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, perspectives."

So what should journalists do to address the fact that not only are their audiences consuming more news online than ever before, but they are also creating, engaging, and talking about news content with each other? The mantra inside newsrooms has been to get journalists on these social media platforms reaching out to audiences. Poynter, the central news-industry non-profit educational institution, ran a social media blog that offered such advice articles as “The Problem with Retweets and How Journalists Can Solve it.” The organization also provided training modules with courses on “Facebook for Reporting and Storytelling” as part of the for-pay “Social Media Webinar Series.” Journalism schools at Columbia University, the University of Missouri, and the University of California, Berkeley, have offered crash courses to journalists hoping to get up to date on social media as quickly as possible. There were talks of coming up with a social media Pulitzer for Andy Carvin, the NPR social media strategist who verified citizen tweets and retweeted throughout the Arab Spring.

Similarly, news organizations got lots of attention from journo-blogs for announcing “social media editors,” whose primary purpose had been deemed to integrate social media into the newsroom workflow. In 2009, three news organizations appointed the first set of social media editors: The New York Times, NPR, and Toronto’s Globe and Mail. These new editors were hailed as the first “brave souls” in the industry to tackle this newsroom challenge, according to PBS’s Media-Shift blog. Then, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal quickly followed, adding social media editors to their rosters. USA Today and Reuters only established the position in 2011, realizing that their own social media efforts were far behind those of other news organizations. However, most of these news organizations reached an important conclusion: no single editor could be an adequate force to encourage participation in a newsroom—widespread cultural buy-in was necessary to accept participation.

Similarly, news organizations had begun to promote participation via social media as a key to their success. Al Jazeera English had widely touted its institution-wide social media training just before the Arab
Spring as being crucial to its acclaimed coverage of the subsequent events.41 The BBC had a full team of journalists devoted just to addressing the needs of the BBC’s many Twitter feeds—from @BBCWorld-service to @BBCbooks. This was in addition to a full team dedicated to monitoring user input via social media and the BBC’s own user-generated content prompts. Notably, in each of these cases, user contributions were seen as being for the benefit of the news organization—users were collaborators, insofar as the information they provided was both accurate and aided in the development of news stories.

However, as with interactivity, the utopian discourse about participation gives way to the economic reality behind news. Participation also addresses underlying concerns with how to raise revenue and increase brand loyalty. Newsrooms like The Washington Post, The Guardian, and The Wall Street Journal have experimented with actually placing a mini-newspaper of sorts, or a “social reader” as The Post called it, on Facebook. Users could read this content on Facebook or be directed back to the main Web site. At the time, the average American spent seven hours a month on Facebook, versus fourteen minutes a month on news Web sites.42 Thus, by trying experiments to create content on Facebook, news organizations were hoping to leverage some of that time, at least into traffic and users.

Similarly, the utopian discourse around user-as-producer and “networked journalism” was far from the reality at The Times. Inside the newsroom, participation was contested in a variety of ways. Many journalists acknowledged this supposedly new relationship with the audience but did not deem it worth their time. I want to stress that inside The Times, participation was almost entirely understood as engagement on social media platforms, not as commenting, not as blogging, not as live-chats, not as emails, and not as user-generated content. But perhaps more significantly, the actual implementation of participation as a value at work in the newsroom suggested that journalists did have far more power than the ordinary person to contribute to creating and shaping the conversation. Journalists at The Times, at least, weren’t too sold on this two-way conversation. The conversation was for them, not for us.
In the digital era, new values operate as constraints, guidelines, and conflicting principles—in addition to older values that have shaped news production for decades. The ones I have identified—immediacy, interactivity, and participation—build on a discussion of new news values in the digital age. I am not the first to argue that these values in the digital age are changing news production, but this study further explicates them by showing them at work within the nation’s most prominent newsroom. This process of understanding news values from going inside the newsroom has a long and established history. Through newsroom ethnography, scholars have entered the newsroom to explore how various newsroom routines shape and pattern what makes news. Understanding these routines is important, because values are defined, created, and established out of the routines of everyday work practices and the resulting internal, external, professional, technological, and other influences on these routines.

We have many, many studies on the content that comes out of newsrooms, but less understanding of the motivations, decision making, and processes behind the creation of that content. Ethnography is especially useful for a number of reasons, because it helps elucidate these elements of newswork.

The foundation for this work comes out of a body of newsroom sociology research that emerged in full force in the 1970s, sometimes called the “first wave” or the “golden age” of newsroom ethnography. The scholarship remained mostly dormant until about the mid-2000s, when newsroom scholars began a “second wave” that looked into the widespread transformations of news routines in the digital age.

The early ethnographies were concerned with examining the larger routines of the news organization, and they spent less time focusing on the experiences of individual journalists. The scholarship tended to emphasize routine, predictability, and order over disorder as a way to create generalizable descriptions. Ironically, the scholarship from this era—a time when TV reigned on three channels and the daily newspa-
per was not yet seen to be in great decline—has stood the test of time because these works so accurately identify forces that still order newswork. The other reason these works loom so large is that few scholars today have come close to replicating studies of their scale and significance in the digital age.

To provide a brief review, the tradition begins perhaps in the 1950s, with two studies emphasizing how professional ideology influences news production in many ways, from the socialization of journalists, to newsroom policy, to the very stories that journalists choose to put in the day’s papers (or “gatekeeping”). Later, Herbert Gans spent ten years on and off at *CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek,* and *Time,* analyzing the constraints placed upon journalists in perhaps the most influential study of newsrooms thus far. He noted that a combination of internal pressures, from professional socialization to the need for predictable content, as well as external pressures like source relationships and economic factors, influenced how journalists were able to do their work.

Gaye Tuchman, who did her work on newspapers and TV stations in “Seaboard City,” a major metropolitan area, argued that newsrooms organized work along strategic rituals designed to make sure that there was a reliable flow of content to the news organization; even the vaunted idea of objectivity was to protect journalists from critique and ensure a continued flow of news from sources. Managing the unexpected was the goal—and the necessity for newsrooms to function. Other scholars emphasized that economic forces constrained the news, that news worked according to a stopwatch culture, that newsrooms were bureaucratically organized (e.g., the beat structure), and that source-reporter relationships constrained what and how journalists could report. And generally, this work does a good job of helping us understand—at least at the organizational level—the forces that constrain and order newswork.

But the economic, political, technological, and social conditions for making news have changed since the golden age of news ethnography in the 1960s–80s. The stakes are higher now than they were in the analog (or perhaps the pre-CNN) age: journalists don’t just need to fill broadcast or print deadlines; they also have to feed the constant
flow of the Web, playing to an audience that reads or watches whenever it wants to because the content never goes off the air. Similarly, these news organizations are now battling to survive in an increasingly complex and sophisticated economic and technological landscape. A look at newsmaking in the digital age is a reminder that, at The New York Times, no one has quite figured out what it means to do newswork predictably or comfortably and that new news routines are still being crafted.

The earlier constraints upon news remain quite on point today, but there are new challenges: creating news in a digital world requires adjusting to the rapid flow of information in a networked information environment. In fact, when sociologist Eric Klinenberg made an appeal for more media sociology in this time of change, he did so noting how technology had dramatically altered the practices and experiences of the journalists he observed. He argued that journalists were staring down a twenty-four-hour “news cyclone” of Web, TV, and print, expected to do it all—and with the understanding that fickle news consumers wanted new news on demand, on their own schedules.

Northwestern sociologist Pablo Boczkowski has made perhaps the most significant contributions to date in the more recent literature on newsrooms changing in the digital age. In his first book, which looked at newsrooms in the late 1990s, he argued that newsroom innovation was contingent on a variety of forces, motivated in part by the individual and organizational flexibilities of the newsroom. In fact, he went to The New York Times in 1998, looking at the proto-Times online: CyberTimes, an outpost of technology coverage publishing only original articles that was later shut down to become—believe it or not—a print section. His more recent book on newsrooms in Argentina notes the dangers of homogenization in an immediate news environment, chronicling two competing newspapers that have become obsessed with copying each other and have prioritized speed over depth.

Two recent book-length interventions about American journalism are important additions that hopefully build on the missing legacy of substantial work on newsroom ethnography. The first project is David Ryfe’s 2012 account of three midsized regional newspapers across the country, where he spent about two and a half years doing research.
He played the role of intern to understand the pressures journalists faced—from adjusting to the demands of online news to dealing with economic pressure. At every newsroom he visited, new innovations were introduced, only to fail. His overarching conclusion was that innovation in newsrooms was simply impossible—quite a dark finding. Nonetheless, he agrees that the same pressures observed by the earlier ethnographers do, in fact, still impact journalism.

C.W. Anderson’s account of The Philadelphia Inquirer and the Philadelphia Daily News shows these organizations in their death throes, trying to survive as their circulations plummeted and as editors and reporters were struggling to respond to these economic conditions. More comprehensively, though, he recognizes that newspapers are no longer the central focal point of the news ecology in a city and also looks at bloggers, radical media producers, foundations, computer hackers, and social media experts. Like my investigation here, his work in Rebuilding the News argues that journalists are struggling within a “web of institutional, economic, and cultural constraints” that will indeed impact the future of news, though his work is more explicitly focused on the challenges facing metropolitan journalism. Both of these books deal with the reality of producing news in a new media environment, and Anderson’s suggests a way to reconceptualize how news makes its way through a community.

There have been dozens and dozens of new journal articles and book collections written on news production in print, TV, and radio newsrooms—and these are quite valuable. These studies highlight the intensity of the challenges that traditional journalists face, as well as the points of contestation in newsrooms. I think their findings can be broken into two core themes: studies that describe the contested nature of professional journalism and professional identity, and work that articulates the difficulties and successes of incorporating new technology into organizational workflow. Traditional journalists have been threatened by new types of journalists, from online journalists to multimedia specialists, who challenge their assessment of authoritative storytelling. Participatory content and blogging have only further forced journalists to assert their relevance as specialists in the new media environment. Similarly, new technology has created a larger conversation
about change in news practices. New technology can be seen as external influence (e.g., the Web moves faster) or internal influence (e.g., we should have more reporters writing for the Web), and the affordances of new technology have created a larger discourse around the notions of immediacy, interactivity, and participation in online news.

My project builds on these developments about the constraints, pressures, and challenges of journalism identified by these scholars. What I offer is an analysis of how new online journalism values impact the daily workflows of journalists as sites of obligation, admiration, and contestation. I do so through an ethnographic exploration of *The New York Times* that spanned five months during which I spent between three and five days a week in the newsroom (more often five). I shadowed more than thirty journalists across the newsroom hierarchy and types of positions, watching them go through their days; I interviewed over eighty people; and I generally attended at least three news meetings a day, depending on whom I shadowed—and on a few rare occasions, I spent all day and night at *The Times* to watch the twenty-four-hour news cycle. Over the course of this book, I take a nod from journalism and use people’s real names attached to dates. But when people did have negative things to say, unless they really wanted their name to be used, I’ve left those quotations anonymous and omitted the date associated with the comments to avoid any potential retribution.

Here, I capture one snapshot of a particular moment in the biggest newsroom in the United States, at arguably the most influential paper in the country, during a time of technological change. The period that I studied, January–June 2010, represents a moment of digital change for both news and *The Times* during an uncertain time for newsroom economics and newsroom routines. However, *The Times* is not a static place, and if I tried to chronicle all of the changes at *The Times*, I would never stop researching; I’d be chasing a moving target. Acknowledging that the subject is fluid actually adds analytical strength to my work: these themes will continue to evolve, and what I offer here is an analytical and empirical lens through which to understand and compare change (see Methods).

The focus here is on documenting the emergent values that I
could see from the practices of individual journalists and their collective experiences in the newsroom. Nonetheless, these values of online journalism—whether thought of as logics, frameworks, pressures, constraints, and so on—are likely at the heart of newsrooms elsewhere. Not only have other journalism scholars suggested their influence, but the wide-ranging reports and accounts from journalists in the trenches suggest their influence is well-founded. Thus, while the setting is unique, and the resources and even the worries of the journalists in this study are different, some fundamental similarities are nonetheless quite possible. The rest of the book makes clear how these values of immediacy, interactivity, and participation are framed and understood within the daily lives of newsworkers—accounting for the challenges and the opportunities that they face.

Outline of the Book

In a brief first chapter, I will relate and highlight some of the major dilemmas facing journalism, and particularly newspapers during the time of my research. This book is not a “newspapers are dying” book, nor is it a serenade for the new partnership between user and producer. But it is important to provide some context for the present discussion and the external factors that influence newswork. Another backstory is important as well: the state of The New York Times. This is part Web history of the newspaper and part financial history, but it lays the groundwork for the rest of the chapters. The newspaper’s journey online is instructive for understanding some of the more recent tensions. Similarly, the state of the newspaper’s finances helps ground the economic reasons for why this particular moment at the paper was so important.

The heart of the ethnography begins with Chapter 2. I document three days in the lives of journalists at The Times. This close look at three journalists—all of whom have different goals and daily work patterns—offers some insight into the way immediacy, interactivity, and participation are experienced in the newsroom. The first vignette shows the experience of a reporter on a breaking news story;
the second a day spent with a reporter who isn’t on deadline but who has an entirely different rhythm, as well as some particular and rather forward-thinking views on multimedia work; and the third a day with a blogger during the unveiling of the iPad (the very first one). These are slices of life inside the newsroom, not full representations of how each value is manifest and contested as a whole—I leave that to the other chapters. Rather, the intention of this chapter is to zoom in on what it was like to be a journalist at The Times in 2010, and these anecdotes set the stage for larger debates along the way.

Chapter 3 focuses on immediacy. This is the first of two chapters on that topic, and it is focused on how the news organization as a whole understands (or contests) immediacy in a digital age. We get a sense of the “old” immediacy: the print world, where immediacy equals today’s news for tomorrow. We see the kind of calculated, rational decision making, the system of meetings, and the planning processes that journalists undertake to prepare stories for each day’s print newspaper. We’ll be careful to note the kinds of conversations that unfold and the vaunted status with which journalists understand Page One. This is not the rhythm or process behind the creation of journalism for the Web. On the Web, immediacy means now, ASAP journalism. The goal is to keep the Web site looking “fresh,” with new content, so that an audience perceived as hungry for different content will keep coming back for more or stay on the page. Chapter 3, then, underscores how the print world lives in almost complete opposition to its online counterpart.

In Chapter 4, we learn more about the impact of immediacy in news production on the traditional journalist, who is caught between serving two masters: print and online. The two different sets of necessities native to each medium produce competing demands of timing and story creation, among others. We see how a story, when produced under ASAP pressure, may actually be wrong at first in the rush for speed. Journalists are often asked to write a “second-day story,” or a magazine-style take-out, in the same day they have written incremental updates for a breaking news story. We learn how this can be an exhausting process for many journalists. To better understand ASAP journalism, we take a closer look at when a scoop is a scoop in the digi-
tal age: As journalists rush to churn out stories faster than anyone else, is anyone counting who gets the story first?

While the focus is on immediacy in both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, it would be misleading to note that the entire New York Times functions according to a breaking news mantra; it does not. Journalists at The Times do have the leisure to write longer stories (in fact, this is how they may begin to think about interactivity). The Times difference means that some journalists, some of the time, are insulated from the demands of the Web. However, immediacy is increasingly a part of the daily reality of journalism at The Times, and fending off the needs of the Web can be difficult, as we will see.

Chapter 5 focuses on interactivity, or the evolution of news content presented via sound, visuals, browsing, and navigation or any kind of complex layering of multimedia. We see how interactivity is a contested value, as journalists explore what it means to create this new form of content. There are economic reasons for pushing forward the creation of interactive content, as top management promotes an agenda of hiring new people and stirring up newsroom initiatives to promote this kind of content. Interactivity can be monetized; more time spent on the page is a valuable advertising metric. But most journalists don’t think about interactivity this way. The chapter offers an overview of the new faces in the newsroom and how they talk about online journalism, and then it shows various top-down and bottom-up attempts at interactivity. Throughout, you will see that the meaning and importance of interactivity in online journalism remain contested in the news creation process.

In a world of participatory action via YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media, Chapter 6 tries to unpack what the idea of participation means inside the newsroom. With a nod to some of the utopian discourse around participation discussed earlier, this chapter illustrates that practice is far from this aspiration of user-as-producer, or redistribution from one to many. For journalists, participation means engagement on a social media platform, but the significance of participation and the way that it will influence their lives are the subject of debate. Top-down management seems to have a strategy, with real economic stakes, yet the top editors have not bought in, and most journalists aren’t thinking about economics.
The result is a wide range for experimentation—there isn’t even a stable code of ethics, for better or worse. While some journalists seem to spend their entire waking lives on Twitter, developing personal brands and experimenting with reporting techniques, others shy away from the platform out of protest, confusion, or concern. We see instances of journalists learning from each other about social media, but what tends to be emphasized is a one-to-many relationship with the audience, not the engagement that theorists promote. The chapter explores the contested nature of participation at the newspaper, and it sheds some light on the working definition of what this value means to journalists—even those who embrace it.

In Chapter 7, I will bring all of these threads together and make some predictions about the future. The New York Times began a Web site in 1996, but it is still struggling to figure out how to balance the demands of working in a dual print/online world. How is it possible that this culture clash still exists? And what does it mean for the future of The New York Times that its front page is not the front page for most of its readers? What will happen as the newspaper continues to find ways to personalize and create a more interactive, “sticky” experience for consumers? And how will journalists fare?

These are the stakes: as of 2010, The New York Times was in, at best, a hazy experimental stage with much of its online news creation and production. But without a clear sense of purpose and identity, as well as true investment from text journalists who believe in the newspaper as a digital edition, the newspaper could, at some point in the future, likely find that the bulk of its internal values and practices have moved it closer and closer to irrelevancy—or its focus on being the best could mean that it emerges as a change-leader for the industry. The Times liked to think those thirty million unique visitors were coming to The New York Times each month because it was the best newspaper site online. However, without true cohesion between past and present mindsets at The New York Times, one wonders when the glass will crack. And that brings us back to Renzo Piano’s towering metaphor on Eighth Avenue. Thus, after we review the context and temporal setting for this study in the next brief chapter, in Chapter 2, we’ll take our first steps into the lobby of the newspaper and beyond.