The Basement Interviews
Open Source Journalism

Jay Rosen, press critic, writer, and New York University journalism professor, talks to Richard Poynder

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Jay Rosen was born in Buffalo, NY, in 1956. Both sides of his family were Jewish immigrants from Poland: one grandfather arrived in North America via New York, the other via Toronto. Rosen's branch of the family subsequently settled in Buffalo, in order to "get away from" the Toronto grandfather.

As he grew up Rosen, in his turn, dreamed of getting away: away from the "comfortable deprivation" and "thinness" of the "white-bread post-war working-class suburb of a typical American city" that he felt Buffalo to be; away from the enforced passivity and loneliness of the suburban house with the always-on television — a world in which citizens were spectators, not participants, in the events of the nation.

By his own account Rosen's education was "pretty incoherent". After flunking out as an architecture major at Carnegie Mellon he changed subjects several times, before eventually graduating from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

In his final year of college, Rosen decided that he wanted to become a political reporter, probably in Washington; an ambition that crystallised during a successful internship at his local paper — the Buffalo *Courier Express*. The editor was sufficiently impressed that he promised Rosen a journalist's position when he graduated.

On his return to college, however, Rosen began to fret that — for someone planning to escape the 'burbs — he was not being very adventurous. So he decided to look for another job, and unwittingly applied for the position he had already been promised but which had been advertised to meet union requirements. When he turned up to claim the post, the furious editor had the security guards throw him out, outraged that Rosen had accepted a job with his paper, and then looked elsewhere.

Forced to start over, Rosen opted to change directions, and enrolled in a media studies PhD program at New York University (NYU). Casting around for a suitable topic to research, he stumbled across a famous 1920s debate between

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Walter Lippmann and John Dewey about "the public" — a debate sparked by the publication of Lippman's book *Public Opinion.*[2]

Fascinated by the discussion, Rosen decided to write his dissertation around the debate. Entitled *The Impossible Press*, Rosen's thesis argued that while the press had an important democratic role to play in helping the public to form opinions, this was a difficult task, and journalists had to keep re-discovering how to accomplish it. He later concluded that they had entirely forgotten how to do so, and now only paid lip service to the role.

Becoming a member of the NYU faculty in 1986, Rosen went on to devote his professional career to exploring the delicate and complex relationship between the press and the public. Gaining a reputation for having an acute insight and understanding of the press' role in a democracy, Rosen became a leading figure in the reform movement known as "public journalism"[3] — which emerged in the US in the early 1990s in order to encourage journalists to repair their relationship with the public.

From 1993 to 1997 Rosen was the director of The Project on Public Life and the Press. Funded by the Knight Foundation[4], and housed at NYU, the project's goal was to support the movement for public journalism by holding meetings for those interested in the topic, encouraging the press to undertake experiments and projects, and then studying the results. And in 1999 Rosen published a book on the topic called *What Are Journalists For*[5]?

In retrospect, Rosen believes that the public journalism movement had little impact on the press, whose disconnect with the public today has reached the point where something is seriously wrong with the relationship.

More importantly, the development of the Web, and especially the blogosphere[6], has broken journalists' monopoly on news reporting. Consequently, cautions

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[2] *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippman, Free Press, Reissue edition, July 1st, 1965
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_Opinion
[3] Public journalism (often also called "civic journalism") was viewed as a countermeasure against eroding trust in the news media and widespread disillusionment with politics and civic affairs. It called on the press to take a more active role in strengthening citizenship, improving political debate and reviving public life.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civic_journalism
[4] The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation was established in 1950 as a private foundation independent of the Knight brothers' newspaper enterprises. It is dedicated to furthering their ideals of service to community, to the highest standards of journalistic excellence and to the defence of a free press.
http://www.knightfdn.org/default.asp
[5] *What Are Journalists For,* Jay Rosen, Yale University Press, 1999
[6] Blogosphere is the collective term encompassing all weblogs, or blogs, as a community or social network. Many weblogs are densely interconnected; bloggers read others' blogs, link to them, reference them in their own writing, and post comments on each others' blogs. Because of this, the interconnected blogs have grown their own culture. Other terms in use include Blogtopia and Blogistan.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogosphere

Rosen, unless it adapts the press risks being sidelined, and becoming increasingly irrelevant.

This threat, he adds, is the same threat currently confronting many other professional information gatekeepers in the networked world. "All kinds of knowledge monopolies — and positions of authority based on them — are wearing away … [and] … the professionals who have gained control of institutions of various kinds — including politics — are not going to have that kind of control anymore."

As such, says Rosen, the Web has shifted the debate away from the need for journalists to embrace public journalism, to a discussion about how the public is now able to do its own reporting, by means of citizen journalism[7] and blogging.[8]

The problem, says Rosen, is that while the Web may appear to empower the public to do its own reporting, the reality is that the world — particularly its social and political institutions — is just too dense and complicated for ordinary citizens to penetrate. However revolutionary and inherently democratic the Internet may be, therefore, we still need professional journalists to interpret the world, and explain things to us.

Rather than viewing the blogosphere as separate from the press, therefore, Rosen believes journalists now have to share journalism with bloggers, and develop a new collaborative relationship; a relationship in which members of the public and professional journalists cooperate to create a superior form of journalism.

After all, as journalists are increasingly discovering (to their chagrin), bloggers are extremely adept at locating and exposing errors in news reports, demonstrating the extent to which in an online world the "code" of news reporting has become more transparent and open.

Essentially, Rosen's vision is of a form of Open Source Journalism, which is how his publishers portray it in describing his new book[9]. "Ultimately", the editorial review on Amazon reads, "Rosen argues that the press must become even more

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[7] The rise of the Web has given rise to the new term of "citizen journalism". Citizen journalism, also known as "participatory journalism," is the act of citizens "playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information," according to the report *We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information*, by Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis. The reports adds, "The intent of this participation is to provide the independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizen_journalism

[8] A blog (or weblog) is a website in which items are posted on a regular basis and displayed with the newest at the top. Like other media, blogs often focus on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news. Some blogs function as online diaries. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog

[9] *By the People: A Blogger's Vision for Restoring Trust in the News and Reviving a Truly Free Press*, Jay Rosen, Times Books (To be published on February 1st, 2008).

interactive, following the 'open-source' model of the software world, if it is to reinvigorate the public's trust in the people who report the news." [10]

Indeed, the beauty of the open source model when applied to news reporting is not just that it leads to greater accuracy (as Eric Raymond might have put it: "given enough eyeballs, all [news] bugs are shallow"[11]), but it provides an ideal way to encourage the public to participate more fully in the affairs of their nation, rather than just sitting passively watching events unfold on their television sets — in the way Rosen did as a child.

Moreover, bloggers are proving that they can be as effective as the press when it comes to sourcing news stories too — as demonstrated in December 2003, when Minnesota-based Doug McGill broke the news to the world that a wave of genocidal killings was taking place in Ethiopia.[12]

The problem is that cooperation does not come naturally to anyone accustomed to enjoying a monopoly. Additionally, journalists are facing this challenge to their authority at a time when their relationship with the public is at an all-time low, and the traditional newspaper business model has run out of steam.[13]

Newspaper companies, says Rosen, find themselves standing over a kind of canyon today. "Right now they have got to the lip of this canyon, and they are all looking at it, and saying: 'I can't get across that. Can you get across that?' But what are they going to do: go back?"

But if they don't get across, he says, the capacity to effectively report the news every day could be "lost".

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[10] http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0805079785/sr=8-1/qid=1143529732/ref=sr_1_1/102-6726416-5618544?%5Fencoding=UTF8

[11] The interview with Eric Raymond can be read at: http://poynder.blogspot.com/2006/03/interview-with-eric-raymond.html

[12] *The Local, the Global, and the Journalist In Between: Doug McGill's Local Man Debuts*, Jay Rosen, PressThink, February 18th 2005.
http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2005/02/18/mcg_glcl.html

[13] There could have been no better demonstration of this, perhaps, than the recent news (coming some months after this interview took place) that Knight Ridder, the second largest newspaper company in the US, has decided to sell all 32 of its newspapers to smaller rival McClatchy. As the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of business points out, the sale follows one of the most difficult years the industry has had, with declining circulation, job losses and falling stock prices. "Newspapers, it would seem, have two big strikes against them: They are in a mature industry and they are a textbook example (stockbrokers are another) of an intermediary between sources of information and customers — a role that is being increasingly challenged by the Internet." http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/1425.cfm

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Before interviewing Rosen I became a regular visitor to his blog, PressThink.[14] What immediately struck me was that in place of the standard information snippets, short personal comments, and links to other sites, Rosen publishes long analytical essays, most of which are pretty dense.

This, however, appears to present little barrier to Rosen's fans. Indeed, in 2005 PressThink won a Reporters Without Borders Freedom Blog Award for "defending freedom of expression."[15]

A slim bespectacled man, Rosen clearly has an inherently cerebral approach to life, and my conversation with him was therefore predictably challenging: I found myself having to grapple with abstract ideas and unfamiliar intellectual concepts. At times I was also frustrated that, like many people with a complex understanding of the world, Rosen is more inclined to raise interesting questions than provide clear answers.

Unlike many intellectuals, however, he is neither self-important nor arrogant, and many of his answers ended with a small self-deprecatory laugh, as if signalling to me that he was fully aware that there are other — some possibly better — ideas out there but, for what it was worth, this was his view.

He also appears anxious not to seem overly professorial. Having initially decided to call his blog "Master Narrative," for instance, Rosen experienced a last-minute crisis of confidence. Concluding that the title was too pretentious, and so might attract parody, he changed it to PressThink. The irony, perhaps, is that many may feel PressThink to be just as highbrow a title.

In short, Rosen seems to be a reluctant intellectual; a man who might have preferred his career to have been more directly connected with the real world, and real events. An early ambition, after all, was to become a Washington reporter, and I sensed a little regret that he had ended up in an ivory tower. At the same time, he evidently accepts that ultimately he is, as he himself puts it, "more of a critic and intellectual than a reporter type".

Unlike most of those I have spoken to in the various free and open movements, Rosen takes no interest in hot topics like digital rights management[16], copyright

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[14] www.pressthink.org
[15] http://www.rsf.org/blog-awards-en.php3
[16] Digital rights management (DRM) is the umbrella term referring to any of several technologies used to enforce pre-defined policies controlling access to software, music, movies, or other digital data. DRM critics argue that the phrase "digital rights management" is a misnomer and the term "digital restrictions management" is a more accurate characterisation of the functionality of DRM systems.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_rights_management

and intellectual property. He is also unconcerned about who owns information, and has little interest in access issues.

But why should he? From the consumer's point of view the Internet is driving down the costs of news information, and so increasingly removing any access barriers. Consequently Rosen is able to look beyond the issue of information's availability, and focus on the need to make it available in a way that inspires the public to participate — in their government, in their nation, and in their town.

It is interesting to note that while Rosen's message is very different to Richard Stallman's, they both believe that the free sharing of knowledge and information serves a vital social and political function in human communities. Indeed, although his concern is news information (rather than software code), in talking to Rosen I was reminded of Stallman's comment to me[17] that "sharing knowledge is an important way in which people cooperate. To refuse to tell someone what he needs to know is hostile."

Or as Rosen puts it, "the enemy of democracy is inscrutable power and opaque institutions."

Unlike Stallman, however, Rosen does not believe it is enough to make information freely and transparently available. When reporting news, he argues, it is essential to present the information in a way that stimulates people to become involved in their community. "As a professor of journalism," he explains, "a lot of my work has been trying to get journalists to recognise in their work that the 'feeling yourself a participant' part is basic to any demand that may exist for their skills and services."

Above all Rosen's message is a timely reminder that however democratic and transformative the Web may potentially be, it is in itself essentially only an information distribution channel. While information may (in Stewart Brand's famous phrase) "want to be free," it is often inadequate, or even worthless, unless and until it has been digested, evaluated, and interpreted.

And that, says Rosen, is why we still need journalists.

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[17] The interview with Richard Stallman can be read at: http://poynder.blogspot.com/2006/03/interview-with-richard-stallman.html

The interview begins ...

RP: When did you become interested in journalism?

JR: At college. I got involved in the student newspaper, and became a reporter and editor of the Buffalo College paper. That led me to an internship at the local daily paper, the Buffalo *Courier Express* — which no longer exists. At that point I had the classic journalism ambition: I wanted to be a political reporter, probably in Washington.

RP: Did the internship feed your appetite for journalism?

JR: Yes. I did well at the *Courier Express* that summer: I got a lot of front page stories, and the editor wanted to hire me before I graduated. But I didn't want to do that because I was going to be the editor of the college paper in my senior year. So he said: "OK. When you graduate in May come and start with us."

RP: So you started out as a journalist on the Courier Express?

JR: Actually, no. [laughs]. When I got back to college I started to think I had made a mistake: I realised I hadn't even looked for a job. Since my goal was eventually to get out of Buffalo I thought maybe my first move should be a step further on. So I found a job that looked just right for me in the trade paper — *Editor & Publisher*[18] — and sent off my résumé and clips. I never heard back, but I figured I had now officially looked for a job, so I called off my search and thought no more about it.

RP: But you didn't take the job with the Courier Express?

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[18] http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/index.jsp

JR: No. The editor was supposed to call me in April, and he didn't. So I called him; he didn't call me back. I sent him a letter; he didn't reply. I sent him three letters, and still I got no reply. By now I was 23 and I had graduated, so I went to the office to confront him; to say: "Hey, remember me? You promised me a job."

So sue me

RP: How did it go?

JR: He had the security guards throw me out! "There's an explanation for this," he said, "but you'll have to sue me to get it".

RP: I'm sure you didn't sue him, but did you ever find out what had gone wrong?

JR: Yes. Several years later — after I had left Buffalo — I ran into somebody from the *Courier Express*. "Hey, you're a legend at the paper," he said.

It turned out that the position I had applied for was my own job: it had only been advertised to meet union requirements; and I didn't know it was the same job because they [E&P] don't identify newspapers when jobs are advertised. The editor thought I was being disloyal and got mad; actually I was just clueless.

RP: So you applied for your own job.

JR: Exactly. The upshot was I still had my dream of becoming a political reporter, but I couldn't use my one big piece of experience because the editor was clearly never going to back me up.

So I had to start over, and in the process I changed direction and decided to study the press instead. And I ended up in a PhD program in media studies at NYU, with Neil Postman.[19] I graduated from that in 1986.

RP: What aspect of the press did you study?

JR: My starting point was the great debate that took place in the 1920s between Walter Lippmann[20] and John Dewey.[21]

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[19] Prominent American educator, media theorist, and cultural critic, Neil Postman was the Paulette Goddard Chair of Media Ecology at New York University, and chair of the Department of Culture and Communication. Postman was inspired by the values of Classical and Enlightenment culture, and something of an old-fashioned humanist who, in the face of extraordinary technological change in contemporary society, held firmly to his beliefs that there is a limit to the promise of new technology, and that it cannot be a substitute for human values. Author of eighteen books, Postman died in 2003. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neil_Postman

[20] Walter Lippmann, was an influential US writer, journalist, and political commentator, and founding editor of *The New Republic*. Initially, Lippmann was optimistic about American democracy, believing that

RP: What was that about?

JR: They were arguing over the concept of the public: what sort of creature the modern public was, and what could be expected of it. Essentially, the issue was whether in a world that had grown in scale it was really possible to believe we had this thing called the public. It was also clear that public sentiment could be manipulated through the media, and that the press was very commercial and hysterical much of the time. Yet public opinion — which had previously been seen as a side issue, or entirely irrelevant — was now much more of a factor in events.

RP: What was your particular interest in this debate?

JR: What fascinated me was that it was one of the few times that a debate about the media was engaged with the philosophy of the day, and the politics of the day, in a really deep way; and the echoes of it remain. And the more interested I got the more I realised that, unlike the 1920s — when everyone was arguing about it and trying to re-imagine it — today the public is a taken-for-granted thing. Everyone has the same story about it. So I wondered: "How could it be that in the 1920s people thought it was really hard to understand what a public was, and yet today everyone thinks it is simple?"

RP: What was your conclusion?

JR: [laughs] Well, that was where I started. Although I didn't realise it at the time, my PhD ended up more like a chapter in the history of ideas.[22]

Anyway, the title of my dissertation was *The Impossible Press*,[23] and my conclusion was that we have this idea that we need the press because the public has to have opinions. But the puzzle was: where did this idea come from, and what had happened to it as the media for communicating changed over time. More importantly, were does it stand today?

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the American people would become intellectually engaged in political and world issues and fulfil their democratic role as an educated electorate. In light of the events leading to World War II and the rise of totalitarianism he rejected this view, concluding that the democratic public was a myth. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Lippman

[21] John Dewey was an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer who argued that the democratic system is not responsible for the poor decisions of the public in local policy-making, such as the prohibition of the teaching of evolution in schools (which Lippmann cited as evidence of the inability of the public to govern). For Dewey, the weaknesses of democracy are symptoms, rather than causes, of the problems of modern society. Once the relevant facts are made public (and in this regards he placed great emphasis on the need of a truly free press), the role of discussion is to determine the exact nature of the common good in that particular situation. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dewey

[22] The history of ideas is a field of research in history and in related fields dealing with the expression, preservation, and change of human ideas over time. Scholars often consider the history of ideas a sister discipline to, or a particular approach within, intellectual history. Work in the history of ideas usually involves close research in the history of philosophy and the history of literature. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_ideas

[23] *The Impossible Press: American Journalism and the Decline of Public Life*. Jay Rosen, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1986

RP: Presumably you believe that the press does have an important role to play?

JR: Right, but my end point was a complex one: I decided that we have drastically oversimplified the question of what the public is. I also felt that it is important we continually ask the question: "Does a public exist?" Because, in effect, the public doesn't exist unless we keep creating a place for it.

RP: We have to keep reinventing it?

JR: That is part of it. But it is more: you have to keep stepping into it. It is like going to church.

RP: And if we don't keep stepping into it?

JR: If we don't do that it atrophies, the public is always going out of existence and coming back into it. And this process can be weakened, or it can be strengthened.

RP: I guess it was in puzzling over this that your interest in public journalism arose. You went on to become a key contributor to the public journalism movement.

JR: It's true that there is a straight line between what I did in my dissertation and what I clamoured for in the public journalism episode, but at the time I wrote my PhD I wasn't involved in any way with working journalists. It was just an academic study. Public journalism was more participatory, and I played a different role in that.

RP: Because it turned out that the press was trying to grapple with the very same issues in which you had become interested, and you found yourself increasingly being invited to speak to working journalists.

JR: Yes. It was then that I realised they were in trouble over this question [laughs]. Essentially, journalists had lost the capacity to think about the public, and they had a frozen language for talking about it — which conspired to keep the public at bay. They had completely lost the ability to imagine this whole challenge of keeping the public alive.

What are journalists for?

RP: What then was the public journalism movement?

JR: It was an attempt to inject an idea into the American press that it had neglected to find on its own. Briefly, the idea was that journalists have a legitimate interest in drawing people into public life as active citizens, and helping them to participate. If people become discouraged, and abandon the tools of democracy they won't have much need for

the press. It wasn't, by the way, exclusively my idea. It kind of coalesced from a number of directions. I helped coalesce it, to give it a language, and to provide some ideas.

RP: To provide an intellectual framework?

JR: And to create a forum for public journalism to be discussed, because the first time that many of the other people interested in it gathered and met each other was at one of the seminars I organised.

RP: Right. You directed the Project on Public Life and the Press, which was housed at NYU. What was the Project on Public Life and the Press, and what exactly did it do?

JR: It held meetings for people in the press who were groping their way toward public journalism — also called "civic journalism." It did research on the various experiments and projects that emerged.[24] It was a clearinghouse for information and ideas, and networking point for those who were interested.

RP: You also wrote about public journalism in your book What are Journalists For? One of the points you consistently make is that a "disconnect" has developed between the press and the public. Clearly you wanted to see this disconnect repaired, but how did you see that happening?

JR: Well at the time I thought it was going to be repaired by enlightened journalists reaching across the divide [laughs].

RP: Can you say more about this disconnect and its implications for newspapers?

JR: Well, when we were knocking on the door of the press in the early 1990s, we pointed out that the authority of the daily newspaper wasn't the same as it had been throughout the 1940s, 50s, 60s, or even in the 70s.

RP: How do you mean: the authority of the daily newspaper wasn't the same?

JR: Consider, for instance, that through this period readership of the newspaper fell from around 70% of the population, to 53%, possibly as low as 51%. So at a certain point the press could no longer assume that the town was reading its newspaper. For that reason we were arguing that the best efforts of the press should be animated by a more active image of the user.[25]

RP: What became of the public journalism movement and what did it achieve?

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[24] e.g. http://www.cpn.org/topics/communication/boulder.html and
http://www.cpn.org/topics/communication/dayton.html
[25] And the decline continues. On March 13th 2006, for instance, the Project for Excellence in Journalism released its *The State of the News Media 2006: An Annual Report on American Journalism*. This reported that for the sixth-month period ending September 30th, 2005, US dailies declined 2.6% and Sunday papers fell 3.1%. Stock prices for newspaper companies fell about 20% in 2005.
http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/2006/index.asp

JR: I don't have a simple answer to that question [laughs]. However, one answer is that, as an assault on the wisdom of the profession, it was repelled, but repelled in a very fascinating way.

RP: How do you mean?

JR: Part of the reason you push an idea at an institution like big journalism is to force it to react, and in reacting it will reveal itself. One of the things that happens, for instance, is that the troops — in this case the journalists — ask themselves "Who do I actually believe: the people spouting these ideas, or the people defending our old way of doing things?"

The upshot in the case of public journalism was that it failed to change the press, or even to change common thinking in the press [laughs]. At the same time it said something very, very important: it confirmed that there is this disconnect out there.

RP: So nothing much changed?

JR: Actually, the situation has changed a great deal since then because two things are very different today. First, the cracks that we were pointing to are now so wide that people look at them every day; second, the Internet came along.

Between them these two things have achieved something that we could never do: get people to admit that something has gone wrong; that newspapers are out of alignment with the public — that there is just something wrong with the relationship [laughs]. So this realisation was eventually accomplished by forces way larger than us.

RP: I'd like to come to the Internet in a moment. But tell me: do you think that this disconnect may be an inevitable consequence of societal changes?

JR: No. The profession of journalism — and the overlapping world of the daily news business — strangled itself, and didn't evolve. It failed to meet the challenges of the day. The press just lost its way.

RP: The former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once famously said that there is no such thing as society. Her notion of society was not quite the same a "the public", but is it possible that the public is an imaginary creature, or at least a creature that no longer exists?

JR: It is possible, and that was one of the issues that was never resolved in the 1920s. The question then was: is this a realistic enough standard for a modern society to even point at? In place of an answer, however, we got polling. Now the public can be produced magically, and it is everywhere. So who could doubt it exists?

RP: You clearly do believe that the public exists, but that the press has simply lost its ability to connect with it. Was it ever fully connected to the public?

JR: The press has always been disliked as well as accepted, and there is always political argument about it. So these issues were always there, and there were explosions before. But the contradictions have built up over too long a period now, and the issue of confidence and the problems associated with the basic professional model that we have arrived at today have reached the point where I don't think they can be ignored.

RP: You say that one role of the press is to help the public form opinions. The question then is how does it do this. I suspect it is connected with what you say in the essay you wrote on the "master narrative."[26] You wrote there about journalists helping to create the universe from which they draw news. As you put it, "How to report the news — accurately, fairly, comprehensively — is something we know how to teach in journalism school. How to construct the public arena ... is not. It's pretty clear where the authority to report the news comes from; it's not clear where the authority to construct the world lies, or could lie."

Your point, I think, is that effective journalism should report on the news in a way that helps the public to engage with issues, to form opinions about those issues, and so to participate in their community.

JR: Yes. You are never going to have a public unless — as you put it earlier — you continuously reinvent it, and provide the conditions for it to prosper. So the promise of journalism is that people will be able to participate, not just in their government, but in their nation, and in their town.

RP: The disconnect, then, lies in the failure of the press to do this, or in their lack of authority to do it effectively?

JR: Right.

RP: And I guess this is most important when reporting on political issues. In describing the "master narrative you quote Paul Taylor,[27] a former political reporter for the Washington Post, as saying[28]: "Political stories don't just 'happen' the way hailstorms do. They are artifacts of a political universe that journalism itself has helped to construct. They are components of a journalistic master narrative built around two principle story lines: the search for the candidates' character flaws, and the depiction of the campaign

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[26] *The Master Narrative in Journalism*, Jay Rosen, PressThink, September 8th, 2003. A term borrowed from literary criticism, Rosen describes the master narrative as being "A part of the press that too easily eludes attention: the big story, sometimes the back story, often a fragment of a narrative, that generates all the other stories, which are smaller pieces."
http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2003/09/08/basics_master.html
[27] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/press/other/quit.html
[28] http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2003/09/08/basics_master.html

as a horserace, full of ploys and surprises, tenacity and treachery, rising action and falling action, winners and losers."[29]

In essence, then, in the process of reporting, journalists create a narrative; they write a "story" within which they locate the news. And it is the way in which they create these stories that determines whether and how the public is engaged?

JR: And that is why when I teach journalism courses I always start my classes with the same sentence: "Journalists are people who make things." The question for them is always: what are they going to make?

RP: *And, as you said, from where they get the authority to make things. Journalists, of course, don't always acknowledge that they do this.*

JR: Exactly. What journalists sometimes like to tell us is that they *find* things: "We find the news". So one of the problems the profession has is that the audience knows that the news is made, and yet journalists keep talking about it as if it is found. This means that over a long period of time people don't trust them any more.

RP: *Where does the issue of objectivity fits into this? In his book We the Media,[30] Dan Gillmor argues that any objectivity the press lays claim to has always been a false objectivity. What's your view?*

JR: This is an incredibly complicated issue. What we can say is that objectivity has become both a belief and an operating system in journalism. It is also a way to limit liability — an aspect that I think is under-evaluated. Indeed, if all other rationales collapse, objectivity as a way of limiting liability will remain.

RP: *Journalists limit liability by using the reporting method you call "He said, She said"? A model that, as you put it, creates the impression that "both sides had their say, no bias here, trust the news you get from us."[31]*

JR: Yes. The idea that you can generate authority by saying: "Well, people on the left claim this; people on the right say that" encourages a lazy frame of mind. It suggests that the truth is probably somewhere in the middle. It also protects the journalist — like no one is ever going to attack you for reporting that way. But over time it doesn't actually work: it doesn't accurately portray the world, and it doesn't educate the public. However,

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[29] Interestingly, when I interviewed Richard Stallman for *The Basement Interviews* he said: "Journalists are trained to think as spectators and they have practices that tend to lead the public to look at these battles as spectators, or gamblers; and that is the wrong way. To try to cover any democratic political struggle, or any fight for freedom, in terms of who might win, or who seems likely to win, is a mistake; it tells people the outcome is decided, so don't bother to participate. To imply that the outcome is determined is to tell the public that they have no say, and so is anti-democratic."

[30] *We the Media*, *Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*, Dan Gilmour, O'Reilly, 2004

[31] *He Said, She said, We Said*, Jay Rosen, PressThink, June 4th, 2004
http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2004/06/04/ruten_milbank.html

that is just one issue: there are fifty such problems I could point to in the practice of objectivity.

The point is that objectivity became a trap for journalists, because it caused them to dismiss a lot of feedback and criticism. This has hurt them, and it is hurting them tremendously right now.

RP: Essentially this is a trust thing. To have authority you have to be trusted?

JR: That's right, because objectivity in the press is a means of persuasion. It's journalists trying to persuade us that we should trust their account as a report of the world and not of their own preferences. But there are a lot of ways I could get you to accept my account of how things are going in the world. I could say: "I am a Christian: accept my account." I could say: "We are both democrats, or socialists, so accept my account". Alternatively I could overwhelm you with my personality, or flood you with data. Or I could say: "I have a PhD in this, so accept my account."

The way journalists do it is to say: "Look, I don't have a PhD, I don't have any interest. I am not an expert; I don't have a stake; I am telling you I checked it out and this is the way it is." So it is just a technique of persuasion.

RP: Do you think that journalists should nevertheless strive to be objective?

JR: I do. Sometimes we can translate objectivity into specific ways of working. For instance, verifiability as a standard in journalism is a very good standard. You could say it is objective because you have to verify everything, so it is a good tool for making journalism more objective.

RP: You frequently describe the culture of journalism as a kind of religion. Why?

JR: I call it a religion because I am trying to be provocative. You could also call it a professional code, a professional culture, the culture of the newsroom, the mores of journalism — you could call it a lot of different things.

RP: You also argue that there is a need for non-believers in journalism?

JR: It's not so much that we should have non-believers, but that the journalistic religion may not be adequate to the times. It's not a scandal that there is a religion, but the religion of the newsroom is in need of revision.

RP: So while we should expect organisations and professions to develop their own culture, it becomes problematic when that culture acts as an obstacle to progress?

JR: Right. It is probably not possible for people who are bound together in a professional context to operate without codes of behaviour and common beliefs, and even myth and legends. In fact, these things are necessary. The problem is that the religion of journalism

as it stands today — the way we teach it in journalism school, and the way it is learned in a newsroom setting — is not up to its task any more.

After the Web, the Flood

RP: OK, to summarise so far: we are saying that the press has an important democratic role to play in helping the public to form opinions so that they can better participate in their government, in their nation, and in their town. Somewhere along the way, however, journalists forgot how to do this, and the press lost its authority. The public journalism movement tried to get the press back on track, but the message was ignored. As a consequence, the disconnect has now widened to the point where the press can no longer deny there is a problem.

Then into this complex picture erupted the Web. But has the Internet merely changed the debate about public journalism, or has it completely replaced it?

JR: I think it would be accurate to say that it has replaced the debate. After all, the press used to be more or less in total possession of the media, and it controlled the profession of journalism. Historically, therefore, the press acted as a gatekeeper to news. That is no longer the case, which represents a big change. It is this issue that I am writing about in my new book.[32]

RP: Essentially, then, the debate about public journalism has been replaced with a debate about citizen journalism.

JR: Yes, to some extent the term public journalism has been superseded and incorporated into the citizen journalism conversation; because the questions and concerns that were bundled into public journalism are in a way contained in this larger question of citizen journalism. After all, if you begin from the assumption of a dangerous disconnect then there is more than one way to reach across that divide. Today you have action going both ways.[33]

RP: You said that prior to the Web the issue was one of trying to educate the gatekeepers — as in the journalists — to engage more with the public, to lead on public issues, to reinvent the public, however one expresses it. Presumably the development of blogs opens up the possibility that the public could take on that role for themselves via the Web?

JR: Yes.

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[32] *By the People: A Blogger's Vision for Restoring Trust in the News and Reviving a Truly Free Press*, Jay Rosen, Times Books (To be published on February 1st, 2008).
[33] In other words, not only is journalism feeding the blogosphere, but the blogosphere is sometimes also feeding journalism, finding stories that journalists follow up, for instance.

RP: So the danger facing the traditional press is that they could simply be sidelined?

JR: Absolutely. They are in danger of not getting into something that is changing their world, and they will fail to see the opportunities there are for them in this.

RP: The news gatekeepers could simply become irrelevant then?

JR: They could, if they don't watch out.

RP: So what would happen: would the public take over the role previously played by the press?

JR: I think that would be hard. Instead you could just have decay, a net loss of journalistic capacity. The original reason why we thought we needed professional journalists hasn't gone away. Modern society is complicated, and a lot of it is opaque and we are not able to understand it without assistance. Honest journalists who can report back from places where we can't go are still very important. But if journalism as a practice does not adapt to the Web it will wither away.

RP: So we should view the blogosphere not as a replacement for the press but as a very powerful ally?

JR: Yes. Actually, I don't know anyone who has studied the matter for more than an hour who ever said that web logs would ever replace the media. But people like to argue about it.

RP: You did say that there was a danger that the gatekeepers would be sidelined and become irrelevant?

JR: Sure. But that does not mean that the capacity to report the news every day is now going to be created by somebody else. It could be "lost."

RP: There have been a number of studies now on the impact of blogs. So far the message seems to be that while a few are having an impact, and feeding into the mainstream media, for now the majority have little impact at all. I guess this just confirms what we all suspected?

JR: Right. But one thing arising from some of these studies that is interesting is that only about one quarter of Internet users knows about blogs today. That's low, and it means that three quarters of the potential audience has yet to be explored.

RP: So there is still much to play for?

JR: There is. Of course it doesn't mean that these three quarters are all going to become addicted to web logs, but it does mean that we are only at the beginning of a process of diffusion that will take a few years.

RP: So the Web is a big deal, and will have significant implications for the traditional press. But do you think the traditional press has really "got the Internet" yet?

JR: No. I don't think they have. The professional journalist — especially the newspaper journalist — is in a knowledge crisis.

Part of the problem is that, unlike many of their readers, journalists haven't had to retrain themselves, and they haven't been involved in the disruption of platforms in the way people in the tech industry have. So they are just not used to having to throw away their paradigm and find a new one.

RP: I guess there are a number of aspects to this. First, there is the disconnect and loss of authority you referred to earlier. Second is the challenge the Internet poses to the traditional gate-keeping role of journalists. Third is this knowledge crisis you refer to. Taken together these represent a serious business threat to media companies, don't they?

JR: I am a journalism professor, not a professor of the media industry. Strictly speaking, therefore, I don't care if the media industry is doing well, or if it is doing poorly. I am interested in the ideas that have given life to American journalism; in what makes journalism a legitimate and important democratic practice; and whether American journalism is doing well, and doing what it should be doing.

That said, it's clear that media companies do face a crisis in their business model. And it doesn't help that that crisis is coincident with the crisis in trust we talked about, and the knowledge crisis that professional journalists face.

RP: The crisis in the business model is primarily a consequence of a downward pressure on the cost of information. This is often expressed in terms of the much quoted — and frequently misquoted — phrase of Stewart Brand's about information wanting to be free?[34]

JR: Well those who say that the price of content is being driven down towards zero by all the new providers are basically right — as a matter of general truth, that is the way things are going. So anybody who is in the content business has to be aware of that.

RP: I understand you are not particularly interested in the business side of things, but how would you reply to the CEO of a large newspaper company who said: "Look Jay, I hear what you are saying about paradigm shifts, but how the hell are we going to make money if everything we do is provided free elsewhere on the Web?

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[34] In 1984, at the first Hackers' Conference, Stewart Brand said in one discussion session: "On the one hand information wants to be expensive, because it's so valuable. The right information in the right place just changes your life. On the other hand, information wants to be free, because the cost of getting it out is getting lower and lower all the time. So you have these two fighting against each other." This was printed in a report/transcript from the conference in the May 1985 *Whole Earth Review*, p. 49. Most people have subsequently focused only on the second part of Brand's statement.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_wants_to_be_free

JR: My answer is: "Life is a bitch" [laughs]. Just because you don't have a sure way to profit today doesn't mean that your old way isn't being eaten up. So it is like you don't have a choice. The fact is that these people are standing over a kind of canyon. In order to get where they want to go they are going to have to cross that canyon, because there is no way to get where they want to be in 20 years without doing so.

Right now they have got to the lip of this canyon, and they are all looking at it, and saying: "I can't get across that. Can you get across that?" But what are they going to do: go back?

RP: Well, media companies are funded by capital. One choice for the owners of that capital would be to take their money elsewhere. So they may simply step away from the canyon, and say: "Enough is enough. Let's get out of this business." That could happen?

JR: Absolutely.[35]

Withdrawing from the business

RP: Given what you said about the role the press should play in helping the public participate in their society is this not a concern for all of us; a threat to democracy even?

JR: Well it would be a threat to journalism. But this is not a theoretical thing any more. While you can point to specific companies where it is not happening, in general the media industry is already shedding journalists, withdrawing from the business. So the question becomes not what is going to happen to that industry — as I said, I don't worry about the future fortunes of the media industry [laughs] — but what happens to this institution we call journalism.

RP: And the answer is?

JR: We do know of ways in which journalism can pass from the commercial media to another structure capable of supporting it. Consider, for instance, what happened to radio reporting in the US. Compare 1960 with today and you find that 90% of radio journalism in the US is now done in the non-profit sector, by NPR.[36] Commercial radio has all but

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[35] Which is precisely what Knight Ridder did, after shareholders forced the company to sell all of its newspapers to McClatchy for $4.5 billion. As the BBC said when reporting the story, "Frustrated with its share performance, leading Knight Ridder shareholders had forced the company to put itself up for sale late last year." The BBC added, "Falling circulations and the loss of advertisers to the Internet have hit US newspaper publishers in recent years."

[36] National Public Radio (NPR) is an independent, private, not-for-profit membership organisation of public radio stations. NPR was created in 1970, following the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, which established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and also led to the creation of the Public Broadcasting Service. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Npr

abandoned it, although commercial radio hasn't been abandoned: that still exists and it still makes a lot of money — there just isn't any journalism there any more.

RP: That is interesting to contrast with what is happing to the UK's public broadcaster, the BBC, which has been under increasing pressure to commercialise its operations.

JR: That's right; in the UK there is this pressure to have the apparatus of journalism supported by the market. Well, we have been at that a long time, and the market expelled radio journalism. However, society didn't say "Well that's it for radio journalism"; it found another way of supporting it. The question here is: if the newspaper industry sheds journalism, what happens to that journalism. Where else could it be based? That is an open question right now.

RP: Are the issues we are talking about exclusive to the US, or are they relevant to any country?

JR: Some of them will be found everywhere, because they concern how journalism fits into the media universe, which tends to have a flattening effect. But many will be different because journalism itself is a profound reflection of the political culture and political history of a country.

RP: Although if, as you say, the press plays an important democratic role, many of the issues will be relevant to any democracy?

JR: Indeed. If you think about it, the original reason why we required a free press in the first place was as a solution to the problem of scale. Why did the free press clause make it into the First Amendment of the United States?[37] Because all political wisdom up to that point said you can't have a republic over such a large area. And the reply to that was: "Well, the press will connect the republic." That idea is still there in our politics; in our media. And it clearly has relevance to any large democratic nation.

RP: So are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future and the ability of the press to respond to the challenges it faces from the Web?

JR: Oh, I am pessimistic about the survival of the current model; but I am optimistic about the prospect for journalism — I think we are just entering a period of a lot of change.

RP: And the implications for traditional journalists are what?

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[37] The First Amendment to the United States Constitution (part of the United States Bill of Rights) prevents the US Congress from infringing on six rights. It therefore forbids laws that, amongst other things, prohibit free exercise of religion, infringe freedom of speech and infringe the freedom of the press. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Amendment_to_the_United_States_Constitution

JR: Whenever you have a gate you have a question over who is going to tend that gate, be it a gate to an elite university, a gate to a museum, or the gates to the mass media. Unlike the UK, in America we don't have a cultural elite or class of people [laughs] that we trust the gate keeping to, so we have tended to give that role to people who have appropriate knowledge, or expertise.

That is really how the press worked from 1945 until around 1995. As we have been discussing, however, this legitimacy was, over time, undermined by declining trust in the gatekeepers. With the Web, that trust has been undermined massively because the gates have been taken away.

PressThink

RP: You have your own blog, PressThink[38] Why did you set up a blog?

JR: For a lot of different reasons. One was because I was fascinated with the fact that outsiders could do it: the disruptive quality of that appealed to me. I also wanted to be directly involved in the form because I thought it was going to be something important. So rather than read about it in news stories, I wanted to be a participant. That is the way you really understand something.

Additionally, at that time I was chair of the department, and I wanted NYU to have a profile in the web journalism world that it didn't have. That was another motivation.

RP: PressThink is quite distinctive. Most blogs link to other blogs, to short news stories, curiosities etc., and their posts are generally pretty short. You, by contrast, tend to post long essays, often over 2,000 words long.

JR: Yes, it is distinctive. But I didn't want to do what other people are doing. I reckoned that there was probably a way to do it completely differently. That part interested me.

RP: Why did you decide to call it PressThink?

JR: I was originally going to call it Master Narrative, which was the title of one of the first pieces I wrote. I was all set to go with that, and even had a mock-up made. Then I thought how easy it would be to parody [laughs], and I got cold feet — I thought it was going to sound really pretentious and academic, even though I meant it in a funny way.

But by then I had already told everybody I was going to do this blog, so I was kind of committed. I thought of calling it ThinkPress instead but I didn't really like that. However, when I switched it around and made the connection to "group think" it suddenly clicked.

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[38] www.pressthink.org

RP: And the subtitle is "Ghost of Democracy in the Media Machine". Why?

JR: The sub-title has to do with my distinction between the press and the media. When the media ingested the press, or developed around it — which is really how it happened — it ingested this thing that has a permanent connection to democratic dreams. We say in this country, for instance, "Freedom of the Press"; we don't say "Freedom of Media". This is because the press is the institution, or the mythology if you will, that connects media back to this democratic spark.

Even if you extinguish the press by diluting it, or trivialising it, or transforming it into entertainment, a little bit of that spark will remain. It's in there; it's in your machine even if you don't want it any more.

RP: In one of your essays you talk about the Web being a democratising force.[39] In connection with this one of PressThink's readers, Brian Uecker,[40] said to me: "Blogs give a literate, politically active segment of the population a much greater voice in shaping debates." That is surely right, but it sounds more like an aristocracy than a democracy to me.

JR: When I say "democratising", the stress here is on the "ing". Any opening up is democratising. Any broadening of distribution — even if it is from a very small elite to a more inclusive elite — is democratising, relative to the old situation. So while I think there is a democratising effect, it does not mean that now the whole thing is open to anybody. Moreover, the effect is probably marginal at first.

RP: In the meantime, the blogosphere is sometimes like a hanging posse. A number of high-profile journalists — including Eason Jordan[41] and Dan Rather[42] — have been hounded out of their jobs by blogs. Should that be a concern?

JR: There is a lot to discuss there. Part of it is that journalists really aren't at all used to scrutiny, certainly not the kind of scrutiny they visit upon everybody else! That used to be a kind of joke, where someone would say: "Oh, who watches the watchers", and people

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[39]T*he Weblog: An Extremely Democratic Form in Journalism*, Jay Rosen, PressThink, March 8th, 2004 http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2004/03/08/weblog_demos.html

[40] Brian Uecker runs his own blog, at http://www.udolpho.com/weblog/Default.asp

[41] Eason Jordan was Chief News Executive for CNN until his resignation in 2005. During the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, earlier in the year, Jordan had claimed that American troops were targeting journalists in Iraq. He later backtracked from the statement and in February he resigned to "prevent CNN from being unfairly tarnished by the controversy over conflicting accounts of my recent remarks regarding the alarming number of journalists killed in Iraq." The right wing of the blogosphere claimed to have played a crucial role t in achieving his resignation.. http://www.cnn.com/2005/SHOWBIZ/TV/02/11/easonjordan.cnn

[42] Dan Rather was anchor and managing editor for the CBS Evening News for 24 years. He resigned as anchor of Evening news following a controversial "60 Minutes II" story that questioned President Bush's service in the National Guard, a piece that turned out to be based on allegedly forged documents. Again, the blogosphere was said to have played a role in the resignation. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A7313-2004Nov23.html

would tut tut, and say [fake grave voice]: "Ha, ha. Good question." But nobody thought it would ever happen.

RP: But now it does happen?

JR: Yes, not only does it now happen, but people in journalism — who know how easy it is to make a mistake in their work; and who know how often they are frantically making phone calls because they actually don't know anything about the subject they are writing about — are alarmed.

First they now have a check on their work. Second it is clear that this check can run out of control. I think this is a valid fear, because there is a kind of fever that can take over.

RP: So it is both good and bad?

JR: Sure, but it can't be avoided. It would be wrong to say that there aren't dangers to this new check, because there are. But it is all part of having to share the press with other people beside professional journalists.

Goodbye gatekeeper?

RP: I wonder how you see blogs co-existing with the mainstream press in future. A lot of newspapers have set up blogs. Others have chosen to buy blogs. Could we see blogs being simply absorbed by big media, and perhaps emasculated in the process?

JR: All sorts of things will happen, and a lot of them won't work. As you say, more and more newspapers are starting blogs, but they don't necessarily know what they are doing so many of them aren't any good. At the same time lots of bloggers are doing more journalism.

So you'll have cases where a very successful blogger is brought into the big media tent, which is kind of buying that person; you'll have people who are already in big media firms learning to blog; and you will have independent bloggers who don't get absorbed. Whatever the details, though, journalists are going to have to have to share journalism now.[43]

RP: Because the Web is a radical departure?

JR: Exactly. This isn't just another stage of the mass media. This is totally different.

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[43] And clearly newspapers have a lot to learn. On 24th March *Washington Post* blogger Ben Domenech resigned after only a few days on the job, following allegations of plagiarism.

RP: Some people have started to refer to what is going on as Open Source Journalism. Indeed, in 2004 Open Source Journalism was one of your Top Ten Ideas.[44] As you put it then, "The audience always knew more, but it didn't have a network for pulling its scattered self together." There is now a whole raft of "open" movements. Do you think they all share something in common?

JR: They all share the same threat to the traditional gatekeepers that I mentioned. Another is the gift economy.[45] I wrote something about this on PressThink[46] and it proved to be my most famous post ever. So there is the gift economy, and there are also the declining costs of people with like interests getting together.

RP: The gift economy goes to the issue of business models for corporations: how do they compete with services and products that are available elsewhere at no cost? Some might argue, however, that the gift economy is just a temporary thing and cannot be sustained over time?

JR: I don't see that. I think the development of Firefox [the web browser[47]] is a very significant event in that respect. I was fascinated when I first learned about Open Source software, and the way it has freaked out Microsoft. Microsoft's inability to understand the motivation of the people involved was the most telling thing.

This is something that has emerged between professional journalists and a lot of people online. In the same way it is very hard for someone in Redmond, Washington,[48] to understand Open Source developers, journalists just don't understand the motivations of bloggers at all — They are saying: "Why are these people co-operating all over the world. They are not going to profit from it."

But the thing that really strikes me from a long-term historical view is that this is a further evolution of the notion of an open society — that is why they all picked that word up. The idea of an open society is partly dependent on our machines for opening up society [laughs]; and as we have new ones then the demand for an open society floods into those new areas, and that is what is happening now.

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[44] *Top Ten Ideas of '04: Open Source Journalism, Or "My Readers Know More Than I Do*", Jay Rosen, PressThink, December 28th 2004
http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2004/12/28/tptn04_opsc.html
[45] A gift economy is an economic system in which the prevalent mode of exchange is for goods and services to be given without explicit agreement upon a *quid pro quo*. Typically, this occurs in a cultural context where there is an expectation either of reciprocation — in the form of goods or services of comparable value, or of political support, general loyalty, honour to the giver, etc. — or of the gift being passed on in some other manner.
[46] *What's Radical About the Weblog Form in Journalism?,* Jay Rosen, Press Think, October 16th, 2003
http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2003/10/16/radical_ten.html
[47] http://www.mozilla.com/firefox
[48] Redmond, Washington is the HQ of Microsoft. Its address is One Microsoft Way.
http://www.microsoft.com/mscorp/info/usaoffices/pacwest/redmond.mspx

RP: And I guess the term open society — which was most famously used by Karl Popper[49] — says something about democracy, and democratic processes?

JR: Surely, because it is saying that the enemy of democracy is inscrutable power and opaque institutions.

RP: Might it be that in the so-called "knowledge economy", and in a networked world, the old models just don't work anyway? So on one side of the canyon you mentioned we can see all the large corporations that are used to traditional business models; on the other side are these various open movements. Most (if not all) of these large corporations just do not seem to understand what is going on, or how to respond?

JR: Oh, sure. After all, a society is very powerfully shaped by whatever knowledge monopolies accrue. All kinds of knowledge monopolies — and positions of authority based on them — are wearing away; and that is the part that is fascinating to me. The professionals who have gained control of institutions of various kinds — including politics — are not going to have that kind of control anymore.

But this isn't a case of either/or. A good analogy is the situation with medical doctors. Medical doctors are still doctors, and they still have a lot of power; they are still the people we turn to. But the knowledge environment that the patient has is very different now, and so the relationship between the patient's knowledge and the doctor's knowledge has changed considerably. When the doctor prescribes something for a patient he knows that — in most cases — if that person is middle-class or above the first thing they are going to do is look it up on the Internet. Does the medical authority disappear under those new conditions? No, but it is not going to be the same.

A personal disconnect

RP: I'd like to turn back to Jay Rosen. You are married and have children?

JR: I am. We have two children: a nine-year-old girl, and a four-year-old boy.

RP: I am struck by something you said in an interview you did in 2000 with the Jewish Public Forum.[50] You said: "As a student of the media and commercial culture, I am impressed with its power to uproot and dissolve just about everything. Which makes me ask myself: what cannot be dissolved? My daughter, only three, is still protected from the media's subtle theft of experience. But I know her day of contact with American culture

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[49] *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Karl Popper, Vols. 1 and 2, Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1945
[50] Established in 1998, the Jewish Public Forum is a think tank that convenes interdisciplinary groups of academics, business leaders, cultural figures and policymakers to broaden the conversation about the Jewish and American futures. http://www.clal.org/c2.html

is coming." [51] *Your job is to think and write about the media, but clearly this is a personal matter too?*

JR: Sure, I have a personal stake in this. Like many other Americans of my generation I was very much raised by the television set; and I recall the loneliness that goes with that. So my interest in public life and political life grows out of that sense of comfortable deprivation that came from a suburban existence with the TV on all the time.

RP: A passive, lonely life? That was your experience of childhood?

JR: Passive certainly; up until Watergate.[52] Watergate was when I suddenly started to take an interest in the outside world. And, from my point of view, from my own biography, that was when I saved my own existence — because before that I was headed for something pretty boring.

RP: The disconnect between the press and the public you talk about is a larger version of the personal disconnect you felt as a child then?

JR: Oh, yes, definitely. I grew up when the 60s were going on, but they weren't really happening to me. So I went through the Vietnam war, and the assassination of political leaders, and the incredible turbulence in the country — the era of protests and 1968 and all that — and I knew about it, but only on the screen, as it were.

RP: I'm wondering, what was different about Watergate. Your experience of that would also have been filtered through the television screen?

JR: Yes, it was. But for whatever reason I was able to perceive that this was not just something going on out there. This was actually about my country, about our constitution. And it was happening right now, and I could participate in it. So I had the sense that I was part of it. Making that connection to the public world was a very critical point in my life.

RP: So did you make the connection because you had reached a certain age, or was it that the media handled it particularly well? Or perhaps the topic was just inherently more interesting than others?

JR: Yes, I was the right age, and I was somehow open to it, and the topic was also inherently interesting. So perhaps it was just the contingency of events. But I don't really know exactly why it was so. That, however, is why I am very interested in how people do make that kind of connection.

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[51] *Journalism, Judaism and the Search for a Third Language: An Interview with Jay Rosen*, Jewish Public Forum, March 2000, http://www.clal.org/jpf2.html

[52] The Watergate Scandal (or just "Watergate") was the American political scandal and constitutional crisis that took place between 1972 and 1974, leading to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watergate

RP: And that's what journalists need to figure out?

JR: Yes. When I wrote about it recently I put it this way: "As a professor of journalism, a lot of my work has been trying to get journalists to recognise in their work that the 'feeling yourself a participant…' part is basic to any demand that may exist for their skills and services."[53] It took me a long time to realise it but that one sentence is the best one-sentence encapsulation I have ever been able to write about what I do. It probably took me a long time to articulate it because I was writing about the origin of the real connection between information and participation.

RP: Here's another Jay Rosen quote from the interview with the Jewish Public Forum: "There is something twisted about modernity, twisted away from any human mooring. Everything says that to me, yet I am not an anti-modern, or even a traditionalist." Can you expand on that thought?

JR: I was very influenced by the work of the historian Christopher Lasch,[54] who died a few years ago. He wrote one sentence that has always resonated for me. "Uprootedness uproots everything, except for the need for roots." I grew up in a white-bread post-war working-class suburb of a typical American city. This was both very liberating — in the sense that I didn't feel hemmed in at all; I was very much a free agent in the world I grew up in: free to believe what I wanted, free to adopt whatever traditions I wanted — but at the same time there was this thinness in my own experience.

When I educated myself later on in my life as a graduate student and professor I realised that thinness can be a big problem.

RP: I wonder if your comment about modernity was as much about the experience of being American as it was about the times in which we live.

JR: Perhaps. I think it is a problem that all Americans face: they long for something more rooted; yet they like their mobile existence. And I have that same ambivalence.

RP: Of course the Web can be a very uprooting experience too — so perhaps it makes Americans of us all. How different from your childhood experience do you think it is for young people today — many of whom will presumably be sitting in their homes the other side of an Internet connection, rather than watching the television?

JR: Well, the Web can empower the illusion that you live everywhere, or that you live nowhere, which creates a sense of weightlessness. So if the really important question is what is rooting your experience — what is unchangeable or given — then the Web surely makes it harder to see that.

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[53]*Deep Throat, J-School and Newsroom Religion*, Jay Rosen, PressThink, June 5th 2005
http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2005/06/05/wtrg_js.html
[54] Christopher Lasch was a well-known American historian and social critic. He was a professor of history at the University of Rochester from 1970, and died in 1994. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Lasch

After all, you have to sleep somewhere. You don't sleep in the network; you don't lay your head down in cyberspace; you wake up in a particular place on earth, and your relationship to the place and to the people there is a key part of your identity — no matter how effective our machines are at scattering identity. As an educator I see this as one of the basic problems of living today.

On the other hand, we now realise that a lot of the most effective uses of the Web tend to combine cyberspace with local life, with where you live on the ground.

RP: I guess that reminds us how important it is for the press to help root us in our local community — a role that surely becomes more important in the light of the weightlessness induced by the network?

JR: It could be. Certainly newspapers are tied to place, and if the idea of being tied to place is really important, then they can help us achieve that.

RP: Looking back, do you have any regrets that you didn't become the political journalist you dreamed of being when you were at college?

JR: Oh, I think it was definitely best for me to become a journalism professor, because I am more of a critic and intellectual than I am a reporter type. But, sure, I think about it. After all, I was on track to be a Washington reporter or something similar — and I know where people are now who started at the same point that I did, and had the same kind of background.

So I sort of look across, and see where they are, and I think about it. But I'm not dissatisfied at all with where I am; I just sometimes wonder what it might have been like.

RP: And that is probably a good end point for us. Thank you for speaking with me.