Live publishing: the onstage redeployment of journalistic authority

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Abstract
In the past 5 years, live, in-person events have become significant revenue sources for industries ranging from high-tech to music. This article explores the rise of live events within one such industry – journalism – linking the rise of ‘live publishing’ to post-industrial career norms and digital economy business models. Drawing on interviews with 10 media companies and participant observation at two conferences produced by The Wall Street Journal, this article shows how media companies position themselves as the legitimate conveners of conferences and forums by redeploying traditional discourses of cultural authority; this enables them to bring together their existing networks of sources, audience members, and sponsors. By convening these groups in a physical space, live publishing takes isolated nodes within media organizations’ networks and renders them visible and accessible to each other, allowing media firms to extract value from these previously immaterial relationships. More broadly, live publishing demonstrates how the interaction of virtual and physical networks allows organizations to transform and redeploy cultural authority into new systems of networked power.

Keywords
authority, brokers, conferences, journalism, live events, media business models, networks

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Introduction

Chris Hughes: I don’t think serious journalism has a workable business model ... so we have our work cut out for us.

Kara Swisher: You could throw a conference. They work. Trust me. They do.

Chris Hughes: We’re considering that.


The semi-tropical courtyard of Southern California’s Ritz-Carlton Resort seems a world away from The Wall Street Journal’s gray, no-nonsense newsroom. Nevertheless, just past the palm trees and through the courtyard’s French doors, an increasingly important form of journalism was being produced in February 2013, as The Wall Street Journal columnist Kara Swisher interviewed Chris Hughes, cofounder of Facebook and new owner of the New Republic. The pair sat in red armchairs on a well-lit stage before roughly 150 media and technology professionals.

The audience laughed at Swisher’s joke about profitable conferences: After all, each attendee had paid US$3495 to be there. But for media companies, live events are serious business. Since 2008, many of America’s most prominent news publications, including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, and The Atlantic have launched or revamped divisions dedicated to conferences and other live events. At gatherings like The New York Times’ Schools for Tomorrow Conference and The Atlantic’s Aspen Ideas Festival, attendees pay hundreds or thousands of dollars to watch prominent journalists interview high-profile experts and to mingle with speakers at meals and parties. Many publications repurpose video or transcripts from such events into editorial content for print and online products. In this way, these events are not merely auxiliary businesses, but a new mode of content production, which I have elsewhere called ‘live publishing’ (Larson, 2012). Events have proven such a strong source of new income that one analyst predicts they may soon generate some 20% of media company revenues, joining circulation and advertising as a third leg of media business models (Larson, 2012).

Although live, in-person events would seem to be a move away from the digital, virtual world, in fact, their economic success for magazines and newspapers derives in part from industry and employment trends brought about by the digital economy. Thus, in many ways, the rise of live publishing represents the collision of two industrial worlds and styles: the hierarchical, professionalized institution of journalism and the networked world of digital technologies and post-industrial work norms. This article explores that collision, showing how live publishing allows media organizations to redeploy forms of cultural authority that supported industrial-era journalism, in ways that enable them to reconfigure their networks of sources, advertisers, and readers and thus profit under digitally driven conditions. Ironically, this reconfiguration of networks is part of a paradoxical process which both invokes and transforms traditional norms and sources of cultural authority.

Informed by networked theories of organization and the sociology of work, this article contributes to a broader understanding of how physical and digital networks interact
with cultural authority, altering the shape of both online and physical social worlds. In the pages that follow, I first look at how scholars have understood the relationship of journalistic authority and business models. I then present my research methods, followed by a brief overview of the history and context of live publishing. Next, my case study of two The Wall Street Journal conferences demonstrates how media organizations deploy traditional sources of journalistic authority – specifically, narrative structure, interviews, and access to experts – to justify and promote their convening power and thereby reconfigure their network of stakeholders. I conclude by demonstrating how the redeployment of traditional norms or values can legitimate new structures which, paradoxically, may then transform, reshape, or even undermine the very values on which they are built.

The paradox of live publishing

The flourishing of live publishing poses a puzzle. According to pundits and scholars alike, the power of the press is on the decline. Journalistic authority (which Zelizer (1992) defines as ‘the ability of journalists to promote themselves as authoritative and credible spokespersons of “real life” events’ (p. 12)) is supposedly fading fast in the face of participatory media (Benkler, 2006; Gillmor, 2006; Shirky, 2008).

If this narrative is true, however, then how do we account for the rise of live publishing at this moment? Why are attendees and sponsors willing to pay thousands of dollars to watch journalists interview experts onstage? What gives media companies their convening power? Before analyzing how live publishing redeploy the concept of journalistic authority, we need to understand its evolving relationship with production practices and business models and see how scholars have interpreted their contradictions and mutual dependence over time.

From the late 1800s, newspapers and magazines used their control of production and distribution systems to maintain a monopoly on public attention, creating a seller’s market for advertising (Anderson et al., 2012; Downie and Schudson, 2009; McChesney and Nichols, 2010; Schudson, 1978). In this era, journalists’ authority, especially their ability to serve as ‘gatekeepers’ determining what counted as news, existed largely by default (Schudson, 1978).

However, by the 1920s, faced with competing accounts of truth from the rise of government propaganda and the public relations industry, journalists began to justify their position as gatekeepers and purveyors of truth (Dewey, 2012; Lippmann, 2008). Lippmann (2008), for instance, argued that journalistic authority came from qualities including expertise in reporting, access to highly placed experts, and adherence to professional norms like objectivity. Journalists today continue to invoke these norms to bolster their credibility and authority (Deuze, 2005; Hackett, 1984; Mindich, 1998; Ryan, 2001; Schudson, 1978, 2001).

Lipmann (1997) observed that such norms not only legitimized journalistic authority but also underwrote newspapers’ business models. He recognized that an American reader ‘does not pay openly for his news’ (p. 204), and thus, journalism must depend on advertising. However, pandering to advertisers would drive away readers and hurt business. Thus, the same qualities that legitimated journalistic authority – reporters’ expertise, objectivity, and access to experts – would protect the business model from its own corrupting tendencies.
However, some scholars in the 1970s and 1980s posited a more tangled relationship, arguing that business models actually **determined** the professional norms justifying journalistic authority. Baker (1994) argued that the norm of objectivity enhanced advertising revenues, by promoting news as an inoffensive vehicle drawing a wide audience (p. 44). Tuchman’s description of objectivity as strategic ritual (1972) and of the beat system’s ‘news net’ as a process for financially rationalizing news production (1978) emphasized the role of business models in shaping professional norms and the discourse of journalistic authority. Zelizer (1990) observed how journalists advanced their professional (and thus economic) interests by selecting narrative strategies reinforcing their own status and authority.

Thus, through the industrial era, scholars perceived journalistic business models, professional norms, and journalistic authority as entwined and symbiotic. However, the rise of participatory technologies radically upset these relationships. Traditional media no longer monopolized public attention; consumers and corporations, buyers and sellers, and readers and sources could find each other more easily (Anderson et al., 2012; Doctor, 2010; McChesney and Nichols, 2010). These trends challenged both the business model and traditional claims to journalistic authority, particularly its gatekeeping function (Lewis et al., 2010; Singer, 2014; Singer et al., 2011).

Early observers of participatory journalism offered an upbeat take on these developments. Benkler (2006) suggested that peer production of journalism would remedy ‘the core failings of the commercial mass media’, while Shirky (2008) proposed that the very category of journalist was merely an ‘artifact of accidental scarcity’.

More recent work, focused on the challenges of integrating participatory culture with professional media production, has been more cautious in its claims of declining power. However, many have concluded that traditional journalistic authority is severely challenged (Anderson, 2011; Deuze et al., 2007; Lewis et al., 2010; Singer et al., 2011). Carlson (2007) notes how news search engines like Google News threaten journalist’s ‘presentational authority’, undermining their power to dictate the relative importance of news stories. Lewis (2012) suggests that journalists are developing a new ‘ethic of participation’ to resolve tensions between professional control and open contribution. Similarly, Anderson (2011) demonstrates how journalists’ discussions about their work reveal ‘a vision of the professional reporter that is less autonomous in his or her news decisions’ (p. 550). In short, Robinson (2007) concludes that ‘journalistic authority in terms of its institutional cache cannot help but become diluted’ (p. 13).

In contrast, the research presented here suggests the story is more complicated than a wholesale decline of authority. This article demonstrates how cultural authority may be redeployed, redistributed, or transformed as new categories of journalism emerge and thereby capture the attention of economically desirable groups in new ways. Anderson (2008) suggests that society may be witnessing ‘a transformation of the bases of cultural authority rather than an elimination of that authority’ (p. 262). This article sheds light on the mechanics and implications of one such shift.

**Research questions and data collection**

This article draws on interviews and participant observation to explore what live publishing can teach us about emerging networked forms of authority. Taking *The Wall Street
Journal conferences, particularly D: Dive Into Media, as a case study, I will ask the following questions: how do digital technology and economy trends relate to the rise of live publishing as a business model? How do the producers of live publishing invoke traditional sources of journalistic authority to enhance that model? And how does this model change the position and role of the media organization within its existing ecosystem?

To approach these questions, I focus on two types of publications in which live events have been highly visible: large circulation newspapers and business magazines. In each category, I contacted the 10 largest circulation publications, as listed by the Association of Audited Media, to determine whether they produced live publishing. I defined live publishing as (1) revenue-generating events, where (2) the editorial department drove the program and agenda, (3) journalists participated onstage, and (4) content produced at the event later appeared in print or online editorial sections, rather than special advertising sections.

To explore the conditions and reasons for live publishing’s growth, I conducted in-depth interviews with live publishing executives and engaged in participant observation at two live publishing events. In my initial census of large magazines and newspapers, I requested interviews from all organizations surveyed. Executives from two newspapers (The Wall Street Journal and the San Jose Mercury News) and two magazine publishers (Forbes and Bloomberg, publisher of Bloomberg BusinessWeek) agreed. ‘Snowball’ sampling based on these discussions led to interviews with executives at six additional media companies cited by colleagues as leaders in live publishing (these were the Financial Times; National Geographic; Techonomy; Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED); Texas Tribune; and Working Mother magazine) (see Appendix 1).

Through these interviews, The Wall Street Journal emerged as a paradigmatic case of live publishing for three reasons: first, the newspaper’s centrality in American journalism, both in circulation (it is America’s largest newspaper, with 1.5 million print and nearly 1 million digital subscribers) and reputation (the paper has won 34 Pulitzers); second, its early success in live publishing (The D: All Things Digital conference launched in 2003); and finally, its recent and aggressive expansion of live publishing. In 2008, Dow Jones created a The Wall Street Journal conference brand, offering four large conferences and several smaller events each year. Meanwhile, D spawned three new conferences since 2010. In 2014, the paper renamed the division WSJ.D, while Mossberg and Swisher left to launch Re/code, their own events and editorial venture.

To analyze live publishing at The Wall Street Journal, I conducted participant observation at two events in 2013 – D: Dive Into Media and The Wall Street Journal ECO:nomics conference on business and sustainability – where I spent a total of 4 days and interviewed more than two dozen participants, sponsors, and speakers.

The growth of live publishing

Live publishing is growing at half of America’s largest newspapers and business magazines. Of the seven newspapers that responded to calls and e-mails for this study, five produced live publishing (The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the San Jose Mercury News, and The Washington Post), and all five had expanded their offerings since 2008. Nine of the 10 largest business magazines produced live
publishing events, and 5 (Bloomberg, The Economist (North American edition), Forbes, Fortune, and Inc.) had increased those efforts in the past 5 years or planned to do so. Three (Fast Company, Entrepreneur, and Black Enterprise) did not provide information on whether or not their efforts had expanded (see Appendix 1). Meanwhile, industry enthusiasm for live publishing continues to grow: In 2014, a leaked report on the digital future of The New York Times (2014) recommended ‘reader-focused events that elevate our brand while meeting our standards’ and observed that ‘there is no reason that the space filled by TED Talks, with tickets costing US $7,500, could not have been created by The Times’.

On the surface, the growth of live publishing is easy to explain: Events make money. The Wall Street Journal’s conference division earns more than US$10 million a year, and nonprofit news organization Texas Tribune generated some 20% of its revenues in 2013. However, a brief look at the history of conferences and publishing suggests why events have become especially popular with the rise of digital technologies.

Live events and conferences are nothing new in American publishing. National Geographic began sponsoring public lectures by its explorers in 1890, and local newspapers have long convened candidate debates and public forums. Until recently, however, such events served primarily to foster a brand, a community, or an editorial mission, rather than regular sources of revenue (interview with Jane Van Hoen, Financial Times, 14 July 2012). As late as the 1990s, industry primers on magazine and newspaper industries did not mention live events as sources of either revenues or editorial content (Daly, 1997; Picard, 1997).

So how did live events come to represent an important new source of both? Interviews and archival research conducted for this study suggest that today’s boom in live publishing has deep roots in Silicon Valley’s conference culture, dating back to the early 1980s. During this time of rapid technological change, technology publishers including Ziff-Davis and International Data Group (IDG) began drawing mass audiences to events like Comdex and MacWorld Expo (interview with Bob Bierman, Bloomberg Link, 11 June 2012). By 1990, more general-interest conferences, like TED, were drawing attendees from beyond the tech industry. During the 1990s, conferences continued to boom, particularly those produced by technology publisher O’Reilly & Associates (Turner and Larson, in press). As technology trade shows competed with each other, some sought partnerships with magazines for their publicity and marketing support, inspiring some magazines to create their own events. Fortune, for instance, launched its first Global Forum conference in 1994 and was producing 30 conferences a year by the late 1990s (interview with Bob Bierman, 11 June 2012).

The conference business in general declined after 9/11, but the increasingly urgent search for new advertising revenues drove media companies to note the high-profile success of live ‘idea’ events such as the New Yorker Festival and the TED conference (interview with Evan Smith, Texas Tribune, 2 July 2012). By 2008, most large business magazines and several prominent newspapers were producing live publishing events, often centered on rapidly changing fields such as science or health care. Meanwhile, several high-profile media start-ups, including TechCrunch, successfully launched live events to support their fledgling editorial ventures (interviews with David Kirkpatrick, Techonomy, 22 July 2012; Ken Doctor, Outsell, 9 September 2012).

Several lines of thought in organizational theory and the sociology of work help explain the rapid rise of technology conferences in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the
related growth in live publishing. Network theories of organization posit that cross-organizational collaboration and learning opportunities accelerate innovation and are essential in industries where expertise is widely dispersed (Powell, 1990). Another line of organizational thought, contingency theory, suggests that corporate leaders seeking to control the impact of uncertain external factors prefer in-person news sources and demand cutting-edge information (Stinchcombe, 1990). Together, these theories predict that in-person learning forums should rise in industries beset by rapid change and uncertainty, such as the fledgling technology industry. For this reason, it makes sense that business publications like The Wall Street Journal, aimed at corporate decision makers, would become active in the growing conference business. It also explains why many live publishing events focus on specialized, professionally valuable topics in rapidly changing fields, such as technology, education, and energy.

Meanwhile, the rise of in-person events in Silicon Valley corresponded with a rapid shift in career expectations and norms, as many white-collar jobs moved from an industrial model of long-term security to a ‘free agent’ model calling for perpetual networking, self-branding, skill building, and knowledge enhancement (Neff, 2012; Pink, 2001; Smith, 2010). Live events from the 1990s until today have provided rich opportunities to engage in such activities, while creating an environment that normalizes, validates, and celebrates those activities. In this way, live gatherings provide spaces that serve both a social and a psychological role, as rituals validating specific social behaviors (Coleman, 2010; Turner, 2009). In interviews, attendees referred to the ritual, community-building importance of live events. One regular attendee of the D: All Things Digital conference, for instance, referred to D as being ‘like Oz – another world for three days’, and Mossberg recalled the first D as being ‘like a reunion’, where attendees instantly recognized their commonality.

Despite the growth of conferences as a revenue source for media companies in the 1990s, such events did not serve as a regular mode of content production until the early 2000s, when the cost and difficulty of producing multimedia content dramatically dropped. According to Bloomberg’s Bob Bierman, live events then became a low-cost way to create integrated advertising packages across several media platforms, which advertisers had been demanding (interview, Bob Bierman, 7 June 2012).

Meanwhile, because live events qualified as sponsorship opportunities, they proved easier to sell to corporations than traditional advertising, where purchases are highly structured and regulated by ad agencies and media buying firms. The Financial Times’ Jane van Hoen, head of the company’s conference division, summarized one recent sponsorship deal. ‘We were able to circumvent all of the agencies and the media buyers and the rest’, she said. ‘There are pockets of money everywhere’ (interview, 14 June 2012).

**Case study: redeploying journalistic authority at The Wall Street Journal**

With an understanding of the history and financial context of live publishing, we can now focus on two The Wall Street Journal events to analyze how live publishing deploys journalistic authority, and how that deployment has led to an economically successful new platform.
In 2003, Mossberg and Swisher approached the managing editor of The Wall Street Journal and proposed the D: All Things Digital conference. Unlike other technology conferences, it would take a ‘journalist’s approach’, Mossberg said, and would serve as an editorial product, not a marketing or branding initiative (interview, 7 February 2013). The event would ban canned speeches in favor of live, onstage interviews. ‘We thought of it as journalism on the stage’, Mossberg said:

We wanted to create impact, make news, bring insights, because we were thinking of this in terms of journalism and because we were journalists … We were the first, major, impactful, journalistically oriented conference. It sprung entirely out of the news department.

The first D conference featured Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Meg Whitman (Deutschman, 2004). The organizers set ticket prices at more than US$2000 and capped attendance at 375. ‘We wanted to make it a hard ticket to get’, said Mossberg, so people would feel ‘they’re at something special and exclusive’ (interview, 7 February 2013).

A feeling of exclusiveness and intimacy was critical for the venture’s success, he explained, because people would come not only to hear speakers but also to interact with them and each other. ‘Every one of these big-time conferences is made up from what you learn on the stage and the networking opportunities’, Mossberg said. The 3-day event included meals, coffee breaks, parties, and other networking opportunities. In this way, D’s program design intentionally incorporated the kinds of networking and personal branding activities perceived as critical to career advancement in the post-industrial era (Smith, 2010).

The first D, held in Southern California in 2003, immediately turned a profit and established the model for future D conferences. In 2008, D’s financial success funded the launch of AllThingsD.com, a free online publication employing 10 reporters and editors. In 2010, Mossberg and Swisher added two new conferences, Dive Into Media and Dive Into Mobile, and a third, AsiaD, in 2011. Typical D attendees included CEOs and senior managers of technology firms, start-ups, or large corporations, as well as reporters from other news outlets who covered the events.

D’s success inspired Dow Jones to launch a separate, unrelated Wall Street Journal conference brand in 2008. Founder Dorothea Herrey said,

I’d looked at All Things Digital and asked, ‘Is it successful because of Walt, or could we do other conferences?’ And the answer was, with the Journal brand, if we make it an editorial product, not a marketing event, and think of it as another channel for our content and a showcase for our editorial excellence, then yes, we could. (Interview, 12 July 2012, emphasis added)

Today, Herrey’s division produces four large conferences and a handful of smaller ones, generating annual revenues over US$10 million. While this made up only a tiny contribution to News Corp’s 2013 News and Information division revenues of US$6.7 billion, the sum is significant because it represents a growth area in an otherwise declining advertising market. From 2012 to 2013, for instance, News Corp’s advertising revenues dropped by 10% (News Corp, 2013).
From page to stage: redeploying traditional claims in the digital era

The success of The Wall Street Journal’s conferences suggests that Mossberg, Swisher, and Herrey were right about the appeal of journalism on the stage. But it does not explain why it was appealing. Why should a participant attend D or ECO:nomics, rather than (or in addition to) technology or eco-business conferences sponsored by industry groups? Why should sponsors support media-produced events over other gatherings? In short, what legitimates journalists’ power to convene a live audience?

Analyzing the structure and content of Dive Into Media and ECO:nomics demonstrates how media companies turn to the discourse of journalistic authority to answer these questions, to position themselves as the rightful conveners of these events, to regain a lost monopoly on attention, and to extract profit from it. Specifically, the staging and design of these events, the centrality of the journalistic interview, and access to elite sources all work to enhance journalistic authority in live publishing. Paradoxically, the new infrastructure legitimized by the invocation of these and other traditional journalistic norms can act to reshape, reform, or undermine those very norms.

Staging authority: narrative strategies of live publishing

In print and TV journalism, Zelizer (1990) argues, journalists use narrative strategies to assert their authority. In the physical space of live publishing, such narrative strategies are visual as well as textual, embodied in stagecraft and production values. At both conferences I observed, the tone and design of conference materials and the configuration of physical space specifically positioned journalists as authorities.

For instance, the printed program for Dive Into Media 2013 employed the distinctive editorial tone of All Things D and the graphic style of The Wall Street Journal to equate speakers with sources or subjects of editorial profiles. Slyly written blurbs replaced standard corporate bios. Each bio included a ‘hedcut’ – The Wall Street Journal’s signature black-and-white ink-dot portrait – rather than a standard corporate headshot. Both the program’s writing style and its graphic design positioned speakers as sources and journalists as the authorities controlling the story.

Inside the Ritz’s ballroom, the physical staging and lighting reinforced journalists’ authoritative position. The reporters sat in cherry-red armchairs at center stage, brightly lit against scrims in jewel-toned purple, emerald, and electric blue, rising to escort their guests into the spotlight. The room’s Wi-Fi had been deactivated, to encourage attendees to ‘fully engage with the speakers’, the program explained. In these ways, the event’s physical infrastructure reinforced journalists’ monopoly on audience attention.

Interviews and authority: asking the tough questions

The role of what Mossberg called ‘journalistic interviews’ similarly served to solidify the cultural authority of journalists and legitimize their convening power. Mossberg saw probing, skeptical interviews as a competitive advantage. Referring to another technology conference, he said, ‘It wasn’t run in a journalistic manner. By that I mean it wasn’t interviews’. He continued,
They didn’t do the kind of journalistic interviews that sometimes make people uncomfortable. If you’re going to ask the right questions, there’s a possibility somebody’s going to have to answer something they don’t want to answer. That wasn’t in their skill set. So I said, let’s do Wall Street Journal interviews on the stage. (Interview, 7 February 2013)

Since World War I, the journalistic interview has been a ‘mainstay of American journalism’ (Schudson, 2003). The probing interview, pushing aside corporate hype, became increasingly important as critics like Lippmann (2008) and John Dewey (1927/1991) decried the rise of propagandists and ‘publicity agents’. From the muckrakers of the 1920s to Barbara Walters, Bob Woodward, and Michael Moore, the willingness of journalists to ask uncomfortable questions has helped legitimate their claims to expertise and authority.

Unlike trade shows, where speakers typically deliver PowerPoint presentations, Dive Into Media forbid canned presentations. The event’s marketing materials stressed that this event was ‘Unrehearsed. Unscripted. Unexpected’ (advertisement for Dive into Media in The Wall Street Journal, 15 January 2013). Similarly, the D: All Things Digital website emphasized ‘unscripted interviews’ with ‘no marketing pitches and no bull’ (http://allthingsd.com/conferences/d/d11/about/).

It would be easy to read this as nothing more than marketing hype. But at Dive Into Media, Mossberg and his fellow journalist, Peter Kafka, were openly skeptical during an interview with Intel Media Vice President Erik Huggers, who claimed Intel’s forthcoming Internet television device would ‘actually care about who you are’.

‘This will be a caring box?’ Mossberg said sarcastically. ‘Really!? Intel has a caring chip in there?’

When Huggers explained that the device included a camera to identify viewers, Mossberg and Kafka challenged him:

So there’s a camera that watches me while I watch TV and you don’t you think people will be skeeved out at all? (Kafka)

No electronic device today ships without a camera. (Huggers)

Every one of those laptops and phones in the front row has a camera. But those cameras are for those people to turn on if they want to have a chat or take a picture. It’s not looking at them for the purpose of serving up ads. (Mossberg)

Huggers tried to redirect the conversation, but Mossberg interrupted him:

You just switched on me and switched on Peter. We were talking about the camera watching you for the purposes of targeting. (Dive Into Media onstage interview, 12 February 2013)

In the eyes of attendees, these moments of challenge helped legitimize the convening power of journalists. Kelly Egan, for example, vice president of business development for a Silicon Valley start-up, has attended several D conferences. ‘It’s one thing if you’re doing a demo, where you’re allowed to give a canned speech on stage, but it’s different when you’re in the red chair’, he said, referring to the exchange between Mossberg and
Huggers. ‘You’re not supposed to be pitching. Walt will ask real questions and he’ll nail you if you’re just self-promoting’ (interview with Kelly Egan, 12 February 2013). Egan’s understanding of what it meant to be ‘on the red chair’ indicated an expectation that journalists would exercise their right to control the story: Huggers had only gotten what he deserved.

For at least some attendees, this exercise of journalistic authority, embodied by the probing interview, differentiated D events from industry conferences, just as Mossberg had hoped.

‘This is neutral territory’, said attendee Edwin Ong, executive vice president of research firm Tribune Media Services. ‘At other events, when a vendor is sponsoring, it just feels weird. Everyone’s pushing a product. Here, anyone can say anything’ (interview, 12 February 2013). For Ong, the ‘neutral’ role of the presiding journalists created an environment where participants felt free to speak their minds. In his view, the entire event benefited from the legitimizing journalistic norms of independence, objectivity and expertise embodied in the interviews.

**Opening the network: access to sources and audience**

Throughout the industrial era, a key source of journalistic authority was the ability of journalists to access elite sources and then broker their information to readers. By doing so, media companies produced reader attention which could then be brokered again to advertisers (Napoli, 2003) (see Figure 1). The advantages of the broker position within a network have been well documented (Burt, 1992, 2004); in the case of journalism, media companies reaped large profits for decades. With the rise of participatory journalism, however, publishers became less essential in brokering information between sources and readers and between readers and advertisers (McChesney and Nichols, 2010; Shirky, 2008).

However, in live publishing, journalists have transplanted their traditional relationships with these groups into a physical setting. In this way, live publishing transforms journalists’ previously immaterial networks of relationships into a physical, embodied, material product. These events create a physical space where separate networks overlap in what network theorists Vedres and Stark (2010) call ‘structural folds’: With their special access and regular professional interaction with sources, readers, and sponsors, the media companies, journalists, and producers who convene live publishing events serve as ‘multiple insiders’ (Vedres and Stark, 2010), acting in their own organizations but also deeply familiar with and active in the worlds of their sources and readers (in the case of reporters) or clients (in the case of advertising salespeople). Such actors do not merely connect but, in a sense, belong to each of the overlapping groups, facilitating the recombinination of knowledge in innovative ways and creating a more complex network where multiple nodes connect directly with each other.

Such folding of separate networks was apparent on the second day of Dive Into Media. After 2 hours in the darkened ballroom, attendees, speakers, and sponsors all spilled out into the courtyard for ‘Deep Dive Discussions’, where they lunched at 1 of 12 round tables, each with a designated host and discussion topic. Journalists hosted eight tables; sponsors hosted four. The Deep Dive discussions created a structure expressly...
designed to transform The Wall Street Journal’s relationships with sources, readers, and sponsors into a single, closely knit network.

Other live publishing events studied for this article offered an array of networking events, including golf outings, late night musical jam sessions, and poker games. Attendees at both events said they came for the networking as much or more than the programmed content. Venture capitalist Theresia Gouw, for example, regularly attended D conferences specifically to meet speakers:

What’s different about this, compared to other industry events, is that Walt and Kara convince the speakers to stay. At a lot of other industry conferences, people helicopter in, but here you’re having lunch with the speakers. (Interview, 12 February 2013)

It is not just speakers, but other attendees, who are on offer for networking. Michael McCue, founder of mobile app Flipboard, has attended every D conference, largely to reinforce connections with colleagues. ‘I always walk out of the ballroom with two or three insights I didn’t have before’, he said. ‘Then I get to talk about them and keep building them and developing them with people [attending the conference] I know and trust’ (interview, 12 February 2013).

Sponsors particularly value the in-person networking opportunities. ‘We’re interested in reaching C-level executives. This builds our network’, said a marketing manager for a national shipping firm which sponsored ECO:nomics 2013. Before the conference, her team had sent free golf-bag shipping boxes to attendees. During the event, they offered free refreshments to attendees and speakers. Such in-person networking had paid off the previous year, when the head of a prominent nonprofit struck up a conversation and later switched the organization’s shipping to the sponsor (interview, 12 February 2013).

In online or print publications, sponsors typically have only indirect, mediated contact with readers and journalists. Readers, sources, and advertisers traditionally depended on the publication as their only means of connection, placing media organizations at the center of a hub-and-spoke network (see Figure 1). However, the physical, in-person nature of live publishing transforms such loose connections into real-life relationships, creating what Turner (2006) calls ‘network forums’ – physical or virtual meeting places where ‘one or more entrepreneurs gather members of multiple networks, allowing them to communicate and collaborate’ (p. 72). While the dawn of participatory technologies opened networks in a way that seemed to work against journalistic authority (Singer et al., 2011), the success of live publishing depends on making these networks visible and open to participants through these network forums (see Figure 2).

In these spaces, journalists present themselves as the natural, logical conveners of conversations, which position them to monetize all nodes of the network. Attendees pay for the opportunity to build business and engage in identity work that will enhance their employability. Sponsors receive personal contact with a valuable, captive audience. (In a nearly literal example of a captive audience, the Texas Tribune Festival in 2011 allowed Chevrolet to shuttle attendees between venues in Volt electric cars driven by Chevy public relations representatives.)

By providing opportunities for sponsors to speak personally to high-value customers, live publishing meets a growing advertising demand for highly segmented direct
marketing – the same demand which advertisers have been pursuing online, through audience tracking (Andrejevic, 2009; Turow, 2005). Ironically, then, live publishing benefits from a trend which may have contributed to the decline of lucrative brand advertising in print (Anderson et al., 2012).

**The return of the exclusive**

By invoking and deploying their interview skills, their access to elite sources, and their relationships to the audience, live publishing allows journalists to position themselves as the hosts of valuable network forums, where their professional connections to sources, audience members, and, indirectly, sponsors become visible and open to each other. The live, physical aspect of events transforms journalists into gatekeepers of people, as well as content. In this way, live publishing allows journalists to recapture and monetize the old idea of the ‘exclusive’, a promise no longer viable in an era of instant access to almost any content. A monopoly on attention, however, can be reproduced when ‘exclusive’ becomes physical exclusiveness.
The Wall Street Journal and many other prominent publications have deliberately cultivated a sense of exclusiveness in their ticketing policies. The 2013 D conference, priced at US$5500 and scheduled for May 2013, was sold out by February. The price and the difficulty of getting tickets create a scarcity mentality that drives demand. ‘It’s the exclusion’, said Kelly Egan of Fanhattan, when asked why he attended Dive Into Media. ‘Here, all the speakers and attendees are vetted by Walt and Kara’ (interview, 12 February 2013).

Similarly, other Dow Jones conferences, such as ECO:nomics, are promoted as ‘invitation only’ to create an added sense of value. ‘We capitalize on [attendees] aspirations by saying, “you are one of the chosen few to be invited to this”’, said Herrey (interview, 12 July 2012). In live publishing, the term ‘invitation only’ means the event’s producers rented a list of executives fitting desired criteria from a direct marketing firm. However, people not on the list can apply, and may later be invited, to the event (interviews with Dorothea Herrey and Bob Bierman).

Through strategies like this, the journalistic ‘exclusive’ has been reinvented as exclusion and made so desirable to both attendees and sponsors that live publishing has been enormously lucrative. Live events allow post-industrial journalism to offer a new kind of

Figure 2. Live publishing ecosystem.
attention monopoly, by deploying journalistic authority to convene an exclusive group behind closed doors, where a special and valuable kind of attention is guaranteed.

In this way, live publishing is linked conceptually to the rise of journalistic paywalls as well as to ‘walled gardens’, like Match.com or early incarnations of AOL, where users pay for the privilege of interacting with themselves. All of these strategies depend on an attention economics that targets small, economically valuable publics. Or, as Dive Into Media attendee Jayne Babine put it, ‘You can’t reach anybody by e-mail anymore. But you can meet them here’ (interview with Jayne Babine, 12 February 2013).

**Discussion: the transformation of norms**

Observations like Babine’s support a fundamental insight articulated by John Durham Peters (2001) about physical presence and witnessing: ‘“Being there” matters’ (p. 718), he wrote, because live experiences are unique, unrepeatable, and unscripted. In the case of live publishing, ‘being there’ also matters because physical presence changes the context in which journalistic norms and claims to authority are implemented, in a way that creates new tensions and contradictions. The reconfiguration of networks in the live setting highlights a contradictory process where traditional norms and sources of cultural authority are invoked to legitimate a new infrastructure – and yet those norms themselves may then be transformed, reshaped, or diluted by the new infrastructure they underwrite. Such contradictions call for critical scrutiny by editors, reporters, and scholars who take seriously the higher claims of journalism, particularly ideals relating to the democratic spread of information and the revelation of unbiased truth, free from undue influence from the wealthy and powerful.

In one notable instance of the transformation of norms, live publishing producers simultaneously invoked and undermined the traditional relationships between sources, reporters, and sponsors. Several producers cited journalistic taboos against paying sources as a rationale for not paying speakers, pointing out that paying sources taints the reporter–source relationship. None of the 10 organizations interviewed paid participants; however, some critics suggest that live events nevertheless compromise the journalist–source relationship, making journalists too dependent on their sources’ willingness to speak at conferences (Deutschman, 2004). After all, critics say, the financial structure of live publishing depends on the willingness of big-name sources to travel to conferences, often on their own dime, and speak for free. At best, this requires a high level of trust and good will between journalist and source; at worst, it can create an unspoken obligation on the part of the journalist.

To be sure, the importance of strong relationships between reporters and sources has long been problematic (Cook, 1998; Rosten, 1937; Sigal, 1973), but this issue seems magnified by a business model entirely dependent on the physical presence and cooperation of sources. Much of the appeal of live events to both audience and sponsors lies in the ability of media companies to broker direct access to sources, raising a potential for abuse which has not been lost on the public or media critics. For instance, in 2009, critics lashed The Washington Post for planning a series of dinners – later canceled – where sponsors could pay US$25,000–US$250,000 to dine with journalists and policymakers at the publisher’s home (Calderone and Barr, 2009). The Post’s events division subsequently
posted a public ethics statement, reading, ‘Post conferences or other live events must not compromise our journalism nor create an appearance [of such]’. (Washington Post Live, n.d.) The growing importance of live publishing offers ample occasion for controversies of this nature.

In another contradiction, producers interviewed for this article often invoked the journalistic values of inclusion and the democratic spread of information as important drivers behind live publishing. Texas Tribune, for instance, subsidizes its investigative reporting and online content through its live events. Similarly, income from the TED conference supports the free distribution of its popular TED Talks and funds programs like TED Fellows, which nurtures young, socially minded innovators around the world.

‘In my mind, it’s not a bad thing to have what some people would call an “elitist” conference – which I term an “expensive” conference – if that is the engine that powers the rest of the ecosystem’, said Tom Reilly, director of fellows and community at TED.

But the claim that live publishing facilitates the democratic spread of news and information obscures a competing truth. At its most exclusive, live publishing creates a two-tiered system of journalism: a premium tier, delivering in-person, professional benefits to those who can pay, and a second tier, where consumers view mediated content online or in print. More than one teacher has pointed out the irony that at US$800, The New York Times’ Schools for Tomorrow conference is out of the average educator’s reach, unless an employer pays for it (Danielson, 2013).

In some ways, of course, such a two-tiered system simply reflects the realities of an increasingly stratified society: Wealth and power have always bought access to special privilege. However, the growing importance of a two-tier system seems especially troubling in the context of an industry basing its legitimacy on ideals of transparency, democracy, and the dissemination of truth. Tendencies toward elite closure and second-tier viewing of events seem to create ideal conditions for what Robert Merton called the ‘Matthew effect’, where those with existing holdings of capital (social, financial, or otherwise) continually expand those holdings, potentially at the expense of others without such benefits – precisely those whom journalism, at its best, claims to protect.

Conclusion

In counterpoint to recent academic work suggesting that the digital economy has undermined journalistic authority, live publishing offers a site where such authority has not been eroded but rather redeployed. By invoking the discourse of journalistic authority to legitimize a new business model and mode of production, the producers of live publishing also create a site where that discourse can be negotiated and transformed along with the institutions it underwrites. This article contributes to a broader understanding of this process, suggesting how physical and digital networks interact with cultural authority, altering the shape of both online and physical social worlds. It also highlights the way transplanting traditional journalistic norms and existing relationships into a live setting raises new tensions and contradictions.

Such contradictions merit serious consideration by journalists and scholars alike, not only because they pose threats to desirable norms, but, more urgently, because scrutiny may yield insight and solutions. The Washington Post scandal, for instance, led to the
cancelation of its objectionable salon series and to a publically posted ethics statement. Similarly, the Texas Tribune, with its US$100 tickets and free entry for students, has found that conferences need not be prohibitively priced. None of the contradictions raised by live publishing is irresolvable, and all can prompt meaningful discussion about journalistic values during a time of shifting technologies and norms. Fostering these conversations, however, will require journalists, event producers, and scholars to recognize and take seriously live publishing as not simply an auxiliary income stream but as an emerging form of journalistic production in its own right.

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**References**


## Appendix 1

### Newspapers ranked by circulation, alliance for audited media (June 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Paper</th>
<th>Produce live publishing?</th>
<th>More events since 2009?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Wall Street Journal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>USA Today</td>
<td>No – produce editorially driven events, but not as revenue drivers</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The New York Times</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Los Angeles Times</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>New York Daily News</td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>No response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>San Jose Mercury News</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>New York Post</td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>No response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Washington Post</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Chicago Sun Times</td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>No response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Denver Post</td>
<td>Events growing but not editorially driven</td>
<td>No response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Business magazines, ranked by circulation, alliance for audited media (June 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Magazine</th>
<th>Produce live publishing?</th>
<th>More events since 2009?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Money Magazine</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bloomberg BusinessWeek</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Forbes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Fortune</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Economist North America</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Wired</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Fast Company</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not yet, but now planning expansion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black Enterprise</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>