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The Courage to Innovate for the Future of Journalism

Thank you for having me today. It is an honor to be speaking at a lecture named for Ralph McGill, the "conscience of the South." I think McGill's valor in writing editorials that challenged racial segregation exemplifies some of the courage that today's news entrepreneurs are demonstrating as they try to re-imagine journalism for our future.

Despite all the handwringing about business models, we are in an exciting time for journalism. It is being re-invented in very entrepreneurial ways, day in and day out.

People who have new ideas about how to make news and information happen are acting on their ideas: They are launching new websites, new partnerships, new apps, new ways of engaging with audiences.

As I see it, the way the news ecosystem is evolving, journalism – and the democracy it supports – is becoming a tale of smaller and smaller organizations that are having bigger and bigger impact. Some of the traditional news organizations that have been around for decades will be gone. Rising in their place are small news start-ups, statewide investigative sites, nonprofit news sites, new data applications, journalism-school news initiatives, information-rich NGOs, and even soft-advocacy sites.

For instance, sites that cover public schools from the point of view of advocating for good schools.

Journalism schools that not so long ago focused on “convergence” are now zeroing in on “entrepreneurship.” J-school programs are springing up all over the country to support startups and journalism innovations.

I do believe that journalism needs to be re-invented. And I hope that traditional news organizations will allow more oxygen for new ideas to be launched **inside their news organizations**. I also hope they will have the courage and grace to accept new ideas from news creators who are **not** members of the journalistic tribe. Some of that innovation means that legacy journalists may have to leave their comfort zones that allow them to do journalism on autopilot. Instead, they will need to experiment with new kinds of stories, different story frames, and ideas for collaboration and engagement they have not traditionally embraced.

I want to leave you with **two lists** today. One is my **crystal ball** for what I see happening in the not-so-distant future. And the other is my **wish list** for the future of journalism.

The last couple of years have seen amazing activity. There are new delivery platforms, with some news organizations moving to digital-first ideas and online-only publications.

There have been a striking number of media mergers – Huffington Post with AOL, the Daily Beast with Newsweek, Yahoo with ABC.

There has been unprecedented collaboration that has upended the fierce competition that marked the journalism I grew up in. We see Pulitzer Prize-winning startups like Pro Publica giving away data and partnering on stories in the normal course of business. We see the Texas Tribune offering its content to other

media around the state. We see the Washington Post running stories from Bloomberg Media. Collaboration is the new normal. And I think it is a good thing because it exposes readers to a richer menu of stories and amplifies news beyond narrow silos. As important, it liberates journalism organizations to focus on a discrete portfolio of subjects – areas where they can add the most value for readers.

As I look ahead, I like to think of the media ecosystem as an elevator with journalists telling stories from very different heights – from micro granular news to the grand master narratives. Let's call them the 5,000-foot-view, the 500-foot-view, and the 50-foot-view stories. For instance, the 5,000-foot level includes explanatory journalism, enterprise stories, coverage of big national and international issues. I think we will be OK there: We will continue to have strong national news organizations telling important stories that affect all citizens.

Major news organizations like the New York Times have exhibited enormous creativity in amplifying its print content with robust blogs, stunning interactive news opportunities, specialty publications and more.

I also think there has been tremendous courage to innovate among local news entrepreneurs who are generating the close-up, or 50-foot, view of community news. There are some 3,000 local news startups that have launched around the country over the last six years.

Activists or creative technologists are jumpstarting some of these sites. Traditional journalists who have left their newsrooms as a result of buyouts or downsizing are launching others.

Many of these professionals still want to do journalism, and as they survey the media landscape, they are identifying gaps they

can fill. Rather than taking a non-journalism job, they are embracing the risk of launching an online news startup from scratch. Braver yet, many are investing enormous sweat equity to make a go of their enterprises. Some are going without salaries for the first several years of their startups. Some are taking out second mortgages on their homes. Others they are living on one income – that of their spouse turned "angel investor" – as they build up their enterprises.

Moreover, they are courageously forcing themselves to learn the kinds of new skills that traditional journalists might disdain: ad sales, bookkeeping, grant writing, marketing, community engagement – and in some cases writing code. At the same time, they are trying to provide quality content and earn the community's trust. Will they succeed in the long term? I hope so. Many sites, like NewHavenIndependent.org in Connecticut, are paving the way and the oldest of these sites is now going on seven years.

J-Lab has been in the forefront of jumpstarting some 90 pilot projects. And I am pleased to report that most of these new efforts are doing an important job of trying to fill the gaps in news coverage and hold public officials accountable. To be sure, they don't yet have the resources to replace everything that is being cut back.

Where I have the deepest concern is at the 500-foot view level. This is where we need more courage to allow new acts of journalism to happen. This is where urban, regional and statewide stories are covered. It is also where news coverage is challenged as metro dailies trim staff, cut news hole, shrink their distribution areas and erect pay walls. I worry that their innovations address their needs more than their consumers'. And I worry that they are not keeping pace with the innovative ideas of entrepreneurs now sharing their news landscape.

At the same time I am heartened by the rise of online metro news sites offering robust journalism: Such initiatives as MinnPost, VoiceofSanDiego, the St. Louis Beacon and the Texas Tribune are charting promising paths for our future.

The courage to think out of the box has been the hallmark of the journalism innovators who have won J-Lab's Knight-Batten Awards for Innovations in Journalism. I would like to tip my hat to the vision that emboldened startups like the Sunlight Foundation, which is inventing new tools for data, interactivity and transparency. To Storify, which has enabled seamless narratives to be constructed from tweets, Facebook posts, YouTube videos and other elements of social media. A nod to Ushahidi for using mobile phones and texting to crowdsource crisis information. And to PolitiFact, which is making possible new ways for holding politicians accountable for their positions and statements. We must be grateful for these new ideas, even though many don't come from traditional journalism organizations.

A hats off, as well, to the B-to-B (business-to-business) journalism enterprises, such as Bloomberg Government, which covers government's impact on business. These efforts are managing to find paying audiences for deep-dive content.

As I look into my crystal ball for the future, I see cause for delight and cause for concern:

- By the end of the decade, I think we are going to see statewide watchdog/accountability news sites in every state. They will be clones of California Watch, Oklahoma Watch, VTDigger, Florida Bulldog, and the New England Center for Investigative Reporting. They will provide original content for media throughout their territories.

- I think we will have new tools and apps that will make data libraries easier to maintain and search and interactive stories easier to produce.
- I think we will see the launch of some of some new national news organizations. It wouldn't surprise me if the likes of the BBC, Reuters or Bloomberg created an online national news site – one that would help supply those 5,000-foot-view stories.
- I think many more local news sites will launch (the 50-foot view) and we'll figure out new and nontraditional ways to quantify the “success” of these startups – looking at engagement, impact in their communities and their prospects for sustainability.
- But, sadly, I also think we are going to lose some daily metro papers – those who are now providing the 500-foot view. Some will go online only. Indeed, a top executive at the Dallas Morning News predicted recently that in just three years the news organization will no longer be printing newspapers seven days a week.

Other urban newspapers will fold altogether, unable to bring in enough revenue to produce a product that is meaty and meaningful enough for people to pay for.

It is painful to see how the portfolios of regional and metro newspapers are shrinking. They do little national and international news – buying most of it from such wire services as the Associated Press and others. They no longer have enough feet on the street to cover hyperlocal news – and, as we see, others are rapidly taking up that challenge. Arts, cultural affairs, restaurant and movie reviews are now

flourishing in new online outlets. So what are metro papers left with?

Sports, to be sure, although you can get sports coverage on ESPN and elsewhere. And they cover stories about City Hall and local government – although often that involves coverage of a city that many of their suburban readers don't live in. They also provide episodic enterprise and investigative stories. I worry that that is not enough.

The recent report on local news by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Pew Internet and American Life project chronicled divergent trends.

While more Americans rely on local television for news, it is primarily for three topics: weather, breaking news and traffic. Conversely, people relied on local newspapers for a wider range of subjects – 11 out of 16 areas – but the overall audience is smaller.

But chillingly, while people said they counted on newspapers to cover a range of topics, a surprising 69 percent said that if their local paper **no longer existed**, it would not have a major impact on their ability to keep up with news and information about their community.

To be expected, 79 percent of Americans who are online said the Internet is their second most relied-on source of information on 15 of the 16 topics surveyed.

The study also found that print newsletters, online listservs and word of mouth were important ways for people to learn about their community, especially news about schools and events.

How many of you have robust neighborhood listservs? If only someone would invent a Storify-like platform to scrape the best news off of those.

So now for my wish list – where I think courage could impact the future:

- I wish for more collaboration among news organizations. It would reduce the inefficiencies of having so many journalists cover the same news at the same time. And it would allow news organizations to deploy some of these resources to break new ground on uncovered topics.
- I wish that metro and regional newspapers would take a cue from some of the statewide news startups and aggressively focus on just five or six subject areas that they know they can own. This would mean relinquishing the rest to other suppliers and partners. It would take a lot of courage to do that, but it could provide discernable added value if readers found deep and consistent coverage of key topics and aggregation of the rest.
- I wish individuals in more states would replicate the Vermont Journalism Trust, a collection of interested people who have organized themselves to be stewards of good journalism. They are now helping to support and raise money for the excellent VTDigger news website.
- I wish the IRS would create a new nonprofit category for journalistic startups to smooth the uncertainties of the application process for entities seeking to become 501-c-3's. This would help bolster information flow in communities.

- I wish foundations and others would fund one-off enterprise reporting projects that could be shared with many media makers on many distribution pipelines.
- Finally, I wish local public radio and television stations would move quickly to develop and expand some serious journalism chops so that they can be more robust providers of local news – beyond talk shows and websites organized around their program schedules. This is starting to happen in some places.

Innovation is more than a process. It is a journey, albeit one that has to move quickly with the current speed of change in the news ecosystem.

It means you take certain risks. Some ideas will succeed; others will fail.

We should celebrate and share our successes and pick ourselves up from the failures and move on to the next thing. There are ideas waiting to happen – if we have the courage to make them happen.

Thank you very much.