2 The rise of online news

'Welcome to Cyberspace' was the bold salutation splashed on the front cover of *Time* on 1 March 1995. This special issue of the news magazine was devoted to exploring precisely what this new-fangled concept of 'cyberspace' meant, offering an overview of the state of internet technology and various assessments of its growing impact on everyday life (telecommunications giant AT&T was the issue's sole sponsor with 28 pages of advertising). From one section to the next, *Time* marshalled together a range of perspectives, addressing topics such as the seemingly imminent arrival of the global village, net-based commerce, computer crime, the wiring of schools, online dating and digital television, all with a view to illuminating the emergent terrain of cyberspace for its readers. Here it is worth recalling, of course, that in 1995 only a relatively small number of these readers could have been expected to possess first-hand experience of the internet.

With the benefit of hindsight, *Time*'s special issue can be recognized as a significant intervention, representing a formative moment when the esoteric realm of cyberspace was deemed sufficiently newsworthy to warrant in-depth treatment by a mainstream news publication. In its opening essay, Philip Elmer-Dewitt (1995) sets the scene by explaining that the origins of the 'cyberspace' concept could be traced back to science fiction writer William Gibson's (1984) dystopian novel *Neuromancer* with its chilling depiction of a virtual reality existing behind the computer screen. Elmer-Dewitt points out that the concept has since been taken up to describe the 'shadowy space where our computer data reside', thereby joining words such as 'the Net, the Web, the Cloud, the Matrix, the Metaverse, the Datasphere, the Electronic Frontier, [and] the information superhighway'. In prophesying that Gibson's coinage would likely prove the most enduring of these alternatives, he highlights its multiple inflections in different contexts. 'Now hardly a day goes by without some newspaper article, some political speech, some corporate press release invoking Gibson's imaginary world', he observes. 'Suddenly, it seems, everybody has an E-mail address.'

Of particular interest to Elmer-Dewitt, however, is the way in which cyberspace is being characterized in news reports as one of the driving forces – possibly the primary one – for economic growth in the years to come. In his words:

All this is being breathlessly reported in the press, which has seized on cyberspace as an all-purpose buzz word that can add sparkle to the most humdrum development or assignment. For working reporters, many of whom have just discovered the pleasures of going online, cyber has become the prefix of the day, and they are spawning neologisms as fast as they can type: cyberphilia, cyberphobia, cyberwonk, cybersex, cyberslut [...] The rush to get online, to avoid being 'left behind' in the information revolution, is intense. Those who find fulfillment in cyberspace often have the religious fervor of the recently converted. (Elmer-Dewitt 1995)

For all intents and purposes, he adds, 'the Internet is cyberspace', or at least it will be '[u]ntil something better comes along to replace it'. To understand what is at stake, he maintains, it is necessary to look beyond the polarizing extremes of typical sorts of press accounts, where 'hype and romanticism' are counterposed against 'fear and loathing'. The internet is remarkable and, at the same time, far from perfect, in his view:

Largely unedited, its content is often tasteless, foolish, uninteresting or just plain wrong. It can be dangerously habit-forming and, truth be told, an enormous waste of time. Even with the arrival of new point-and-click software such as Netscape and Mosaic, it is still too hard to navigate. And because it requires access to both a computer and a high-speed telecommunications link, it is out of reach for millions of people too poor or too far from a major communications hub to participate. (Elmer-Dewitt 1995)[1]

Still, in recognizing that the 'rough-and-tumble Usenet newsgroups' were slowly giving way to the 'more passive and consumer-oriented "home pages" of the World Wide Web', it was becoming increasingly apparent that fundamental changes were underway. Changes with an effect, in Elmer-Dewitt's estimation, 'likely to be more profound and widespread and unanticipated than anyone imagined – even the guys [and gals] who write science fiction'.

For those readers interested in the implications for journalism posed by the advent of cyberspace, several of the special issue's articles provide telling insights. An essay by *Time*'s managing editor James R. Gaines (1995) outlines his take on the 'cyberrevolution' and the pressing need to introduce the magazine's 'own brand of journalism' to new media forms. 'For the past 18 months,' he writes, 'each weekly issue of TIME has been available on the electronic newsstand of America Online, the fastest-growing of the commercial computer services.' This decision to go online has meant, in turn, that 'our editors, writers and correspondents have been familiarizing themselves with yet another new journalistic venue: the ongoing exchange of real-time

computer messages with our readers – friend and foe alike'. This issue of interactivity between the magazine and its readers is similarly addressed by David S. Jackson (1995) elsewhere in the issue. In noting that *Time* was one of 450 publications (mainly magazines and newspapers) that had 'embraced the electronic option' by the end of 1994, he stresses the importance of making journalists an integral part of the online relationship. 'By offering message boards and forums, as well as by posting the E-mail addresses of reporters and editors', publications such as *Time* 'have started an electronic dialogue between journalists and their audiences.' This type of dialogue, he maintains, 'is having a subtle but important effect on both – and, inevitably, on the whole profession of journalism'. As a result, it seems, 'reporters, their sources and their readers find themselves all together in a new environment, in which the much criticized power and distance of the press looks entirely different'.

The realization that the 'information superhighway is a two-way street', where journalists could expect to encounter the viewpoints of their readers on a regular basis, brought with it a growing awareness that traditional rules and conventions were being rapidly rewritten. Slowly but surely, the participants in what would prove to be a lively, and frequently acrimonious, debate over whether 'real journalism' could take place in cyberspace were taking up their places. It is with this in mind that this chapter proceeds to examine several formative instances where the relative advantages and limitations of online news came to the fore when the web was in its infancy; specifically, the reporting of the Oklahoma City bombing, the crash of TWA Flight 800, the Heaven's Gate mass suicide, and the death of Princess Diana. Each of these respective instances will be shown to have contributed – to varying degrees and in different ways – to the rapid growth of a news provision online. At the same time, each instance will also be shown to help pinpoint its emergent ecology as a distinctive medium of journalism, that is, the ways in which the rudimentary conventions of online news underwent a gradual – and contested – process of consolidation.

Breaking news

For many online journalists today, the Oklahoma City bombing of 19 April 1995 continues to be regarded as a tipping point of sorts, namely the moment when the potential of news sites for providing breaking news became readily apparent to advocates and critics alike within journalism's inner circles. It was at 9:02 am that Wednesday morning when a rented truck, packed with some 4800 lbs of explosives, detonated in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Building, a nine-storey concrete office block housing a number of federal government agencies. The resultant blast, it was later claimed, could be felt over 15 miles away. Described by authorities at the time as the worst terrorist attack ever to

take place on US soil, the bombing killed 168 people, including 19 children who attended a day-care centre on the second floor, and wounded more than 500 more. Approximately 90 minutes after the explosion, Timothy McVeigh was stopped by the police for driving without a licence plate near the town of Billings. Found to be carrying a concealed weapon, he was promptly arrested. Two days later, just as he was about to be released, he was identified as a bombing suspect. Also that day, Terry Nichols, a friend of McVeigh's, surrendered in Herington, Kansas. He and his brother, James Nichols, were held as material witnesses. Like McVeigh, Terry Nichols would be eventually indicted on 11 counts for the bombing. Both men pled not guilty at separate arraignments in Oklahoma City's federal courthouse in August of that year.

In 1995, a time when news websites were typically little more than repositories of reports previously published elsewhere, the role of the internet in creating spaces for information to circulate that fateful day in April has since been hailed as a landmark moment in online history. Worthy of particular attention was the immediacy of the news coverage, its volume and breadth. Minutes after the bombing, journalists and their editors at online news services were rushing to post whatever information they could about the tragedy. 'Within an hour of the blast', stated Beth Copeland, deputy managing editor at *Newsday Direct*, 'we had a locator map of Oklahoma City, the latest AP [Associated Press] story, [and] a graphic talking about various types of bombs used in terrorist attacks' (cited in Agrawal 1995). Elsewhere on the web, eyewitnesses posted their descriptions of the excavation scene, often with heart-rending details. Others transcribed news reports, especially with regard to the disaster-relief work underway. Listings of survivors, and the hospitals treating them (complete with telephone contact details), similarly began to appear. For people anxious to contact relatives but unable to get through on long-distance telephone lines, some Oklahoma City residents offered to make local calls for them. Discussion forums called 'newsgroups' appeared, where people gave expression to their rage, others to their grief, while still others offered emergency aid for victims. Such was also the case with online chatrooms; several Internet Service Providers (ISPs) opened multiple rooms dedicated to discussions about the bombing. CompuServe's Daphne Kent described the chatrooms she visited as the most emotional she had seen, apparently due to the fact children had been killed and 'it could have happened anywhere' (cited in *USA Today*, 21 April 1995).

As quickly as it could manage, the *Oklahoma City Daily* began to post related stories, as did local television station KFOR, 'where people could query station staff about events and inquire about the station's progress in getting word out to the rest of the broadcast media' (Oakes 1995). ISPs, such as America Online, created repositories devoted to the bombing, making available news feeds from the wire services. Prodigy and AT&T Interchange also

offered their members news coverage of ongoing developments (as did CompuServe, although not on the first day). Evidently, within three hours of the explosion, *Newsday Direct* users were able to ask questions of an expert, author and retired Navy Seal Richard Marcinko, on the service's bulletin boards (Agrawal 1995). For many of the newspapers with an online presence, such as *The New York Times* with its @times site or *The Chicago Tribune*'s Chicago Online, it would be near the end of the day before a pertinent story was posted. Few offered much by way of provision for unfolding news events beyond copy taken from the wire services, preferring instead to post the daily's news items once they had been published. News photographs were particularly rare. The site associated with *The San Jose Mercury News*, along with that operated by *Time* magazine, were amongst the very few able to post photographs. ABC News made a video clip available to users of its service on America Online, although it apparently took 11 minutes to download what was a grainy, postage-stamp-sized, 15-second clip, even with the fastest modem connection available (Agrawal 1995). From the next day, the amount of online coverage improved, with some news sites also allowing users to access archived stories on terrorism, militia groups and related topics.

Confusion reigned over who was responsible for the bombing. Many mainstream news organizations, such as CNN, repeated unfounded rumours that 'three men of Middle Eastern extraction' were the prime suspects. Other experts, called upon to conjecture, pointed out that 19 April was the second anniversary of the disastrous assault by Federal agents on the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas, which ended in the death of 80 people (the agency blamed for the ill-fated operation had offices in the destroyed Oklahoma City building). In this whirl of speculation, where claim and counter-claim clashed, people were turning to the internet in numbers never seen before. There too, however, much heat was being generated, with little light. The capacity of the internet to place an astonishing amount of information at users' fingertips was not without its pitfalls. Talk of conspiracies concerning the bombing resounded across the web, especially in the case of sites used by members of right-wing militias, pro-gun groups, neo-Nazis, survivalists and similar conspiratorially inclined organizations. 'To those who've followed the coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing', observed Todd Copilevitz, 'it might seem like the tools of terrorism are teeming across the Net' (*Dallas Morning News*, 7 May 1995). Many analysts and politicians were incensed that technical instructions regarding how to make a copy of the bomb used to destroy the office building, which reportedly used a combination of ammonium nitrate fertilizer and racing fuel, were all too readily available. Was the internet responsible, some wanted to know, for inciting the violence of extremists? 'Fast-spreading computer technology' was being recurrently blamed for allowing disaffected individuals and groups to communicate with one another, and thereby spread their messages of hate. 'In the past, someone who held

those views was in isolation, was disenfranchised', argued one commentator in a *Washington Post* article. 'With this technology', he added, 'they can gather. They couldn't even find each other before' (cited in *Washington Post*, 28 April 1995).

Separating out facts from supposition was difficult work. For journalists turning to the web for information, a particularly pressing concern was the need to ascertain whether a given source could be trusted, especially where verification was difficult to establish. 'There is something incredibly seductive about information that shows up on a computer screen', Theresa Grimaldi Olsen (1995) argued in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. As some journalists discovered in the aftermath of the bombing, she observed, 'it can make gullible neophytes out of people who should be professional skeptics'. A case in point revolved around the following message, which appeared on an internet newsgroup (identified as a site used by militia groups) the day after the explosion:

> If this turns out to be a bomb, expect them to tie it to the militia . . . I have expected this to come before now. I will lodge a prediction here. They will tie it to Waco, Janet Reno is behind this, the campaign will succeed because the media will persuade the public. Expect a crackdown. Bury your guns and use the codes. (cited in Olsen 1995)

This comment, Olsen contends, was cited as evidence of extremists using the internet in an array of news outlets, such as *Newsday, The Dallas Morning News, USA Today, The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, the *Huston Chronicle*, and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, amongst others. However, it would later be revealed that the posting was a prank, the playful invention of a University of Montana journalism student.

A further hoax occurred two days later, this one concerning McVeigh, who had been arrested and charged with the bombing. This time the claim was that the suspect had posted his personal profile in America Online's membership directory. Subscribers to the service could read a profile describing him as 'Mad Bomber', which stated: 'Let us take back the government . . . or die trying. Boom.' Evidently the television programme *Dateline NBC* broke the story, which swiftly spread around the globe. In the UK, for example, the *Sunday Mirror* newspaper's headline declared: HELLO, I'M THE MAD BOMBER . . . BOOM!; SICK MESSAGE FLASHED WORLDWIDE; OKLAHOMA BOMB SUSPECT LEAVES MESSAGE ON INTERNET. Later the same day, however, it was revealed that the profile was false; it had actually been created and posted on the service after McVeigh had been arrested. For Scott Rosenberg, all of the 'post-Oklahoma traffic between the on-line world and the news media represents a coming of age for relations between the two realms'. Cyberspace, he argued, was fast becoming a 'real place', one which

acted as a 'kind of transnational meeting ground where people talk, rumors spread and news happens, and where reporters need to know the customs and pitfalls, or risk massive goofs' (*San Francisco Examiner*, 30 April 1995). In his view, the Oklahoma story created a type of 'feedback loop' between the news media and the online community, which possessed the potential to be either informative or treacherous depending on the amount of care used by reporters.

Scooping exclusives

In the aftermath of the national crisis engendered by the Oklahoma City bombing, advocates of the internet insisted that it had proved itself to be an indispensable news and information resource. Critics, in sharp contrast, were sceptical about the value of news sites, arguing that they were slow to react, and in the main offered news that was otherwise available in evening newspapers or on television. Others pointed to technical glitches, observing that several of the major news sites had ground to a halt because they were overwhelmed with demand in the early hours, when they would have been especially valuable (*The Seattle Times*, 30 April 1995).

Nevertheless, analyses of internet traffic in the first two weeks after the bombing discerned dramatic increases in the 'hits' registered by online news sites. 'Broadcast is no longer the only medium for breaking news', stated Bruce Siceloff, editor at NandOnet, the online service of *The News and Observer* in Raleigh, North Carolina. 'We didn't have to stop a press to replate', he added. 'There were no deadlines. No readers who lost out because they got an early edition.... Like CNN and radio, we can and did break and update and expand the story on a minute's notice – numerous times in a single hour' (cited in Agrawal 1995). According to Siceloff's figures, the number count of hits for the NandOnet site grew by about 300,000 a week for the first two weeks, reaching 2.37 million hits for the week that ended 30 April. Of particular interest to users, he argued, was the wealth of information from primary sources available online (such as the University of Oklahoma's student newspaper, the White House, relief agencies, pro- and anti-militia groups, and so forth), its instant availability, and also the opportunity to interact (Agrawal 1995).

News coverage of the ensuing judicial proceedings against McVeigh and Nichols was remarkably intense by any standard. Significantly, however, it was the decision taken on Friday, 28 February 1997 by *The Dallas Morning News* to break a major story associated with the ongoing trial of McVeigh on the web, some seven hours before the newspaper went to press for the Saturday edition, that had far-reaching implications for the emergent ecology of online news. Some commentators declared it to be a 'journalistic Bastille

Day', seeing in the decision the sudden liberation of newspapers from the time constraints associated with print, which meant that they were now empowered to break news straight away (Hanson 1997). The *Morning News* story in question contained details of what was claimed to be a jailhouse confession by McVeigh, where he allegedly admitted to his defence team that he had sought to ensure a 'body count' so as to put his political point across to the government. The suspect's lawyer, Stephen Jones, instantly denounced the report as a 'hoax', stating: 'If McVeigh said anything like that to the defense team, I think I would be aware of it' (cited in *Washington Post*, 1 March 1997). In his view, the *Morning News* was 'one of the most irresponsible newspapers in the country', simply intent on building its circulation in Oklahoma. The decision to post the story on the web, he added, was due to the fear that a district judge would issue a temporary injunction against publication. In response, Ralph Langer, the daily's editor, insisted: 'We put the story on the web site because it was, in our view, extraordinarily important and we got the story finished this afternoon and we felt we ought to publish, so we published' (cited in AP, 1 March 1997).

Langer's decision, in the eyes of some, amounted to the *Morning News* site effectively scooping the newspaper. 'Did we scoop ourselves? I don't think so', commented Dale Peskin, the daily's assistant managing editor for new media. 'This is a new age. We're all dealing with new opportunities to tell stories in lots of different ways and get them out there when they're most vital and valuable' (cited in AP, 1 March 1997). Across the media spectrum, journalists weighed in with different interpretations of the decision's significance. For some, the online report was an example of compromised reporting, a charge based on the fear that the media controversy (it was front-page news across the country the next day) would undermine McVeigh's right to a fair trial. As these sorts of anxieties began to fade, however, attention turned to the larger impact of the internet on newspaper publishing. Some participants in the ensuing discussion heralded the posting of the exclusive on the web as a landmark, one representing the crossing of a journalistic Rubicon (*The Guardian*, 4 March 1997). While other newspapers had stepped over similar thresholds by breaking news online before, none had involved such a major story. Within minutes of the posting, AP, CNN and Reuters contacted the *Morning News* in pursuit of further details; within hours, links to the story were appearing on the websites of the *Washington Post*, CNN and MSNBC. According to Peskin, the daily's own site – typically attracting as few as 100 users an hour at that time of day – was accessed by 40,000 visitors between 3:30 pm and 10:00 pm (*The Guardian*, 10 March 1997).

The 'scoop heard around the Internet', as it was aptly described at the time, was credited by some commentators with helping to chip away the rigid boundary separating newspapers from their online counterparts. Some of online journalism's strongest advocates sensed that progress was being made

in the struggle for legitimacy. 'Perhaps the historic decision', Jon Katz (1997a) suggested in his *Wired News* column, 'will help to cool the irrational, sometimes bizarre mainstream media portrayal of the digital culture as de-civilizing, sexually degenerate, chaotic, and irresponsible'.

Of fact and fakery

Discussions about the potential of the internet as a news source assumed a far greater salience in journalism's inner circles in the months to follow the Oklahoma City bombing. For those in the newspaper industry, it was becoming increasingly obvious that they would not be able to compete with their electronic rival where breaking news was concerned. This was particularly so at a time of crisis, when people's need for information to provide context to rapidly unfolding events was of paramount importance. 'Information in the form of raw news, opinion, condolence and all else that spews from connected humans when their world goes haywire', Chris Oakes (1995) wrote at the time of the bombing. 'Perhaps more than any Web use, this Internet response to a national tragedy presages what the future of online will be.'

The reliability of the information available online increasingly became a matter of dispute in the months to come, however, particularly with respect to the circumstances surrounding the crash of TWA flight 800. On 17 July 1996, the Boeing 747 airliner, en route from New York to Paris, plunged into the Atlantic Ocean off eastern Long Island. All 230 people on board were killed. Beginning with the breaking news reports, speculation was rife as to who or what might have been responsible for the explosion, which took place about 20 minutes into the flight. A number of eyewitnesses offered their perspectives in these reports, several of whom were convinced that they had seen some type of object or streak of light closing in at high speed on the airliner. Several 'terrorism experts', called upon for their views, were quick to blame Arabs and Muslims for the explosion (echoes of Oklahoma City), contending that a bomb was surely involved (*Chicago Tribune*, 2 January 1997). Others insisted that its cause would likely prove to be due to some sort of mechanical failure or design flaw in the airliner, amongst other technical possibilities. In the ensuing rush to judgement, a number of mainstream journalists recurrently relied on anonymous sources, some of the more far-fetched of which were attributed to the internet. At the same time, however, the internet was also being recognized as an important resource for official inquiries into the crash. In the case of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), for example, its New York website address was regularly mentioned at press conferences, together with an appeal for help to determine the cause (both an email address and a toll-free telephone number were provided). The site reportedly received more than 1500 pieces of

information in the days immediately following the crash, some of which was described as being 'extremely valuable' by a spokesperson (*Courier Mail*, 6 August 1996).

In the days that followed, as speculation about the reason for the crash became ever more intense, something resembling a consensus had begun to emerge across several online newsgroups. The preferred theory was that the TWA 800 had been accidentally shot down by a US navy cruiser engaged in exercises off the coast of Long Island, a tragic case of so-called 'friendly fire'. According to *Sunday Times* reporter James Adams, the theory first appeared in the alt.conspiracy.com newsgroup, from where it was copied and circulated to other newsgroups, such as activism.militia, survivalism.com and im-peach.clinton.com. It was further amplified, in turn, by local television news stations, to the point where it began to surface in mainstream news reports around the world. 'Within a week of the crash', Adams wrote, 'the friendly fire story was the hot topic of Washington dinner parties and had already been investigated and dismissed by the Pentagon' (*Sunday Times*, 22 September 1996). The Pentagon's refusal to affirm the theory engendered, not surprisingly, allegations of a government cover-up. One popular explanation for the alleged cover-up 'making the rounds on the Internet', Dennis Duggan reported in *Newsday*, was that 'the plane was targeted because two Arkansas state troopers who were once part of Bill Clinton's security detail were on their way to Paris to tell all about Clinton's extra-curricular affairs to *Le Monde*' (*Newsday*, 24 November 1996). This story, he maintained, was printed in the *Miami Herald*.

For those following the conspiracy claims being made, events took an unexpected turn in November of the same year. Speaking at an aviation conference in Cannes, Pierre Salinger, a former ABC News correspondent (and one-time press secretary to President John F. Kennedy), made a startling announcement. To the astonishment of his audience, he claimed that he was in possession of evidence proving that TWA 800 had been shot down by US forces. His allegation, based on a report which he insisted had been obtained from a French intelligence agent, created a media sensation. Days later, however, Salinger was made to acknowledge what certain internet commentators had been pointing out from the start, namely that the report, with its apparently authoritative details, had been in circulation on the web for several weeks. Crash investigators at the FBI, as well as the National Transportation Safety Board, were scathing in their criticism, with one official from the latter describing the retired Salinger as a 'once-respected journalist' (cited in *Toronto Sun*, 12 November 1996). Much of the mainstream media criticism went beyond Salinger, however, focusing instead on the internet as a platform for delivering spurious information. Newspaper critics were particularly harsh, some contending that facts rarely get in the way of a good conspiracy on the internet.

Television journalists, typically much less troubled by the rise of the internet than their counterparts in the press, were strongly critical as well. 'Forgery, fakery, falsehoods – they're everywhere on the Internet', declared Leslie Stahl of CBS's popular news programme *60 Minutes*, in a story which addressed the alleged 'cover-up' concerning TWA 800. 'And rumors are so rampant', she added, 'that cyberspace is becoming a dangerous place' (transcript, *60 Minutes*, 2 March 1997). Less than a fortnight after the programme was broadcast, Salinger reiterated his allegations at a Paris news conference, this time releasing a 69-page document and radar images to support his contention. Assistant FBI Director James Kallstrom promptly derided the charges. 'It's the big lie', he stated. 'There's no facts. It's based on Internet gossip, hearsay, things that can't be substantiated, [and] faulty analysis' (cited in *Daily News*, 14 March 1997). Shortly afterwards, Maggie Canon, *ComputerLife*'s editor-in-chief, stated that she was one of several journalists who had received – and had decided to ignore – the same 'official military document' which Salinger interpreted as confirmation of his missile theory. 'The nature of the Internet leads people to more readily believe rumors too', she commented. 'The Internet is often viewed by its users as an unfiltered, primary source of information and not to be distrusted like the traditional news media. There is almost an immediate acceptance of information on the Internet.' This when in actuality, she argued, 'there are far more lies, rumors and hoaxes transmitted on the Internet than anywhere else' (cited in *PR Newswire*, 18 March 1997).

Nevertheless, the value of the internet was underscored by Ford Fessenden, a *Newsday* (Long Island) journalist, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting of the crash. The newspaper's coverage, he observed, 'owes a deep debt to the technology of computer assisted reporting'. Describing his methods, he explained that 'hourly consultation of the Internet and daily querying of safety databases became routine' in the course of investigating the story. 'Computer-assisted reporting has the ability to transform public understanding of aviation safety' (cited in *The Guardian*, 10 July 1997). Reporters like Fessenden, although still very much in the minority, were making inroads in the struggle to change perceptions of this medium and its potential.

Immediacy, depth, interactivity

Notions such as 'new media', and with it 'computer-assisted reporting', were slowly becoming a part of the journalistic lexicon. For every journalist heralding the promise of new technological possibilities, though, there were likely to be several more calling for restraint to be exercised. Speaking on a CNN broadcast in December of 1996, *Washington Post* media columnist Howard Kurtz had argued:

...the thing we shouldn't lose sight of here is that, for a lot people this is still a toy. They surf around, they check out what's there. Nobody has made money on it yet. But the reason that all these big news organizations, including mine, are investing in going onto the net, is because of the feeling that in three or four or five years when you can get video and when it really becomes faster and more reliable, that this will be a more [serious] news player. (transcript, CNN 'Reliable Sources', 1 December 1996)

As the Salinger controversy waned, the situation appeared to be improving, but not nearly fast enough in the eyes of some advocates of online journalism. Katz (1997a), commenting in his *Wired News* opinion column, remarked that more than '700 newspapers have dumped their static, stale content online, to little effect. With a handful of exceptions – the *San Jose Mercury News, The Wall Street Journal* – papers' use of the Web as a news medium has been dull, expensive and counterproductive.' Old media, he argued, must embrace the changes created by new media, especially where the latter enable journalists to break the news first. 'Newspapers', he wrote, 'have clung beyond all reason to a pretense that they are still in the breaking news business they dominated for so long, even though most breaking stories are seen live on TV or mentioned online hours, sometimes days, before they appear on newspaper front pages.' To reverse their decline, one commentator after the next was contending, newspapers would have to recognize the speed-driven imperatives of the internet. Merrill Brown, editor-in-chief of the all-news network MSNBC (set up the year before), echoed this point, arguing that a key objective of Microsoft and NBC's joint venture was 'to break stories with frequency on the Internet' (cited in AFP, 5 March 1997).

Later that same month, a shocking incident took place that further pinpointed certain unique qualities that online journalism could contribute to the coverage of breaking news. The Heaven's Gate mass suicide, as it was promptly dubbed at the time, transpired over several days in an affluent neighbourhood in Rancho Sante Fe, near San Diego, California. The police arrived on the scene on 26 March, having been contacted by a fallen member of the Heaven's Gate cult who had received a videotape from its members. The cult's leader, along with 38 members, had taken their own lives by consuming applesauce pudding laced with phenobarbital, followed by vodka. Evidently it was their fervent belief that the passing of the Hale-Bopp comet was to be interpreted as a sign indicating that they were to leave behind their earthly bodies ('containers') and board a spacecraft travelling in the comet's wake. News of the suicide created an instant media sensation. Amongst the online news sites, the *Washington Post*'s helped lead the way. 'When this story broke at 8:00', recalled Jason Seiken, editor at the time of washingtonpost.com, 'we put it up immediately. Any time there was any sort of

update, that went up immediately' (transcript, National Public Radio, 3 April 1997).

This immediacy, in Seiken's view, was one of three important advantages the site had over its press and television rivals. The second advantage was the capacity for greater depth in online reporting. 'There's really no limit on what you can put on a web site', he argued. 'So, whereas when publishing *The Washington Post*, we have to be very cognizant of how many pages we put out, when we're publishing washingtonpost.com, well, we currently have more than 40,000 pages.' In the case of the Heaven's Gate story, when it became apparent that the cult's own site was being overwhelmed with online traffic, Seiken made its contents (including a book they had written and transcripts of their videos) available for washingtonpost.com users from a copy derived from an America Online cache. This strategy allowed users to see for themselves what the cult members believed in their own words, as opposed to having to rely upon a journalist's interpretative summary. Seiken also arranged to have a timeline created. Interspersed throughout the descriptions of the different periods in the cult's history were links to members' primary source documents. Previous articles by *Washington Post* journalists were also made available so as to help contextualize events. A third advantage identified by Seiken was the capacity of online media for interactivity. 'We were able to find one of the world's foremost UFO experts and actually put him online and have him answer questions from our readers', he commented. This strategy, commonplace today, was novel at the time. When asked whether he could anticipate a future where online news would be better placed to cover breaking news than traditional news organizations, he replied: 'As the web becomes really interwoven into the fabric of more and more people's lives, it's just common sense that that's going to happen.'

Public interest in the Heaven's Gate suicides was so intense that media attention did not subside for quite some time. Weighing into the ensuing discussions about the significance of the events were those who felt they needed to be understood, at least in part, in relation to the growing influence of the internet on public life. Much had been made in news reports about the fact that the group was supported in the main by money earned by members who were professional webpage designers. Once again, Katz (1997b) was quick to offer pertinent insights:

> Wherever these people really went when they died, they left us with the first Web tragedy. For the first time, the dead are very definitely us, not them. Their lives, work, beliefs, and passing are woven into the machinery of the digital culture, already part of our archives and history. This wasn't some remote cult hidden away in some faraway jungle, to kill and die in private. Their messages, fingerprints, voices, and handiwork are ineluctably available on the World Wide Web,

> easily and instantly accessible, a couple of clicks away on any browser. Web sites from Pathfinder to Yahoo! to Wired News threw up links, dug out postings, reproduced Web sites and pages within minutes; a medium within a medium, covering the destruction of part of itself. (Katz 1997b)

Adopting sharply contrasting positions, however, were other commentators already predisposed to regard the internet as posing an inherent danger to society. Many sought to characterize the Heaven's Gate members' involvement with the internet as evidence to support their criticisms. The web, they argued, was a recruiting ground for cultists. Young people, in particular, were at risk of being 'brainwashed' in their view, hence their demands for controls to be imposed over the type of information allowed to circulate on the web. Much of this criticism echoed emergent campaigns against the availability of pornography online, a growing threat to morality in the eyes of some.

Above dispute, however, was the role online news sites had played in making available resources to help contextualize the news story, thereby bringing to light dimensions otherwise not being addressed by their print and television rivals. Still, searching questions continued to be raised about the credibility of the new medium in journalistic terms. Would the primary role for online news sites be an ancillary one, that is, mainly to provide background information to supplement the reporting undertaken by these rival media? Or, alternatively, would these sites contribute to the elaboration of a different type of journalism altogether?

Confirming authenticity

Ongoing debates about these and related questions, not least regarding the relative quality of the information circulating on the web, took an unexpected twist in the aftermath of the news that Diana, the Princess of Wales, had been killed in a car crash in Paris. She died along with her lover, Dodi Al Fayed, and their chauffeur (a fourth person in the car, a bodyguard, was seriously injured). The story broke in the early hours of 31 August 1997, with online journalists scrambling to post whatever information they could gather. Matt Drudge of the online *Drudge Report* would later claim to have been the first to break the news to US audiences (transcript, National Press Club Luncheon, 2 June 1998). In any case, the BBC's fledgling online news site, as well as that of *The New York Times*, ABCNews.com, CNN.com and Yahoo!'s Current Events, amongst others, rapidly posted stories after television reports announced the initial details. Even before Diana's death had been officially announced at a news conference at Paris's Hospital de la Pitie Salpetriere, online news coverage encompassed the globe.

Just as television news has long been considered to have had its legitimacy confirmed by the coverage of US President John F. Kennedy's assassination and funeral in 1963, some felt that a parallel of sorts could be drawn with the online reporting of Princess Diana's demise. For those looking for updates on breaking developments, yet impatient with the repetitive cycles of television news, once again the web came into its own (CNN.com apparently attracted some 4.3 million page views on the Sunday, an extraordinary figure for the time: see *CNET News*, 2 September 1997). Some news sites made available links to audio and video files, as well as to related websites, such as those of the charities with which she was involved. Timelines were widely used, as were story archives and bulletin boards. 'Perhaps the key benefit of the Net as a news-delivery mechanism', observed Bruce Simpson at the time, 'is the way that users can do their own research and scan huge amounts of information [in] such a short space of time – while users of other media are "spoon-fed" whatever the news-editors feel appropriate' (*Aardvark News*, 1 September 1997). This capacity to enable users to pursue their own paths of enquiry was underscored by the extent to which other media focused, almost exclusively for hours on end in the case of some television networks, on the officially sanctioned details of the Diana story. Much of the television reporting adopted a reverent, even deferential tone, with newsreaders serving as the 'mourners in chief', as described by *The New York Times* television critic.

In contrast, certain voices on the web were posing awkward questions, and in so doing raising difficult issues. 'I welcome the opportunity to be franker and quicker in this medium', Andrew Ross, managing editor of *Salon*, remarked. 'The traditional media felt the need to be more stately and official and to parrot conventional wisdom' (cited in *CNET News*, 2 September 1997). Elsewhere on the web, users went online to express their viewpoints in a collective response widely described, as noted in *The Sunday Times* a week later, as an 'unprecedented electronic outpouring of grief'. Heartfelt memorial pages appeared, allowing mourners to pay their respects, share their memories, and offer condolences. Similar sentiments were expressed across hundreds of chatrooms and discussion forums. At the same time, debates raged over topics such as the possible implications for the monarchy's future status, whether a boycott of the tabloid press should be organized, and the conduct of the paparazzi in the events surrounding the high-speed crash. In the case of *Newsweek Interactive*'s 'My Turn Online', for example, one day's topic was: 'Princess Di vs. the Press. Princess Diana's car crash apparently happened as she was trying to elude news photographers. Did the press kill her? Did we, its readers?' (cited in *Modesto Bee*, 9 September 1997). Meanwhile, proponents of contending conspiracy theories posed their 'unanswered questions' on different newsgroups (e.g., alt.conspiracy.princess-diana), seeing in the crash sufficient grounds to suspect foul play.

Interestingly, from the very outset of the online coverage, various

commentators were predicting that photographs of the accident scene would find their way on to the web. The Paris police had moved quickly to try to confiscate the film shot by the paparazzi (one of whom was beaten by angry witnesses at the scene), and a number of newspapers made it clear to their readers that they would refuse to pay for images depicting the accident's victims. Still, there seemed to be little doubt that a story of this magnitude would generate photographs online before too long. 'The 'Net always contains the most scandalous, dubious and exploitative information you might possibly want or stumble into', commented 'Web expert' J.C. Herz at the time. 'There's no mechanism for suppression of information on the Internet, and while that's part of the beauty of the medium, [it is] also the downside' (cited in *Network World*, 8 September 1997). Less than a week after these remarks were made, a photograph ostensibly depicting Diana in the crashed Mercedes surfaced on the web. Specifically, the image appeared on a site providing 'an archive of disturbing illustration' operated by an anti-censorship group called Rotten Dot Com. Based in California, the group claimed to have received it via an email from an undisclosed source (no credit line for the photograph was provided). While the image shows the aftermath of a very serious car accident, it was unclear whether the bloodied, blonde-haired woman trapped in the twisted steel was actually Diana. The group's own stance was ambiguous at first, neither confirming nor denying the photograph's authenticity. The image was posted, the homepage stated, 'for political reasons, to make people think, and to make them upset'. If indeed this was the group's intention, it succeeded. The number of visitors to the site – many of whom responded with emails expressing their outrage – was such that the available bandwidth was insufficient, forcing the group to remove the image so as to allow the site to continue to operate.

'Group posts picture purporting to show dying princess' was the Agence France-Presse (AFP) headline for the wire service story that broke the news. The Italian news agency ANSA, along with several newspapers, including the Paris daily *France-Soir*, also put the unverified photograph into public circulation. Various news sites promptly linked to the Rotten Dot Com site, although in at least one instance the pertinent ISP proceeded to delete the image in response to what was fast becoming an ethical controversy over the relative appropriateness of its use (*CNET News*, 18 September 1997). Within 24 hours, French authorities were being quoted in news reports as stating that the photograph was indeed a fake. Certain inconsistencies were identified, including the fact that the rescue workers depicted were not wearing French emergency service uniforms, nor were the emergency telephone numbers on their equipment the correct ones for France (999 being the British emergency code). A number of embarrassed newspaper journalists, not surprisingly, placed the blame for the hoax directly on the internet. The editor-in-chief of *France-Soir*, Claude Lambert, told Amy Harmon of *The New York Times*:

Not very adroitly, perhaps, we did it to put a spotlight on the excesses of the Internet [. . .] There were heated arguments about the decision in the office on Friday, and not everybody on the staff agrees we executed it properly. Maybe the headline should have said 'Diana, the Phony Internet Photo,' but we still would have gone ahead and published it. (cited in *The New York Times*, 22 September 1997)

If the incident was a test of the internet's credibility as a news source, as some said, then in the eyes of many it had failed. While examples of photographic hoaxes abound in journalism's history, the capacity of internet users to disseminate misleading material so far and so quickly deeply troubled some critics. For Harmon, the controversy surrounding the Diana photograph 'underscores the public's apparent eagerness to give the Internet's indiscriminate electronic press the benefit of the doubt. Or at least its tolerance for the often sensational appeal of material it carries.' In other words, one might be tempted to reply, much like the public response to the mainstream media.

A further criticism of the proliferation of rumours in cyberspace featured in a televized speech made by respected BBC News foreign correspondent Fergal Keane in October of that year. Delivering the Huw Weldon Memorial Lecture to the Royal Television Society, he argued that the fundamental obligation of the reporter is to the truth (broadcast on BBC1, 20 October 1997). Pointing to the 'hundreds of conspiracy theories floating around about the death of Diana', he expressed his concern that 'calm and considered reportage' was at serious risk of losing out to 'the sensational and the spectacular', especially where 'the generation growing up on a diet of the X-Files' was concerned. At issue, he feared, was a 'dangerous retreat from rationality', whereby 'truth-telling' that is 'artful, fearless and intelligent' all but disappears into the swirl of 'trivia, gossip and celebration of the banal'. Growing technological pressures – compounded by those from the market – must be resisted, he reasoned, in order to better protect the interests of truth. 'I am worried about the potential of the internet to devalue the role of the reporter', Keane revealed, before wondering aloud about what the future might portend. 'What a pity', he mused, 'if technology, far from pushing us into another age of enlightenment, was to return us to the rumour-ridden gloom of the Middle Ages'.