



Clifford Lynch: Saving digital news interview

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CLIFFORD LYNCH: [\[00:01\]](#) Journalism shapes events as well as documenting them, and for that reason it's also important to keep a good record of it. If you look at the role of journalism in everything from decisions to go to war to political campaigns — that's something we really need a record of so that we can go back and look at it and see how journalism shaped our actions and formed public opinion.

I think that a record of journalism and of journalistic findings is a critical supplement to the documentation of the working of government, for example, and the records of government. It's a way of documenting the work and actions of individuals and corporations and other groups that are not part of the public record per se but whose actions affect the public in numerous and critical ways.

I think these are some of the kind of special aspects of journalism, and I think that when you look at the record, the journalistic record, that is something that every individual in our society may need to go back to. It's certainly essential for scholars; scholars use it heavily, scholars in many, many disciplines use it extensively and in some extraordinarily creative ways, sometimes. But, it really belongs to the society as a whole, not simply to the province of scholars and researchers.

[\[01:45\]](#) In the old days, if you'll allow me the term, when you had a newspaper that was the news, or when you watched a TV broadcast, what you saw on that broadcast was the news. Now the news is actually these very complicated multimedia databases that are assembled and presented in a wide range of context. They're actually, in fact, not even presented the same from viewer to viewer, reader to reader, when you get on the web. These are customized to the demographics, tastes, interests, preferences of the viewers as far as the sites can ascertain them in many cases. So we really need to be able to understand not just what's in these observable manifestations, but what's really in the databases that drive these kinds of manifestations.

[\[02:43\]](#) I think there is a genuine problem here. I think that there are some organizations — and certainly the Internet Archive holds a very special place, and we owe a very special debt to the initiative in the work of the Internet Archive in trying to help with this situation. The Library of Congress through its copyright deposit arrangements — and you see similar things in other countries with national libraries who are using copyright deposit as a way of collecting some news. What they're doing helps too, but, we need a much more broad-based and robust approach than just relying on a couple of these institutions.

[03:29] So I think we do need to press for some of these public policy kinds of questions, but I also think that we need to talk about norms and behaviors, about responsible actions by journalistic agencies or organizations and the corporations that own them. I think we need to be struggling also with some of the conceptual underpinnings here, like, how do we document the history of journalistic output in a world of personalization? Or, in a world of highly network news where you see reportage intermingled with evidence that underlies and supports that reportage, but also gives the reader or the viewer or the consumer of the news the opportunity to go back and revisit the underlying documents or press conferences or whatever themselves.

[04:27] The answers are going to be different at different scales. I think that the dilemmas of what to do with the enormous databases being amassed by some of the really large media properties — CNN, ESPN, the major news services like Bloomberg or the Wall Street Journal or The New York Times — there's one set of answers I think that will come into play for those. There's a very different set of answers for some of the journalistic enterprises that operate locally, at much smaller scale, and that frankly have had 20 years of intense economic pressure of getting squeezed, of losing revenue sources like classified ads to other venues and other mechanisms.

Those folks are skating right on the edge all the time and we've seen lots of closures of various kinds of local news outlets — be they newspapers, radio station, television — over the past decade. Some of these may actually move into something that starts to look a lot like a not-for-profit mode. And indeed may ultimately end up doing that.

[05:49] That's not to say that they don't do things to generate revenue to pay their employees and their expenses. All not-for-profits have to do that, but, perhaps they more explicitly bring to the fore that public good and public service character. There may be a very powerful network of alliances that occur with local public libraries, historical societies, local or regional universities; all of those are natural partners in getting a handle on preserving this digital journalism.