To a journalist mentally healthy – there are still a few – daring to talk once more about our trade is folly. How many speeches and prophecies, vindicating or celebrating the revolution currently under way in the media have we all been exposed to, and you in particular as you are brave enough to be tempted to join our crowd? Yet, tonight, celebrating the memory of James Cameron, who spent part of his remarkable career in Paris covering French politics as a rather exotic exercise, being at this lectern is an honour and I will try and comply.

I. SOME GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS ABOUT JOURNALISM

1. I am not Valerie Trierweiller. Sorry for those of you Brits so fascinated with the French attitude towards sex, especially that of our politicians.

2. Andy Coulson is out of jail after 5 months – time enough to ponder over the means to investigate famous people’s private lives– at least Trierweiller has been more candid about hers.

3. How many of you know about Alex from Target?

Three weeks ago, the serious upscale media, the world over, were trying to make sense of the American midterm elections. Yet the Washington Post, CNN, Time and a variety of media pundits were also spending time, paper and energy pondering about Alex from Target.

Alex from Target is a cute looking 16 year old from Texas working at a check out counter of an American food chain. A young woman named Abbie took his picture and posted it on Twitter. Two days later, 600,000 people had become followers, and the young man was flown to Los Angeles to appear on TV on the Ellen DeGeneres Show. “What kind of skills do you have, she asked. Singing, dancing, acting? Well, the guy said, I can apparently bag groceries pretty well.”

The reason why the Alex from Target phenomenon is in my view so revealing is that it had obviously nothing to do with news. It was not even an advertising ploy from the company, nor from a marketing start-up demonstrating some sort of “fan girl demographic”. No. It shows
how something or someone totally uninteresting can today attract attention and feed the global conversation much more forcefully than any kind of journalistic endeavour.

II. WHAT HAS BECOME OF JOURNALISM IN THE MIDST OF CONSTANTLY CHANGING PATTERNS?

Albert Londres, the founding father of French journalism at the turn of the 20th century, used to say journalism is thrusting your pen into the wound, and never reporting about trains being on time.

Frankly, I am not sure such definitions work any longer. The revolution we have all been swept into keeps changing radically the criteria determining our trade.

1. Consumers are more powerful than editors to determine what is newsworthy.

The proliferation of web sites delivering news or so called news has changed the pattern of news delivery. Some sites go as far as developing only stories which users show interest for. Even the most dignified publications now tell you what are the most read pieces on their web sites. Serendipity becomes an issue. There is so much offer on our plate that choice is of the essence, and we all tend to rely on what others recommend – at least those who belong to the same tribe, on Facebook or in real life.

According to Pew research Center, 30% of American adults now get their news only through Facebook. In Europe, Google has been increasingly pointed out as the worst threat ever to traditional media. Most of European print media have been trying to fight back, pleading that its research engine makes profit out of their own content. Mathias Döpfner, CEO of Axel Springer, who was the most vocal, eventually surrendered: the boycott was too costly for his publications to survive. But intense lobbying is still going on and the European Parliament will discuss that very issue tomorrow. The Huffington Post with its many national editions is another clever example, using for free material produced at high cost by traditional media.

When I discussed this with Arianna Huffington, she dismissed the argument in her usual Greek, theatrical fashion, pointing out to the Pulitzer prize the American HuffPost got in 2012 for a series on wounded veterans. When it comes to prestige, traditional references still hold.

Editors have to face another issue: Boring news have become hard to sell, and harder to cover. Take the European Union – editors and politicians alike having been so convinced for half a century that it’s impossible to get people interested that they have paved the way for populism
of the worst kind – here and elsewhere on the Continent. Always try and answer the questions your readers are likely to ask themselves, Alan Rusbridger, the editor of the Guardian, told journalism students in Paris some time ago. The problem is there is a whole range of topics which readers would not spontaneously ask themselves about.

In fact complexity has become an issue – and indeed a test for good journalism, as we recently found out with Rosetta the comet, or Iran nuclear negotiations, for instance.

As a result, what is labelled as newsworthy is more and more littered with trivia. Not that trivia should be all scorned: it’s very much part of social bonding – talking to people at the pub or in the tube in the old days, talking to your smartphone today or posting your pizza to tell your friends how fascinating your life is.

Yet trivia is flooding the web in such proportions that news itself has become a rather hazy category. In fact, news may well become what matters to you, and you only: the individual consumer has become the ultimate reference and referee.

2. **Journalists are no longer the only providers of news.**

The latest and most worrying competition now comes from brands – consumer brands eager to publish content with or without a direct connection with the product. In the old days, firms would try and corrupt journalists to do the job, saying nice things about them, and badmouthing the competition. A lot of that is still going on, I’ve been told, and not only in politics - in the food retail industry, or in the restaurant business. But technology now allows for more sophisticated and eventually less expensive ways to proceed: websites hiding the real provider of content; lobbies paying for individuals to produce and for news organizations to publish so called reportages which are not openly labelled as advertising. It may come as a surprise to find in a perfectly respectable publication – no names - a 2 pages or 4 pages promoting the wonderland of Turkmenistan or some other Central Asia oligarchy.

The lines between public relations and journalism are becoming blurred. The most blatant example is to be found in Richmond, California: the Richmond Standard, a web site which boasts of delivering daily news about the community insisting on positive stories, is actually run and funded by Chevron, the oil group which owns the local refinery. As early as 2006, Cardiff University researchers estimated that 41 % of UK press articles were driven by PR. I let you work out what the percentage may be now. Look at the way Twitter tries and develops its business, enticing brands to publish what they call news in the same format as legitimate
news brands. The truth is that people today don’t care much about where the story comes from as long as it tells them something.

We journalists also have other competitors, perfectly decent ones and at times admirable: let’s call them citizen journalists if you want to be grand, or net providers to be more down to earth. Their contribution can be perfectly legitimate, and useful when they feed news channels and websites with photographs of events wire services have not yet heard about. The news cycle gets reversed: first a picture on Twitter from an unknown source, often anonymous – then the confirmation by a legitimate news operator which has supposedly checked the fact. Sometimes the competition for speed – electronic speed – is such that fact checking becomes a luxury. Nevertheless net providers have become indispensable in situations of catastrophes, and in danger zones where no one else is willing or able to go.

In 2014, so far, according to Reporters without borders, 58 journalists have been killed in action – most of them in Syria. Interestingly, two other categories have now entered the statistics: 12 fixers, these indispensable local helpers, have been killed this year, and 21 net providers or citizen journalists.

The most extraordinary and brave example of such a change is Maisa Saleh. She used to be a nurse with short brown hair until she decided to put on a blond wig and start her own TV program, every week, from an apartment in Damascus. She would have guests to discuss political and security issues, go out and film her own stories, braving Assad’s security. The system worked last year for a few months until one of her friends blew it under torture. She was arrested, beaten, and eventually freed on a prisoners’ exchange. She now lives in Turkey and works for Orient TV, a Syrian opposition channel based in Dubaï. Is she a journalist, an activist or both? Such lines have become blurred, especially when the cause matches our own concerns about what’s happening in any part of the world.

Another trend is worth noticing. Editors ask journalists on the ground to find human stories, emotional stories – when it comes to analysis, they go for think tank experts, who provide expertise without having spent much if any time on the ground. 24/7 news channels are more hungry for videos than for analysis.
3. **Journalists must be ready to stand on their own.**

Remember: just a few weeks ago, James Foley, Steven Sotloff, two American colleagues were beheaded by Isis. Footage of their execution still circulates the web as a tool for Jihadist propaganda. John Cantlie, the British photographer, who had managed to escape when he was first abducted in Syria, is still held hostage. In Syria, in parts of Africa, journalists and aid workers have become commodities in the lucrative hostage business. Islamist extremists also know how to tape and to edit and to broadcast their message, as well as if they had been attending journalism school. And they want to make their stuff as exciting as a bloody video game.

Last May, Camille Lepage, a young French woman photographer, was murdered in Central Africa.

Foley, Sotloff and Lepage thought it was their job to cover the news where it was happening, in the midst of contemporary warfare, where civilians are at the same time the targets and the ammunition.

What do those 3 who considered it worth risking their lives have in common? They were all free-lance. They were all taking their chances, paying for their journey, for their fixers, for their equipment, for their web connexion, for their protectors who would eventually betray them and hand them over to their murderers.

Assessing and taking such a risk which may cost him his life, is now a decision a journalist has to take for himself. Most of the time he or she will not be protected by the shield, the brand, the political connections of a powerful news organization. Last April, 4 French journalists who had been held hostages in Syria for almost a year were freed. 2 were working for Europe 1, a radio station, the other 2, a writer and a photographer, were freelance.

Although it is never to be officially acknowledged, a ransom was paid by the French government, probably through an intermediary from one of the Gulf States.

Daniel Pearl, who was the SE Asia bureau chief of the Wall St Journal, was beheaded in Pakistan in 2002. That was 12 years ago. Ever since, all major American news organisations try and avoid sending an American citizen in dangerous spots.

It is not only out of caution, and concern about the well-being of their employees. The truth is, they can’t afford it anymore.
III. IT’S THE ECONOMY, STUPID!

No need to dwell upon figures: all hard news organisations are losing money.

Let me start with print. You know about the situation here in Britain, so let me tell you about the Continent. In France, in Germany, in Spain, in Italy, the structures of the industry may be different, but all titles are slashing jobs for the same reasons: circulation keeps sliding and advertisers are migrating online, paying lower rates. FAZ, the respected Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung is set to cut 1 newsroom job out of 10. In Italy, newspapers are still preys to political power games, Berlusconi style, and Corriere della Sera, the most venerable national paper, has become a battlefield between the editor and the owners over a 220 million € cost cuts plan. In Spain, total circulation has fallen by 30% in 7 years. In spite of intense diversification and adjustment to the needs of the vast Hispanic market world wide, El Pais keeps bleeding. In France, the State gives 400m € subsidies to newspapers and magazines, but some are in a critical situation: Libération has lost 20% in newsstand sales; 100 journalists are due to leave. Le Monde keeps struggling to convince a rather conservative newsroom to adjust to digital priorities – the challenge is not yet won. An exception in Europe, the French government has negotiated a deal with Google to make it pay 60m € to fund the publishers’ transition to digital channels. But it’s not enough.

In such difficult times, even the most dignified publications find it tempting to go for soft rather than hard stuff.

Take the NYT, now headed by Mark Thompson, of BBC lineage. The announcement has just been made it is cutting down the newsroom by 7.5%. In a note to the staff, Dean Baquet, the executive editor, said he was reconsidering – I quote – some of what we do – from the number of sections we produce to the amount we spend on free-lance content. Having invested heavily in its digital expansion, the paper is now shutting down its NYT Opinion app. It has not attracted enough subscribers and yet it would offer some of the most prestigious American bylines. NYT Now, the new app aimed at younger readers, as not proved as popular as hoped in spite of a lower subscription rate. What matters now is NYT Cooking – yes, cooking – a new app offered for free until the audience gets large enough to be asked to pay.

(In spite of the cuts, the staff has grown to 1330 people, its largest size ever. The reason? More developers, web producers, video journalists. That is where the jobs are.)

Enough with the serious stuff: the temptation is also there for well-regarded, successful journalists having already gone from print to digital. Have you heard of David Plotz? He used to be the editor in chief of Slate, the online magazine. Last July he decided to quit and look
for something more fun to do. A soccer magazine, a Broadway musical? Last month, he became CEO of Atlas Obscura, a little-known travel website – new ground to explore with boundless technological potential. There is a bright spot, though, in the American print landscape: the Washington Post. Thanks to its new owner, Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, the paper has been able to hire more talent in the newsroom and has just launched a new app, in connection of course with Amazon but with its own appeal.

Let’s get back to traditional media. Television and radio networks are also under stress. Again, you know all about the BBC, which remains in my view a remarkable organisation which I am proud to contribute to from time to time. Just a word about at what’s happening to CNN: ratings are hovering near a 20-year low. The demographics are bad: the audience that attracts the most revenue, the 25 to 54 years old, is going down. Jeff Zucker, the CNN boss, is laying off journalists and cutting down expenses. His latest strategy is to mix breaking news with original series – nothing like what Ted Turner had dreamt about. MSNBC has gone another path: data mining. It has struck a partnership with Vocativ, a digital news start-up which provides 3 taped video segments a week. Vocativ mines the deep web for content with data-collection software which are traditionally used by governments and corporations. Stories range from Ukraine to topless skiers to footage from a Caracas squat. Each reporter is paired with an analyst – sorry a data ninja – scrutinizing patterns of information.

Whatever the media we journalists operate, the problem is to remain relevant in the digital age.

IV. IT’S THE TECHNOLOGY, STUPID!

The technological revolution which has been impacting all of us has made our trade much more individual than ever before. When I started in the early 70s as a researcher then an associate producer at 60 Mn, still the best and ever lasting CBS News program, we would be a team of 5 or 6. We were still using film, which had to be shipped and processed. There were no satellites to carry the pictures even before we got the news. These were the great days of electronic journalism, as long as you belonged to one of the very few news corporations dominating the market, and willing to invest some of their hefty profits in the best talent and the best stories. Walking in the corridors, at W57th in NY, you shivered thinking you were in
the footsteps of Eward R. Murrow, and Mike Wallace, my boss, could ask me to go and buy him some product to dye his hair dark without being accused of sex discrimination. Of course it was. Life at 60 Mn was not a fairy tale. But we would spend weeks on a story, do solid research, worry about light and angles to get the picture right, not to mention the editing process, which would take just as long. Budget was no issue. None of us could possibly work on his own.

Today, look at Vice News. Since their embedded documentary on Daesh, watched by millions on YouTube, they have become the trendy reference in the television industry. Vice used to produce trash - their most famous hits were a story on “the biggest ass in Brazil” or another one “Sex donkey” – 16 million viewers. Aside from selling their company to a bigger one for half a million $, Shane Smith and his pals have found a new and lucrative business model. Going on line with formats from 3 mn to an hour, they have touched upon another kind of advertising, which firms are particularly fond of. Vice reaches you, the Millenials, the young generation. To most of you, a TV set has become an oddity. Why bother about a big plastic box, and submit yourself to what programmers have decided for you when you can watch anything you want, any time, on your IPad or any other device? And why take offense when the North Face, the popular outdoor clothing company, pays for Vice journalists to explore and film the most remote areas of the planet? Here you have the typical mix which contemporary journalism is getting into: a brand paying for content produced by professionals trained to travel light, be multitask, and not ask silly, old-fashioned questions about ethics or the like.

I have been lucky enough to work for television, for radio as well as for print. But believe me, when I was appointed executive editor of l’Express, the French news magazine, after anchoring the evening news on television, some were openly questioning my ability to write proper French. The corporation can still be stiff and stupid, but today no one questions the need for your generation to master different forms of journalism. You are all training to be multifunction, adjusting to the ever-changing tools the digital revolution keeps inventing. I was at an event at Google in Paris last night, experimenting the magic lens you can make yourself with simple cardboard, connect to your I phone and take a 360 degree look at whatever video app you choose. Technology has become the great enabler.

It’s exhilarating and frightening at the same time. How can we journalists remain indispensable in a global communication system? Those basic democratic principles, which we take for granted pretty much like the oxygen we breathe, are only respected in a few,
privileged parts of the planet. Look at what’s happening in President Putin’s Russia – Pavel Dourov, the young founder of VKontact, the Russian Facebook, had to flee Moscow last summer and is probably here, in London, wondering what to do next. He may well have already found out.

Now the latest news from Mark Zuckerberg, his American counterpart. His current goal is to produce a new algorithm able to combine all the news you need: from your cousin’s wedding date to cool recipes to the latest developments in Ukraine, which he knows has become your foremost interest. It will be called News Feed. Our media barons have been afraid of Google? Let them now deal with Facebook and its 1.3 billion monthly users. The news market will be more fragmented than ever. Only the best brands will survive and even thrive, as indeed the Financial Times demonstrates.

The perfect personal news content: good news or bad news? Up to you to decide. It’s your turn to pick up the gauntlet. We have done our part, good and bad. And on the whole, it’s been terrific. Just one piece of advice: still learn how to write.

And please, mind the spelling.

Good luck.