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Howard Gardner

RECLAIMING DISINTERESTEDNESS FOR THE DIGITAL ERA

THE DIFFERENCE THAT HALF A CENTURY CAN MAKE

The disruptive potential of the digital media can best be seen by a comparison with the state of affairs that obtained in the United States (and perhaps elsewhere) a half century ago. At the time, as expressed by an editorial in the journal *Daedalus*, the professions were at their height of power and influence. Editor Kenneth Lynn exclaimed, "Everywhere in American life, the professions are triumphant."[1] On the one hand, potent credentialing agencies determined who could legitimately call himself a doctor, lawyer, professor, engineer, or architect. While schools of journalism never had the same monopoly on credentialing, nascent reporters were expected to undertake one or more apprenticeships, usually in provincial settings, their subsequent advance being determined by the quality of their journalistic practice. Most importantly, many if not most professionals saw themselves as acting in the public interest; rather than attempting primarily to amass individual wealth and status, they believed that they had entered into an arrangement with society: If they were afforded prestige and a reasonably comfortable living, they would in turn attempt to render complex, fair judgments under conditions of uncertainty. They embraced, in short, an ethic of disinterestedness—my concern in the pages that follow. For those who were around at the time when the professions reigned supreme, this statement from a 2012 obituary of a ninety-two-year-old lawyer has the tone of authenticity:

> A quarter century after graduating from Harvard College, Mr. Brooks writes that he decided to go to law school "in the happy belief that being a lawyer would provide a desirable combination of a modest livelihood and freedom, intellectual and otherwise, in contrast to the shackles of employment in 'business.'"[2]
>
> (Obituary for John G. Brooks, by Bryan Marquard, *Boston Globe*, April 22, 2012, p. B9)

Of course, in the middle of the last century, the professions were overwhelmingly dominated by white males, typically WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). That the professions were virtually closed to many sectors of society is a strong mark against them, but it should not be allowed to obscure their positive, more public-minded facets. (For a spirited defense of the importance of expertise in legal matters, see the work of Robert Post.)[3] We should avoid nostalgia for a golden age that certainly did not exist for all parties; but we should not throw out the professional "baby" with the often prejudicial "bathwater."

Even today, while the professions are laudably open to a much broader swathe of society, it could be maintained that they remain bastions of privilege. Credentialing certainly remains; credentials from elite institutions are as coveted as ever. Professionals also do very well financially: The most successful doctors, lawyers, and professors make far more money than did their predecessors in the "John Brooks era." Yet hardly any profession is held in anywhere near as high regard as it once was. Talented young persons like lawyer Brooks, who at an earlier time might have become professionals, are now attracted by careers as investment bankers, management consultants, creators of new media or technologies, or serial entrepreneurs—careers where they not only avoid the glare of publicity but where, even as youths, they can amass huge fortunes. While many of these "new occupations" adopt the lexicon of "professions," they do not have the credentialed status, nor (in my view) do the members of these new professions behave as genuine professionals, committed to disinterested judgment.

For their part, even fully credentialed professionals today are rarely seen as individuals acting in the public interest. Rather, they are widely regarded as rank-and-file employees of huge institutions. Law firms now house many hundreds of lawyers who bill at high hourly rates; large corporations may house hundreds or even a thousand in-house counsel; for-profit health maintenance organizations operate on fees for services, many of which are seen as medically dubious and would not be reflexively applied in most other nations; universities serve as launching pads for individual reputations and accumulation of wealth while the bread-and-butter work of teaching is relegated to graduate students or adjuncts, many of whom are alleged not to be fluent in English. Often these increasingly corporate entities are managed by individuals drawn from the realm of business rather than from the very professions over whose members they hold sway.

We have seen these trends at work dramatically in the demise, in 2012, of the law firm Dewey and LeBoeuf (formerly the highly regarded Dewey and

Ballantine).[4] Certain well-networked senior partners raked in tens of millions of dollars each year even as the infrastructure of the firm collapsed and many middle-level employees were left with neither income nor pensions.

The core of professionalism—a disinterested stance—is at risk in our new media age; its rescue, its preservation, is imperative. To be sure, the trend away from disinterestedness and the decline of the professions are not in any simple sense due to the new digital media. After sketching out the case for the value of disinterestedness, I return to the role of new media in their decline and potential recovery. The question of professionalism is relevant to youth experience with new media. Professionals contribute so much to the architecture of the institutional environment that youths confront and provide the role models that young people may (or may not) choose to emulate.

THE PROFESSIONS AND DISINTERESTEDNESS

Imagine a world in which a physician routinely recommended medicines produced by a drug company that was supporting his research, a middle school teacher devoted the bulk of her time to a student whose parents had endowed a building at the school, an auditor gave an unwarranted high rating to a company in which he had recently made an investment, a judge failed to disclose her relationship to one of the parties in a suit that she was hearing, or a journalist made no effort to interview an individual accused by an associate of committing a serious crime.

Shifting focus from the individual to the institution, what should one think about a university that admitted students on the basis of their parents' wealth, a newspaper that did not cover a scandal involving one of its chief advertisers, a scientific laboratory that suppressed data that discredited the value of a drug marketed by one of its chief funders, or an auditing firm that refused to take clients who espoused a particular religion.

While few observers might argue openly for it, many would resign themselves to the state of affairs I've just described. On their account, it is human nature to succumb to these lures. Human beings always have pursued, and always will pursue, their own interests, and so will the institutions which, after all, are created, populated, and sustained by human beings. The most that we can hope for is that in an open marketplace, such dishonorable individuals and flawed institutions might ultimately fail—perhaps because of negative publicity, poor management, or services of lesser quality than those provided by competitors.

At both the individual and the institutional level, it is possible and indeed desirable to adopt a *disinterested* stance. In assuming such a stance, the individual, group, or institution deliberately brackets personal preferences and the possibility of imminent rewards. The disinterested stance entails a commitment to judge each particular case on its merits, to consider the full range of options, and to select the course of action that embodies the long-standing values of the profession and thereby serves the common good over the long haul. Accordingly, in the individual cases just mentioned, the physician recommends the medicine that is most appropriate for the patient, the teacher divides her time roughly evenly across students, the auditor applies the same standards to each and every company whose books he examines, the judge recuses herself at the slightest hint of a conflict of interest, and the journalist makes every effort to interview the accused as well as the accuser.

The same kind of disinterested stance can, and in the ideal should, be adopted at the institutional level. The university has need-blind admissions; the newspaper covers all significant scandals; the scientific laboratory publishes all of its findings; the auditing firm applies the same standards to all clients.

In principle, a disinterested stance can be assumed in any sector of life: parents toward their several children, a movie director toward all members of her cast, a business toward the full range of suppliers or customers. As suggested by the examples cited above, my focus here falls on the professions—on the individual professional and on organizations staffed primarily by professionals. In speaking of professionals, I mean to single out those individuals who have received extensive training followed by official certification, have explicitly or implicitly pledged to honor long-standing values of the field, are empowered and trusted to make complex decisions under conditions of uncertainty, and can be expelled from the professional ranks by individuals or agencies so empowered.[5]

I contend that if its citizens are to be served fairly and comprehensively, any society must both cultivate and protect the professions. Historically, the launching and development of the professions is a long and arduous task; in contrast, the dissolution of a profession can be accomplished with relative ease. The advent and—increasingly—the hegemony of the digital media complicates the process of professionalization—a point to which I will return. And yet, unless we are willing to dispense totally with the disinterested stance, we need to devise ways to perpetuate the ensemble of professions, the niche and scope of responsibilities of the individual pro-

fessional, and the operation of institutions staffed by professionals as vital preserves of disinterestedness.

At both the individual and the institutional level, one can discern times and circumstances when the disinterested stance emerges. With respect to the individual, in early childhood the young person—necessarily in the clutch of an egocentric perspective—thinks only about his own needs and desires. By the time of formal schooling, however, most children have adopted a sense of fair play: goods ought to be evenly distributed, cheating undermines the rationale for a game. With respect to the broader society, the emergence of legal systems over the millennia undermines sheer assertions of power, replacing them with a legal system ("a government of laws, not of men") and with judges who can administer penalties or proceeds in an evenhanded manner. One can point to specific codes—such as the Hippocratic oath in medicine, or the ethical guidelines of journalism—that attempt to identify overarching values, clear spheres of interest, and specific practices that counter or minimize the pursuit of parochial interests.

DEFINITIONS

Even for those who understand that "disinterest" does not mean "lack of interest," the term can pose difficulties. Human beings are all too capable of believing that they can subordinate their own interests, though it is apparent—at least to disinterested observers!—that they (or we) are often deluding ourselves.[6] A disinterested stance is not antithetical to strong motivation or feelings; indeed, these features may even be a reliable concomitant of the dedicated professional. The disinterested journalist may have a passion for justice; the disinterested educator may love teaching, research, and working with students; the disinterested scientist is often motivated both by a strong interest in the topic that she is exploring and by the aspiration of making a fundamental discovery.

I've deliberately chosen the term "disinterested." Unlike the more common "fair play" or "just," it does not carry excess connotative baggage. Nor is it simply *neutrality* or *objectivity*. The term "disinterest" presupposes that all of us have interests, but that it is part of the role of the professional—whether officially defined or simply aspirational—to be able to put those interests aside.[7]

What marks the disinterested stance is the capacity to separate out, to assume a distance from, one's own personal motivations—or, to put it positively, to prioritize instead a passion for the practice of the profession at the

highest level of excellence. And so, the investigative journalist is prepared to abandon pursuit of a promising story if the supposed facts turn out to be illusory; the teacher does not feature his personal point of view on a controversial issue, but gives a rounded picture of the topic and makes sure that opposing perspectives are given equal exposure; the scientist is willing to publish results even if they undermine a theoretical position of which she has previously been a staunch advocate; the lawyer defends with equal vigor the client with whose personal philosophy she is sympathetic and the client whose personal philosophy she finds repugnant.

Taking a leaf from sociological analysis, I find it important and perhaps necessary to think of the professional as an individual who is able to assume a particular *role*. Much as the surgeon puts on a dressing gown or a judge puts on a robe, the professional takes on a set of attitudes and standards when he or she is practicing that profession. It becomes vital for the professional to be cognizant of when she is assuming that role; to make it clear to observers as well; and, most challengingly, not to confuse one role with others. Those professionals who attempt to assume more than one role—for example, the journalist who is also a lawyer or a teacher—require keen self-awareness.

Time for a few examples. During the 1980s and 1990s, Maine's Senator George Mitchell was clearly a strong advocate of the program of the Democratic Party. More generally, he regularly received very high ratings from liberal watchdog groups and correspondingly low ratings from their conservative counterparts. Clearly, Mitchell was not devoid of values or passions. Yet year after year, even after he became Senate majority leader, Mitchell was cited as the most respected senator by aides from both parties. Moreover, at a time when the United States or other countries faced difficult situations—the use of steroids in American baseball, the decades of bloodshed in Northern Ireland—Mitchell was chosen as a mediator by the opposing parties or "interest groups." Before becoming an elected member of Congress, he had been a federal judge; and as a judge who had assimilated his role, he had learned to put aside his own pet interests and deliver fair verdicts and sentences. This capacity to act in a disinterested manner, to assume the role of *judge*, is the reason why embattled parties, time and again, turned to Mitchell.

Daniel Schorr was for many years a leading journalist on radio and television. He seems to have been bitten by the "journalism bug" at an early age. Schorr had his first scoop at age twelve, when a neighbor fell to his death. He recalls:

I called the local newspaper the *Bronx Home News*, and dictated a story to them, earning my first five dollars . . . And what I remember of it was that my mother and other remarked about how cool I was, how unaffected I was myself, emotionally, by the fact that a person had died almost in front of my eyes. That anecdote, whether literally true or not, has colored my entire professional life, the ability to detach myself.

That capacity for disinterestedness was severely tested when Schorr was assigned to make a documentary about the Nazi death camps. In his own words:

> It was pretty strong stuff at Auschwitz . . . There was a time, for example, when I was saying in my script, and this is where they came out of the gas chamber and then they pushed them into the ovens over there . . . they couldn't get all the people they were killing, so some of them were just burned from the oven and thrown into empty trenches over here . . . . I did that very journalistically. I didn't faint. I didn't feel overcome by it all, I just did my job. It may well be—there were members of my family two generations ago who were lost in the Holocaust. . . . Some of them may well have died at Auschwitz, but I was doing a job there and I did the job.[8]

Neither Mitchell nor Schorr were individuals devoid of passions or feelings. (From personal acquaintance I can confirm that they had strong feelings about certain—indeed, many—issues.) They could not have done their jobs well if they took a passive or perfunctory stance. And yet when called upon to fill their *professional roles*—of judge and of journalist respectively—they were able to put aside personal preferences and feelings and to proceed in a disinterested fashion, not perfectly perhaps, but certainly in impressive fashion.

Disinterestedness need not depend solely on the judgment and the courage of the individual practitioner. Individual lawyers may give their all to a client for whom they have sympathy, because they can count on the judicial system—the opposing lawyer, the jury, the higher court—to provide, when needed, a counterweight. It is the job of the editor of the paper to make sure that an important story is covered by more than one reporter, and that biases in reporting are balanced or, better, edited out by the time the media outlet "goes to press." A dean or provost should make sure that across the faculty, rival points of view are expressed. Perhaps most pow-

erfully, the entire apparatus of scientific funding, publishing, and awards is set up to make sure that faulty claims are recognized as such—and as soon as possible.

One can see this corrective process vividly at work in the sciences. In October 2009, *Science* magazine published a study of a retrovirus that was allegedly implicated in chronic fatigue syndrome. Questions were raised about the validity of the methods and the findings. On December 23, 2011, editor Bruce Albert published a letter:

> Given all these issues, *Science* has lost confidence in the Report and the validity of its conclusions. We note that the majority of the authors have agreed in principle to retract the Report but they have been unable to agree on the wording of their statement. It is *Science's* opinion that a retraction by all the authors is unlikely to be forthcoming. We are therefore editorially retracting the Report. We regret the time and resources that the scientific community has devoted to unsuccessful attempts to replicate these results.[9]

Dependence on "the system," or on higher authorities, can go only so far, however. A liberally oriented newspaper may feel it can push its own agenda because there is a rival paper on the conservative side. But if one of the newspapers ceases publication, it is no longer possible for readers in the region to receive a balanced picture of events. A judge in a lower court may rely on higher courts to correct his excess, but there is not an infinite regress of courts on which to depend. Ultimately, the buck must stop somewhere; it is preferable that each level of the system—in the United States, from District Court to the Supreme Court—exhibit disinterestedness.

I like to invoke the metaphor of a "righting mechanism." Without doubt, both individuals and institutions have enormous potential to pursue their self-interest and nothing more. It is accordingly important for both individuals and institutions to be aware of this tendency and to guard against its exploitation. As a liberal Democrat, Senator Mitchell certainly had pet policies as well as pet peeves. But when he was asked to mediate among three competing bills, the proponents looked to him not to push his own interests but to come up with a formulation which, while not perfect, would be judged as satisfactory and fair by the several parties. As a Jew who had lost relatives in the Holocaust, Daniel Schorr certainly had strong feelings about the Nazi Holocaust; and yet when called to report on the death camps, he controlled his emotions and presented the facts in a straightforward

way. As I see it, members of every profession should remain vigilant that disinterestedness remains a treasured value.

We may ask to what extent the disinterested stance can and should be applied to realms beyond professions and their organizations. In principle, disinterestedness can be adopted by any individual, institution, or organization. But the disinterested stance is not always appropriate. For example, there is no reason why a painter or novelist should hide his or her passions; nor do we look to such artists for a disinterested presentation. At most, we expect the artist to present his own perspective, not merely transmit that of others. ("Precedence" is a hallowed precept in the law, something to be spurned for the most part in the arts.) An athlete should do his best to win a competition—though we have the right to expect the athlete not to cheat and, to the extent that he is involved in team sports, to bracket his personal glory in service to the team. Individual businessmen as well as corporations properly work for profit. We admire those who treat their customers well and who initiate efforts to help the broader community—but strictly speaking, such disinterestedness is not part of their role, not part of their "job description." No businessman can be barred from practice simply for pursuing maximum profits; indeed, according to authorities like economist Milton Friedman, that pursuit should in fact be the goal of all capitalists.[10]

Of particular relevance to this volume, a question arises. Is the disinterested stance relevant for ordinary citizens, or for designated advocates, as well as for trained and certified professionals whose role has been well delineated over time and circumstances? One can certainly take the position that it is unnecessary or unrealistic for ordinary citizens to attempt to be disinterested; rather, they should become informed and then advocate strongly, if also fairly, for the position that they personally favor. In the words of Angel Parham and Danielle Allen (chapter 11 in this volume), this stance would entail the cultivation of equitable interestedness. I can accept this stance as a fallback position—after all, it is better to be informed than uninformed, and it is better to be an advocate than to be silent or hypocritical. Still, in the ideal, and perhaps especially in an age where nearly all have access to media, I believe it highly desirable to cultivate in all individuals the capacity for disinterestedness, for all of us to understand what it means to put aside our personal aspirations and instead adopt a neutral or more worldly stance. Finally, it's important to add that cultivation of this stance should begin during the school years, and should not await formal induction into a profession. The professions should embody important values

of adult life. Professionals should model the practices and values that are central to their calling, and make sure that these are woven into the DNA of key institutions.

It is, however, possible for disinterestedness to go too far. Therein lies the peril of bureaucratization. Bureaucracies were established for the legitimate purpose of moderating the pursuit of special interests. Cases are judged not by the power or persuasiveness on the part of individual practitioners, but according to a "neutrally" established set of rules. Who gets a driver's license, and in what order petitioners are seen, should be done in a transparent and evenhanded way. But what Max Weber caustically called the "iron cage" of bureaucracy can be counterproductive.[11] In cases that embody complexity or subtlety , the rule book may be inadequate or may lead to results that are widely seen as destructive or as benefiting the wrong party. Here a genuine recognition of competing interests and how they can most judiciously be weighed against one another trumps lockstep adherence to an algorithm. King Solomon is sometimes to be preferred over the Official Manual of Rules and Regulations.

ENTER THE DIGITAL MEDIA

As mentioned earlier, the trend away from disinterestedness and the decline of the professions are not due to the new digital media; indeed, they could probably have been discerned at a time when now familiar brands like Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Twitter had not yet appeared on the scene. It is more likely that these trends reflect a congeries of long-standing forces; relevant social, demographic, economic, and political changes occurred gradually, the proverbial ratcheting up of temperature one degree at a time. But there is little question that the professions—and their vaunted, if not always achieved, disinterested stance—have become exceedingly vulnerable in the time of the digital media.

Several factors are responsible. To begin with, members of any developed society now have direct, immediate access to a huge amount of information on nearly every conceivable topic. In the past, professions and professionals benefited from an aura of mystery—merited or not—that surrounded their expertise. While perhaps not as secretive as medieval guilds, few individuals outside the professions believed that they had the knowledge and wherewithal to challenge the opinions of the certified, credentialed experts. The credentialed professionals looked authoritative and they spoke (and dressed!) with authority.

In addition to greater access to the knowledge and skills once restricted to experts, there is far greater knowledge about the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of individuals and institutions. In the era of Franklin Roosevelt, few Americans realized how physically impaired their president was; and the sexual escapades of John F. Kennedy (and other highly visible political figures across the political spectrum) escaped public attention and scrutiny, although they were known to supposedly disinterested reporters. Now virtually every peccadillo of virtually every public figure—whether true and verified, true but not adequately verified, suspected, rumored, or simply spun out of whole cloth—is available for public scrutiny. Attention to improprieties by individuals—be they senators, scientists, or scholars—inevitably colors—if, to switch metaphors, it does not poison—the way in which the sector to which they belong is viewed by the general public. And so, even if the majority of auditors treat all clients in an evenhanded way, the whole profession is tainted by the well known malpractices of Arthur Andersen and other gigantic accounting firms.

Perhaps most damaging to disinterestedness and the professions in the long run are alternative forms of credentialing. In the twentieth century it was widely believed that aspiring professionals benefited from personal apprenticeships, in which they spent considerable periods of time in the field working under or alongside acknowledged and respected mentors. These apprenticeships ranged from internships and residencies for junior physicians to stints in regional bureaus for cub reporters to extensive bench-top work by budding scientists in laboratories presided over by highly credentialed and well-established researchers.[12]

With the ubiquity and accessibility of the digital media, the special status of credentialing has become extremely vulnerable. This situation is well captured by the famous cartoon caption, "On the Internet, no one knows I am a dog." Not only is it possible for new entries and entities to claim that they can provide equivalent training online, from a bachelor's degree to a professional degree; at least in principle, one could implement the professional equivalent of the Turing test, a well-known "thought experiment" in computer science. If a hypothetical graduate of an online law school can "pass" as—or for—a graduate of the Yale Law School, or an online physics doctoral candidate can "pass" for a PhD from MIT, what possible justification can there be for mandating multiyear training far from home at great expense? Perhaps we can now say, "On the web, no one knows—and perhaps no one cares—that I've never actually set foot in a medical school."

In a day when virtually everything is counted and ranked by supposedly neutral search engines,[13] it has become extremely difficult for all but the most informed to make needed distinctions among claims of quality. In principle, to be sure, one should be able to distinguish between (1) genuine expertise and knowledge, (2) the ability to parrot such knowledge thanks to good briefing or "test practice," (3) skillful branding or advertising, (4) knowledge of how to "go viral" or the good luck to do so, (5) credentials that are in fact valid as opposed to those that are suspect or even invented out of whole cloth (think of how a naive high school student could make a judicious choice among thousands of for-profit and not-for-profit colleges). But how many of us have the time, motivation, and expertise to undertake such needed discriminations?

While it might be tempting to see the digital media as a villain, such a judgment is inappropriate. Indeed, technologies in themselves do not have interests; they can even be described as the ultimate "disinterested" entities. A pencil can be used to write exquisite sonnets or to poke out a competitor's eyes! By the same token, a website can be used to raise money for victims of a natural disaster or to fuel a campaign of racial hatred.

But while technologies do not have interests, they certainly have biases and tendencies. In comparison to earlier media, the digital media are essentially instantaneous, interactive, and open to immediate editing or refuting, enabling virtually unlimited networking and connectedness. Search engines have to be programmed, their parameters can be changed, and indeed different search engines will come up with different entries and priorities. At least in the incarnation with which we are currently most familiar, the digital media also favor messages that are short, sharp, flashy, easily transmitted, and transformed with the potential to "go viral," with results that may or may not be predictable or desired. (The editors of this volume instructed all authors to limit their chapters to 8,500 words; such an injunction would hardly be needed for most writers and readers today!)

To be blunt, none of these tendencies initially favors a disinterested stance. After all, the disinterested stance tends to be fostered and found among those with lengthy professional training, rather than among those who may have little knowledge or depth, but much to say or even to shout, and little reason to consider or reconsider what comes out of their mouths or their fingers. Or, more poignantly (as well as more hyperbolically): "On the Internet no one cares that I have a PhD, two postdoctoral fellowships, and favorable recommendations from respected professionals."

Still, whatever their apparent initial proclivities, there is no reason in principle why the digital media *need* to deal a death blow to disinterestedness. For one thing, we live at a time when it is *more possible* than ever to determine what actually happened or did not happen (Gardner 2012).[14] While the daily news was once screened before it was presented—admittedly by individuals who saw themselves as disinterested—nowadays everything can and will be posted every minute. Individuals with the time and energy to scan the web are in a far stronger position to discover the actual state of affairs. Whether one approves of Wikileaks or Wikipedia, these sites dramatically increase the probability that all possible information (and misinformation) have been posted.

An additional point is that disinterestedness need not inhere in the media themselves. Rather, as pointed out by other authors in this volume, the media are better construed as playgrounds on which opposing perspectives can and should be articulated as powerfully as possible. It's not the job of the web to mediate; it is the job of the web to make all manner of information available, and to do so without any hidden weightings or biases. Then—and, some would add, *only* then—can individuals or institutions adopt a disinterested stance, as I hope they will.

A personal example: As a cognitive scientist, I have long studied the nature of human intelligence. If I am to live up to my role as a "disinterested" scientist, I can and should survey the full range of claims and counterclaims on this hot-button topic. It is then up to me whether I use this survey simply to bolster my already established views or, on the contrary, to nuance or even dramatically alter my stance.

Of course, the tendency of individuals to examine chiefly the sources with which they are likely to find themselves in agreement has been well documented.[15] But even though some algorithms direct us to sites with which we are likely to agree, we cannot simply blame the media for such selective presentations; ultimately, bias is chosen (consciously or unconsciously) by individuals, and it can be countered by effective education and a healthy dosage of self-discipline. As an expert, I certainly know which sites on the topic of human intelligence are likely to present one point of view, which are likely to embrace the opposite perspective, and which seem to cultivate a disinterested stance or at least a variety of stances.

Indeed, paradoxically, the very plethora of information available on the digital media could usher in a new era of disinterestedness. Given the deluge of information which no human being can fully absorb, we may end up cherishing especially those individuals, groups, and "sites" that manage

nonetheless to transcend individual and group interests. For example, in the realm of politics, an increasingly trusted site is Politico.com. In the realm of culture, many individuals treasure Arts-and-Letters Daily. When it comes to medicine, Consumer Reports or Medexpert are held in high regard. If I want to know what is going on in the world, I rely on a few broadcast outlets—National Public Radio and the British Broadcasting Company—and a few publications—*The New York Times, The Economist*—to provide a wide ambit. Perhaps each of these outlets has slight biases—but those biases are known, and when these media outlets are alerted to errors, the editors make every effort to correct the error promptly and prominently.

Indeed, especially at a time of extreme partisanship, those of us who do not simply accept the partisanship, or even rejoice in it, value those entities—governmental or nongovernmental, online or offline—that attempt to provide disinterested information.[16] I have in mind the Congressional Budget Office, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Amnesty International. We also look to certain governmental entities—particularly the Supreme Court—as the ultimate arbiter that transcends individual or corporate interests. Accordingly, when—as, many believe, is currently the case—the Supreme Court votes predictably along partisan lines, its credibility as an institution is undermined. After all, if the Supreme Court of the United States of America fails to exhibit disinterestedness, to what judicial institution can one turn?

At times, the new media can aid in disinterestedness. Consider the example of athletics. Until the invention of speedy recording and transmitting devices, close calls were left to the discretion of the judge or referee. Even when the judge strove to be disinterested, it was quite possible for him to err. Now however, thanks to rapidly accessible digital records, it is possible to examine the questionable play and subsequent call quickly and to make amends, as appropriate. No longer is it a case of "It's only how I call them"; now it is a case of "It's how I call them after I've had a chance to review the 'instant replay.'"

Less visible, but perhaps more important, are the individuals who administer complex informational systems. Because of technical problems that arise, such individuals may have the power to read users' e-mails, access credit information, and follow the trail of sites visited and deals made. When sticky ethical issues arise—for example, those involving individual privacy in the face of requests by governmental agencies—these administrators often work in tandem with the chief officers of highly trafficked sites like Twitter, Facebook, or Google. So far, it appears that the individ-

uals charged with these huge responsibilities have conducted themselves with admirable professionalism. According to Ethan Zuckerman, "When systems administrators go rogue and read e-mail, they tend to get shunned and drummed out of the profession."[17] It may be that the importance and delicacy of their situation serves to engender an ethos of professionalism in the ranks of such administrators.

I should note the claim that there is "wisdom in crowds," and that a more disinterested view will emerge if one simply allows everyone to weigh in. It may well be that on certain issues—for example, in choosing the song or the singer who is most likely to rise to the top of the charts—the collective judgment of crowds may be more valuable than that of individuals or even groups of experts; the proverbial Manhattan telephone directory trumps the Harvard faculty. On issues where knowledge is widely available, the consensus reached on Wikipedia may even trump that achieved in a traditional print encyclopedia. Indeed, Wikipedia prides itself in adhering to a disinterested stance and in eliminating submissions with a clear axe to grind.

As a general principle, however, I find this argument unpersuasive. Not all modes of "cognitive democracy," as Henry Farrell and Cosma Shalizi call it in this volume, are equivalent. There is a huge difference between conclusions reached by individuals who lack knowledge or who act in their own self-interest, and conclusions reached by individuals who are deeply informed and who engage in deliberative reflection. The latter may not always yield superior results (experts are also susceptible to "groupthink"), but knowledge and serious deliberations are necessary even if they are not sufficient. Moreover, while experts are certainly not immune from bias, they are at least likely to be countered by others of equal expertise. In contrast, history is replete with examples of manipulated masses, culminating in the "madness of crowds." Nor do I find it reassuring that large numbers of my fellow citizens believe in angels, are skeptical about climate change, and embrace creationist ideas. Wikipedia may succeed in eliminating sheer bias, but often at the cost of blandness or superficiality.

TOWARD THE PRESERVATION OF DISINTERESTEDNESS IN A DIGITAL ERA

I've argued that even before the hegemony of digital media, the disinterestedness once associated with individual professions and with professional guilds had been attenuated. With little question, the complex of Internet

web, social networks, quick and brief messaging, and other digital entities has contributed to the undermining of the professions and the dissolution of the disinterested stance that had once been the hallmark of their achievements. If we are not to give up on the ideal of disinterestedness, what can we do and what should we do?

Three principal levers come to mind. First of all, we need to bring to the attention of various publics the importance of disinterestedness and the perils that will fall—indeed that have befallen—those sectors where disinterestedness has waned or even disappeared. Quite effective are movies and television shows featuring people who "do the right thing"—blowing the whistle on unethical behaviors, and instead modeling what it's like to be fair-minded. See, for example, films underwritten by Jeff Skoll—*An Inconvenient Truth*, *Fast Food Nation*, or *Standard Operating Procedure*.

As a complement, we need to highlight examples of the *lack* of disinterestedness—to turn an even less mellifluous phrase, "the costs of interestedness." Every profession has its ethical guidelines as well as procedures whereby miscreants can be penalized; but these are rarely enforced; and when they are, such course corrections are often done in a private way—in a well-intentioned but actually counterproductive effort to allow the offender to "save face." Only when individuals who pervert the values of a profession are *publicly chastised*—only when there are well publicized "wakeup calls"—is there a reasonable chance that others in the profession will mend their ways. I certainly don't favor the reinstitution of public stockades. But unless there is some kind of public recognition, some kind of shaming of those who have pledged to be disinterested but choose not to be, it is hard to see how young workers are ever to appreciate the sheer cost to the profession of conduct that flaunts disinterestedness. Put sharply, it matters whether bankers who play with interest rates (or traders who manipulate the cost of energy) are protected by US regulatory or legal entities, are allowed to resign with full pay, are forced to resign and to return their bonuses, are indicted while getting away with a slap on the wrist—or are indicted, convicted, and given long, well publicized prison sentences. The same goes for doctors, lawyers, or professors who are guilty of malpractice.

It is easier today than ever before to spread the word about heroes and villains. Digital communications can and should be mobilized to recognize the assets of disinterestedness and the costs of its demise. Of course, powerful media are not always used in positive ways, and we can expect resistance to a formal cyber-hall of heroes and villains. The solution, however,

does *not* lie in a decision to avoid foregrounding examples of malignant as well as benevolent professional practices. Rather, the responsibility lies in the creation of media outlets that seek to practice disinterestedness and are self-critical of those occasions where disinterestedness fails. Put succinctly, only disinterested media can effectively convey the message of disinterestedness.

In addition to providing examples of disinterest as opposed to interest, the media can also provide powerful ways of thinking about the plight of the professional. Along with many other social scientists, I have been much influenced by economist Albert Hirschman's book *Exit, Voice, Loyalty*.[18] In this insightful work, Hirschman outlines the options that confront an individual—in our case, the professional—who witnesses examples of bad or compromised work. Initially, because of loyalty to the firm or institution, the worker may and perhaps properly should choose to be silent. But if the malpractice continues, the worker should be prepared to speak up, to voice his or her misgivings about an unacceptable set of practices. Under favorable circumstances, as a consequence of such public voicing, other critics will join in and may succeed in bringing about a cessation of the undesirable practices. If, however, the raising of voice has no effect, the individual worker should attempt to exit the institution.

To be sure, such exit is not always easy, and is certainly not always effective. Indeed, in authoritarian situations, public exiting can place the exiting agent at mortal risk. But in a democratic society, there should be alternative work options; no one is compelled to work at Goldman Sachs. Importantly, the worker will be able to live with himself, and perhaps eventually be honored by practitioners and observers.

My third recommendation follows directly from the first two. Urgently, we need to create spaces, both face-to-face and online, where members of a profession (or, indeed, any line of work) can discuss the difficult cases that pop up with regularity; which steps professionals have taken in response to these quandaries; what worked well, what might have been planned and executed in a more effective way; and how to draw on the "intelligence" distributed across the expert community so as to increase the likelihood of disinterested decisions and actions.

Drawing on a figure of speech with a lengthy history in the Anglo American world, I call such spaces "commons." Common spaces developed originally as pastureland in which the cattle of neighbors could graze. In the contemporary era, we should create common areas—virtual as well as physical—where members of a guild can meet to discuss the most important and most difficult cases that arise. (One possible example is the blog called The Volokh Conspiracy, where law professors and others discuss complex cases and vexed issues. Another quite different example is the experiment in the evaluation of patent applications described by Beth Simone Noveck.)[19] Excellent discussion of the vital role that common spaces can play is found in the writings of Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom.[20]

My colleagues and I have been engaged in such work. When we first began the GoodWork Project in the middle 1990s, we were concerned primarily with the question of how professions can survive in light of a number of disruptive conditions: the relentless pace of change, the altering of our sense of time and space by the digital media, and the power of unregulated markets. We did not use the term "disinterestedness," but we already had a sense that the professions harbored important human values, and that these had become vulnerable in the current era.

Over the course of a decade of empirical research, we established the nature of good work: work that is technically excellent, personally engaging, and carried out in an ethical manner.[21] We determined that it is easier to do good work when all the factors and forces in a sector are well-aligned; in the end, however, the decision to pursue or to abjure good work remains an individual decision. We noted similarities and differences across the professions: for example, partnerships are important in the law but not, apparently, in most other professions; individuals who work in philanthropy find it difficult to judge the quality of their own work, because almost no one gives them frank "disinterested" feedback. We also learned that young people are more likely to aspire to good work if they have mentors and peers who value good work and if, in the case of wakeup calls (where professionals violate fundamental values of the profession and are called to task), the young workers have the disposition to draw lessons that strengthen their professional moorings.

Once the major phase of our empirical research had been completed, we engaged in efforts to sensitize young people to the importance of good work and to increase the incidence of good work across the professional landscape. A tall order! A chief vehicle of this endeavor has been the goodWorktoolkit.[22] This instrument consists of authentic stories of professionals faced with ethical dilemmas, indicates the various ways in which these professionals might have tackled these dilemmas, and then encourages discussion among participants about preferred courses of action. Again, we have not used the phrase "disinterested," but many of these dilemmas call for more "disinterested" stances. In microcosm, our good work sessions

constitute an example of how a "commons" might work; but clearly, such common spaces can and should be undertaken on a much broader and deeper scale.

Let me give an example of a dilemma adapted from the toolkit. Debbie is a high school student who edits the school newspaper. She is proud to be a budding journalist, following the footsteps of her grandfather, a well known reporter for a leading newspaper. At her school there is a rape on campus and, as a good journalist, Debbie writes up a report for next week's issue. But then she is called into the office of the headmaster, who says that she cannot print the story. "Next week, we recruit for next year," he explains, "and we can't report an event that would jeopardize enrollment."

Debbie finds herself in a quandary. As a journalist, she knows that she should report the event, especially because the rapist might still be on the loose. Yet she takes the directive of her headmaster seriously. Confused about what to do, she goes home and describes the situation to her mother. Her mother is herself torn. On the one hand, as the daughter of a journalist, she is proud of her daughter. And yet she also hopes that Debbie's younger brother can attend the school and, as she muses aloud, she does not want her daughter's actions to jeopardize her brother's prospects for admission.

Not surprisingly, students find this dilemma fascinating. They can empathize with the different pressures, professional and personal, felt by the budding journalist. Perhaps less predictably, teachers also find this dilemma compelling. In truth, nearly all individuals—and certainly all professionals—face such dilemmas regularly. And yet we rarely have the chance to discuss them with peers, to reflect on them, to reach the optimal if not the perfect resolution, and, perhaps most important, to learn from what did not go as one had wished.

An important point for more senior professionals to keep in mind is that young people today may hold views about professions that are surprising. In one session with students at an elite school, I discussed the firing of Merilee Jones, a dean of admission at MIT. It turned out that Jones had faked her credentials for thirty years; it was obvious to me and to most of my senior colleagues that someone whose job it is to evaluate credentials cannot herself sport fraudulent credentials. Yet in the discussion with students, not a single student defended the firing. Some students said, "She was doing a good job, what's the problem?" Others said, "Well, everyone lies on their resume." At this point, I decided to suspend my role as a moderator. I pointed out that one should not lie about one's credentials or, indeed, anything else; but that if one did lie, and was caught doing so, that

was instant grounds for firing. This incident reminded me that one cannot assume any kind of consensus across the generations about what it means to be a responsible, let alone disinterested, professional.

In work like this, my own views on "disinterestedness" intersect with the problematic raised in this volume. No one is born disinterested, and indeed, the very concept of disinterestedness may not exist in many societies. I do consider disinterestedness to be the mark—or at least an aspiration—of a developed civilization, particularly one with democratic liberal values.[23] By undertaking wide-ranging discussions with young people about the kinds of issues that are likely to arise in their subsequent work lives, my colleagues and I have a number of objectives: (1) to expose them to such issues, (2) to acquaint them with the range of perspectives on such issues, and introduce perspectives that may not have occurred to the young people themselves, (3) to allow them to examine their own intuitive reactions and recommendations, (4) to see where these preconceptions are adequate and where they fall short, and (5) to encourage them to come up with courses of actions which serve not only the goals of one or another interested group, but rather the wider, longer-term aspirations of the community or communities that are affected. By no means can we assert that such interventions are necessarily effective. But I can state with confidence that in the absence of such interventions, it is hard to see how a disinterested perspective can ever arise. I endorse the notion that people rarely achieve a higher understanding when they only consult their own reflections: debate and discourse are the "royal road" to deeper understanding and better supported courses of action.

In our GoodWork enterprise (now captured on the web as thegoodproject.org), we have worked with individuals already in the professions as well as those training to be in the professions. Much of our work has been carried out with journalists, and indeed my colleague William Damon has devised a "travelling curriculum" which has been used in hundreds of print newsrooms across the country.[24] But we are by no means restricted to any specific profession. During a recent week, I carried out "GoodWork" sessions both with school principals and with law students.

Conversing with principals, I began by asking, "To whom or what do you feel responsible?" We then reviewed the various interest groups in the school and how best to navigate across their often competing agendas. I described the dilemmas faced by a principal: for example, what to do when a teacher of high quality is a very tough grader and students, while appreciating the teacher's pedagogical gifts, feel that she is jeopardizing

their entry to college; or what to do when the offspring of the chair of the board of trustees (or of the school board) is caught cheating. Such dilemmas arise almost every day. Some of them may be sufficiently familiar that the principal has hit upon a comfortable and effective course of action. But others are new and complex, and it is difficult to figure out the optimal response. Indeed, many of these dilemmas involve the digital media: Should students be allowed to text during class? Should students be allowed to "friend" teachers on a social network? What happens when prepackaged answers to an assignment go viral? Here is where some kind of "common space" in which rival positions are articulated and scrutinized could be quite helpful.

Working with law students, I began by asking, "In whose interest(s) should a lawyer work?" I then asked whether the supreme judicial court of the state or of the nation also had interests and, if so, what they were, and what it would mean if no members of said court were able to behave in a disinterested fashion. Drawing on a newspaper account, I then described a meeting in New Orleans of lawyers who work for large corporations. At this meeting the lawyers admitted that they were frequently faced with conflicts of interest. I quoted the article: "For every bad decision (CEOs and bankers) make, there is often a lawyer who approves it—and most likely charges over $1,000.00 an hour for that brilliant advice. Indeed it increasingly seems that the lawyers aid and abet the bad behavior of the nation's corporations." After engaging the students in a discussion of the responsibilities of the legal profession, I quoted further from the article:

> Lawyers—even Wall Street lawyers—are supposed to be a different breed from their clients and banker counterparts. They sign an oath when they are admitted to the bar. Their ethical standards are supposed to be beyond reproach. For many years, if a lawyer was called "commercial" that was considered pejorative. Today it is increasingly a badge of honor. Indeed, much of the conversation among the top lawyers in New Orleans was not about the rules but about how far you could push them.[25]

I understand that after my talk, the future lawyers lingered in the hallway for quite some time, discussing the pros and cons of a life in the contemporary practice of corporate law.

It is worth considering what is included in a lawyer's oath. Here are some excerpts from the lawyer's oath in the state of Michigan:

> I will not counsel or maintain any suit or proceeding which shall appear to me to be unjust, nor any defense except such as I believe to be honestly debatable under the law of the land.
>
> I will employ for the purposes of maintaining the causes confided to me such means only as are consistent with truth and honor and will never seek to mislead the judge or jury by any artifice of false statement of fact of law, and will never seek to mislead the judge or jury by any artifice or false statement of fact or law.
>
> I will accept no compensation in connection with my client's business except with my client's knowledge and approval.
>
> I will in all other respects conduct myself personally and professionally in conformity with the high standards of conduct imposed upon members of the bar as conditions for the privilege to practice law in the State.[26]

It would be interesting to verify how many lawyers in Michigan have been disbarred and what reasons, other than sheer illegal behavior, have ever been grounds for disbarment. Google offers no ready answer.

Life is complex, situations are tricky, and no professional should hold him or herself up as a paragon of virtue, let alone an icon of disinterestedness. Indeed, such judgments are best left to others, and are best made after the passage of time. Nonetheless, I feel confident in asserting that any profession and professional group can benefit from a discussion of the various interests at play in their work; that such discussions are likely to reveal how best to serve wider interests of the profession and the broader values of the ambient community; and that relevant discussions can and ought to be initiated well before the beginning of professional education. While in certain ways this challenge is compounded by the hegemony of the digital media, the media can also be mobilized to advance the causes of good professional behavior. It is up to those of us with professional opportunities and obligations to ensure that the media are mobilized for the ends that we most cherish.