The humble interview, the linchpin of journalism for centuries, is under assault.

It is a transaction that clearly favors the person asking the questions. A print reporter writes down someone's answers, then picks and chooses how much, if any, to use, how to frame the quotes and where to put any contrary information. Television correspondents slice and dice taped interviews in similar fashion.

But in the digital age, some executives and commentators are saying they will respond only by e-mail, which allows them to post the entire exchange if they feel they have been misrepresented, truncated or otherwise disrespected. And some go further, saying, You want to know what I think? Read my blog.

"The balance of power has shifted," says Jay Rosen, who teaches journalism at New York University. "Everyone used to be landlocked, and the media was the outlet to the sea of public discussion. But now there are many routes. . . . Readers have more power because they have more sources, and sources have more power because they can go direct to readers."

My interviews with Rosen, who writes the Pressthink blog, were conducted by e-mail. Here's the backstory: New York Times reporter Jim Rutenberg interviewed Rosen for a piece on the White House Correspondents Dinner. They "had a pretty detailed conversation" about Washington journalism and culture, Rosen later blogged, "but what Jim needed me for was the bloggers vs. journalists debate . . . I was not misquoted. I was used to make a point Rutenberg wanted to make before he talked to me."

Rutenberg says he is "totally open to criticism" but feels he handled Rosen's comments fairly. He says he told Rosen during a 45-minute phone conversation that "this is not what I'm writing about, but I'm interested to hear your thoughts. I think he wanted some of the larger points he was talking about to be in the story."

In the blog world, criticism is good fodder. When Times reporter Neil Lewis chided Rosen in an e-mail for being unfair, Rosen posted it (with Lewis's permission) along with a detailed response. Rosen said he had cried foul "not because I only got a few lines in the play and waaaaahhhhh I wanna bigger part. By my participation in Jim Rutenberg's story, I ended up perpetuating a lame, wrong-headed and outworn interpretation of a failed ritual."

Rosen now refuses interviews for pretaped television pieces -- "Takes so much time for so little a contribution to public discussion," he says -- and is weighing whether to insist on e-mail with print reporters.
"I think one of the basic functions of journalism is to interview people and have discussions," Rutenberg counters. "If we accepted that from the White House, I have a feeling many readers of [Rosen's] blog would have a problem with that. . . . To me that's more message control."

Some interview subjects, particularly on controversial stories, have long insisted on taping their discussions with reporters. More recently, such prominent newsmakers as Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban have largely limited themselves to typed exchanges with journalists -- a technique that allows them to take their time in responding and is easily posted online.

Jason Calcanis, chief executive of Weblogs Inc., says on his blog that "journalists have been burning subjects for so long with paraphrased quotes, half quotes, and misquotes that I think a lot of folks (especially ones who don't need the press) are taking an email only interview policy."

Veteran magazine editor Jeff Jarvis adds at his BuzzMachine blog: "Are interviews about information or gotcha moments? . . . Isn't it better to get considered, complete answers?"

These are thought-provoking points, and I've certainly interviewed people (and been interviewed) by e-mail. But let me say a word in defense of face-to-face discussions, or even telephone chats. When you see someone's expressions or listen to someone's voice, you get a sense of the person that words on a screen lack. A back-and-forth in real time often leads to illuminating moments. And, of course, typed answers can be rather bloodless -- and they make it impossible for me to write, he said with a smile:). I understand the skepticism toward the way reporters edit interviews. Since journalism is the art of compression, it's not a bad idea for news organizations to post transcripts or videotape of entire interviews so readers and viewers can judge the process for themselves.

Rosen is also spearheading an effort to marry citizen journalists with professional editors, on the theory that there is wisdom in numbers. His online venture, Assignment Zero, in collaboration with Wired magazine, ordered up reporting about a project called the Citizendium, an alternative to the all-volunteer online encyclopedia known as Wikipedia.

The result is a somewhat unwieldy collection of draft articles, addendums to drafts, sidebars and spinoff questions, such as: "We hear that the word on the virtual street is that Citizendium offends the standards and practices of online culture . . . by having standards and practices. Is this true?"

"In the beginning we were shocked by how many people signed up and wanted to contribute," Rosen says, with more than 900 volunteering their efforts to Assignment Zero in areas from writing to graphics to fact-checking. "When we had that burst of enthusiasm, we did not have the right system in place for handling or directing it, and by the time we had something better in place we did not have the same enthusiasm. Also, I don't think we found a clear path to participation for all these potential contributors."

On the plus side, volunteers come cheap.

Debating Fox

The pundits differ on who won last week's GOP presidential debate on Fox News, which drew 2.4 million viewers. But the cable network is winning plaudits in some unexpected places.

"The network hosted the most interesting and innovative debate so far in this election season," Slate's John
Dickerson wrote. "Moderators asked probing questions of the 10 candidates and pressed those who ducked them."

AOL blogger David Knowles, who has criticized Fox for what he calls "overwhelmingly conservative bias and shoddy reporting practices," gave "full praise to the network and its big three moderators. Brit Hume, Chris Wallace and Wendell Goler did what MSNBC's Chris Matthews could not. They played hardball, asking tough questions and inciting the candidates to spar with one another." Ken Rudin of National Public Radio said the Fox moderators "stayed out of the picture, asked sensible questions and gave the candidates ample time to answer them."

But when the Democratic Party last week announced its schedule of 2007 debates, Fox got stiffed. There are two on CNN, two on MSNBC, and one apiece on CBS and ABC. Several Democrats, under pressure from liberal bloggers who denounce Fox News as unfair and unbalanced, last month pulled out of a proposed Fox debate in Nevada.

"They're a bunch of wimps," Fox host Sean Hannity told viewers. "And they're a bunch of cowards. And they don't have the courage of their convictions to stand before objective, discerning reporters." While several of the Democratic candidates have appeared on Fox, the top tier has been shying away, even as the Republicans have debated on MSNBC.

A Democratic National Committee spokeswoman declined to comment, but party Chairman Howard Dean has called Fox "a propaganda outlet of the Republican Party."

**Tabloid Ethics**

In the course of denouncing a potential lawsuit against the paper by fired gossip writer Jared Paul Stern, the New York Post made a striking admission Friday.

The paper said that Page Six editor Richard Johnson, in 1997, accepted a $1,000 "Christmas gift" from restaurateur Nello Balan, who was frequently mentioned on the gossip page. (An affidavit provided to Stern by Ian Spiegelman, another former Page Sixer, says it was payment for a favorable mention.) The payment came to light two years ago. Editor-in-Chief Col Allan was quoted as saying Johnson "made a grave mistake" and was reprimanded.

**Trade Magazine Classic**

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