

THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

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Introduction

With continually changing technology and the way people are consuming the news, journalism is being revolutionized and rapidly evolving. Newspaper businesses are folding at an ever-accelerating pace, leaving many uneasy and uncertain. Important questions regarding the future of journalism are now being asked as people realize the operative word used regarding the decline of print is not “if” but “when.” What sort of new technology will be utilized? With such a vast amount of information now available, how do we determine fact from fiction? With forms of communication like blogging, will journalists lose their position as professional gatekeepers for the public? Through the lens of some of print media’s key factors – namely new media trends, lack of true gatekeepers, various platforms, advertising dilemmas and need for professionalism – the future of a changing industry will be examined to determine how to retain a positive outlook in the midst of change.

New Media

Two months ago in a Society of Professional Journalists meeting, Josh Awtry, managing editor of the Salt Lake Tribune and overseer of the paper's online operations, spoke about newspapers, new media and what the impending future holds for journalism. As far as recent history and changes in the newspaper industry are concerned, Awtry said despite all-time high newspaper sales in 2005—most likely due to the real estate boom—the industry is dying and anyone who says differently is fooling themselves. In only a year’s time (2008-2009), a large portion of readers were lost, whittling down readership to what is projected as the older generation of the population, ages 40 and up. A big part of the reason newspapers are still widely being distributed is due to the fact that two-thirds of ad revenue is generated by the physical source. However, online advertising is becoming ever more popular and finding new and creative ways to draw revenue.

Despite this seemingly grim outlook though, journalists still—and always will in the foreseeable future—have an important and needed job. Awtry said the appetite for news has never been stronger with millions of websites devoted to informing others of current events and trends. Now is the time for journalists to be proactive in garnering readership. “We are in sales; we always have been,” he said. “We have to get people to read our work.”

Dubbing the pursuit, “building your brand,” Awtry said it’s not the just about the organization you work for, but also the individual’s unique talents they bring to the table. Journalists that have built up trust with those they interact with are those that are more often hired by media outlets. That trust should be balanced, Awtry said, with an active effort to bring new people to our platform, alert people of content and communicate with a sense of humanity. Too often the “gatekeepers” confuse tone with bias and humanity with advocacy, he said.

Clayton Christensen, one of the consultants recently appointed to the Deseret News advisory board, put together an expansive report on journalism's future, called the "Newspaper Next" project. In an article Christensen wrote for Forbes Magazine, he discussed how newspapers need to react in this shifting market. “Newspaper companies have only begun to scratch their innovation potential,” he said. “To succeed, they have to learn to look at markets in new ways. They must invest to create new capabilities and rethink the way they work individually and collectively.” Christensen observed that some publications tried to come up with business models to attract more readership, but the real question must be about how to serve the public in changing times. There is no going back; no weathering the storm and waiting until hard economic times blow over. The media industry is forever evolving and newspapers must be willing to adapt.

Both Christensen and Awtry strike a similar and significant vein in their respective insights. The “downfall” of newspapers is no longer an occurrence worth occasional worry and thought. It’s a very real trend affecting the industry itself and calling for change—and change soon. An equilibrium of sorts must be struck between solid, well-researched content and new, innovative ways of storytelling and adapting to consumers’ needs. One doesn’t necessarily have to give way to the other.

The future need only appear grim to primarily those stalwarts unwilling to change their method of disseminating and delivering information. There's no need for that level of rigidity, however. The content is essentially the same. We must separate the medium from the message.

Viewed in another light, the shifting journalistic atmosphere offers new and exciting opportunities in storytelling and delivering an important message to a variety of consumers. With a personal conviction to adapt, work hard, gain trust and generate and spread a distinct "brand," these two media experts suggest a hope for journalists and tentative direction for them to head now and in the future.

Gatekeepers

"The national conversation has changed," said John S. Carroll, former editor of the Lexington Herald-Leader, the Baltimore Sun and the Los Angeles Times in the annual Creason Lecture at the University of Kentucky in 2008. "Millions of people who previously had been excluded have now been allowed to join in. Who ever saw it coming? For those of us who believe in free speech and free press, this is an unexpected gift, a First Amendment miracle, bestowed by the same forces that are laying waste to our newspapers." In his address, he posed three questions dealing with journalists role in the evolving world of journalism and news reporting — raising questions as to who the gatekeepers will be in this new age.

Carroll first asks, "Who, in the digital future, will do the reporting?" He said if journalism has a mainspring, it is the reporter and the reporter's elemental task of finding and verifying news—an essential component of America's democracy and way to inform its citizens to qualify them to successfully govern their nation. That being said, with reporters as the keystone to democracy, their changing role in the future must be addressed. Carroll postulates that "you may get your news on your Blackberry, you may get it on the Web, you may get it from a talk show ... but if you trace any given story to its origin, you'll almost always find that it came from an old-media reporter, usually writing for a newspaper."

Despite this claim, however, reporters are still being shed from news organizations, begging the question of the source of future news. Some people think blogging will fill or has already filled that void. However, Carroll said blogging turns out to be a hard business. "The money is generally lousy, and there's a constant struggle to get and hold an audience. There is a centrifugal force in blogging. If you are a moderate and portray the world in thoughtful shades of gray, your audience will abandon you. The loneliest place in the blogosphere is the middle of the road." With that description, and even with the fact that blogs have contributed a noticeable amount to the national discussion, they still rely heavily on "old media" for their information. In this vein arrive the large portals online with distributors like Google, Yahoo, MSN and others. These businesses have become the primary news source for millions without employing virtually any reporters. This trend challenges traditional news organization's ability to make money and ability to produce a democratic self-government.

Where question number one was qualitative, Carroll's second question is more qualitative. "What principles, if any, will guide the journalism of the digital age?" Generally-speaking, the "marketplace of ideas" is enriched by new and diverse voices. However, many voices are not only un-journalistic but pretty blatantly manipulative. Though somewhat hampered by "old-fashioned" ways of doing things, old media outlets typically hold their ethical gatekeeping duties with seriousness and pride. In this regard, the question remains a mystery. Will journalism – real journalism – triumph over propaganda, marketing and disinformation? Time will tell. One would hope the public would seek to discover the truth but often choose the quicker way out, selecting whatever is most easily available to them. Perhaps that, being available and accessible to an audience, is what professional journalists must seek.

Carroll’s final question is this: “Will we have journalistic institutions that are strong enough, and independent enough, to serve as a counter-weight to big government and big corporations?” He continues by stating the advent of the lone blogger has stirred something patriotic in our nation, viewing themselves as pamphleteers in the American Revolution; a modern-day Thomas Paine (who Carroll assumes would be an avid blogger if alive). Those outlets aren’t quite enough, however. “It seems to me that big, institutional journalism – not just a din of individual voices -- is still needed,” he said. “But one important thing has changed since those early days: institutions have grown. Government has become huge. Business is huge. The tools of spin and of deception are huge and sophisticated. And, likewise, institutions of journalism have grown, too.” Carroll uses the example of the story in the New York Times that exposed the wiretapping of American citizens by the National Security Agency. It’s unlikely that a blog would have the power or tools necessary to provide such a check and balance or have the know-how to do so — much less be able to handle the legal ramifications in the aftermath. Muscular journalistic institutions are necessary to have the heft to take on big government and business and maintain a democracy. Individual voices oftentimes are not enough.

Flipping the elements, I think the implications of news being tailored for specific citizens makes journalism’s role as a gatekeeper shift. With new media and online sites catering to specific preferences, the perspective landscape is altered. Overholser and Jamieson’s “The Press” discusses the potential results of such consumer behavior: “Some have argued that such practices lead to the ‘Daily Me’ news mindset, newspapers, web sites or video news sources of the future that present only what a person wants to know about. In this ultimate example of audience fragmentation, no two people might get the same news ... [and] customization raises an important question about democratic discourse when people do not share a common perspective on events.” Will the future divide audiences into niches, educating them only in what they choose to hear? Or will the public still demand well-rounded news that helps them make decisions based on knowledge and communication?

Information and the dissemination of information is rapidly evolving. Gone are the days of one-way tracks from journalist to public. Now it’s a grand conversation with millions of participants privy to a vast array of facts and ideas with linked stories provide quick access to readers’ interests. Many articles come with video and audio in addition to text. As Carroll would say, “Possibly -- just possibly -- we might live to see a new age; a golden age of journalism. Let us all hope.”

Platforms

With these impending and current changes being made in the news industry, the question is now being begged, to what platform will waning newspapers transfer to provide such a multimedia experience? Which technological advancement will dominate how news is received? Or will there be many choices dependent on how that user wishes to receive their information? Researchers and journalists alike are striving to answer these questions and study some platforms that have already found a niche in the fluctuation market.

According to Pew Research Center’s “Project for Excellence in Journalism” program, some interesting developments are being made within some various social platforms—including blogs,

News Topics Across Media Platforms				
January 19, 2009 – January 15, 2010*				
	Blogs (% of stories)	Twitter (% of stories)	YouTube (% of videos)	Traditional Press (% of newshole)
Politics/Government	17%	6%	21%	15%
Foreign Events (non-U.S.)	12	13	26	9
Economy	7	1	1	10
Technology	8	43	1	1
Health and Medicine	7	4	6	11

* Twitter was tracked from June 15, 2009 – January 15, 2010

Twitter and YouTube. Across all three social platforms, viewer attention spans are brief. Just as news consumers don't stay long on any online news site very long, social media doesn't remain focused on any one story for an extended period of time. Just 5% of the top five stories on Twitter remained among the top stories the following week. This was true of 13% of the top stories on blogs and 9% on YouTube. In the mainstream press, on the other hand, fully 50% of the top five stories one week remained a top story a week later.

Often people view blogs as only a compilation of "soft news" or opinionated, entertainment writing, but research shows 17% of blog stories deal with politics and government, as compared to the traditional press' 15% of the newshole. Foreign events, science and technology were some of the other top blog topics that each eclipsed the mainstream media. However, the traditional press was more likely to cover the economy, health and medicine than blogs. Politics also accounted for 21% of YouTube's top stories. With these statistics, the public may be surprised at the high number of "hard news" oriented topics in social media, suggesting a still strong interest in such civic and national matters.

Topics of News Coverage: Blogs vs. the Traditional Press		
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Foreign Events (non-U.S.)	12	9
Science	10	1
Technology	8	1
Health and Medicine	7	11
Celebrity	7	2
Economy	7	10
Terrorism	6	4
Crime	6	6
Environment (including Global Warming)	4	2
Pop Culture	3	1
Oddball	3	< 1
Gay issues	2	< 1
Consumer News	2	< 1
Education	2	1
Media	2	2
Religion	1	< 1
Immigration	< 1	< 1
Race/Gender Relations	< 1	1
Disasters/Accidents	< 1	2

In an article in Wired Magazine entitled, "The Big Question: New Media's Effect on Journalism," some of the top industry professionals commented on what they believed to be the future of the news. Clay Shirky, author, consultant and NYU adjunct professor, said "there won't be a ten-year 'Next Big Thing'. Here's a slice of the last ten: WordPress, Wikipedia, Digg, Meetup, Flickr, YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, Foursquare. Twitter is the new headline news, QQ the new

agora, ChatRoulette puts the 'self' in self-expression. Expect more of the same in the next ten." Adam Penenberg, journalism professor at NYU, agreed with varied platforms, but took it one step further. "Journalists will create for the web's two billion users and growing, then port it over and become cheap, disposable technology," he said. "The upshot: self-expression becomes ubiquitous with social-media functionality."

In Paul Levinson's "New New Media," he said, "students look at YouTube videos and send and receive tweets on iPhones and BlackBerry's while teachers are lecturing. But few of these new media are discussed in classrooms or at any length or detail in textbooks nor in many other kinds of books, either ... [I] seek to remedy that understandable omission." The future of journalism lies in these various types of social media and they way the traditional press works with them and use their own platforms within new technology to reach audience members. These new platforms have promising functionality and breadth of reach, whatever form they may take in the future, and journalists would be wise to take full advantage of this rapidly changing technological dispensation.

Advertising

Although the general public is sure about the extinction of newspapers and journalists' new challenge to be marketable on various platforms and social media, the one major roadblock is finding advertising that replaces both physical newspaper advertising as well as paid subscriptions. Though readership is shifting to the web, newspapers still reap more advertising revenue from tangible ads. Not only will journalists now and in the future have to figure out a way to fund their content, they will also have important ethical decisions to make regarding readership and professionalism.

With varying ways of advertising, many online sites use the typical business model of more "clicks" means charging more for ads and sponsorship. A page's traffic determines its success. Though this makes clear sense logistically speaking, if a reporter is paid contingent upon how many hits he or she is getting or how popular their articles are, a natural transition seems to be that of seeking out increasingly sensationalized headlines and less objective articles.

Mark Glaser, a contributor to "The Online Journalism Review," said "Most freelance writers wait in dread for The Call -- their equivalent of the 'Dear John' letter from an editor who is calling to say they're no longer needed. A number of years ago, The Call came to me from my editor at CNET, but with a twist. They were killing my humor column because it didn't get enough page views. I even got a rundown of the numbers, though they were meaningless to me. The Internet has been lauded for providing advertisers with exact metrics on how their ads perform, but it also can be turned against writers and journalists, especially at sites that live and die by traffic. While this blurring of the Chinese wall between advertising and editorial could hurt the credibility of the nascent operations, few journalists can ignore the economic viability of their publications." As Glaser demonstrates, journalists will have to maintain their ethics in a market that often forces them to think about the success of their articles and subject matter. A balance has to be struck to ensure that professional and relevant news is being reported.

In an article entitled, "Data and Journalism," Paul Bradshaw discussed the ability for companies to reduce the margin of error in their advertising and measure which are more effective than others. "The offering to advertisers is likely to say 'we can display different adverts based on what information the user is interested in,' or 'we can point the user to their local dealership based on their location,'" he said. In this sense, to be effective, advertising targets the market of whoever is viewing the page -- whether it is based on the content of the site, the viewer's location or ads with customizable products based on interest. "Advertising sales will need to experience the same revolution that journalists have experienced, learning the language of web metrics, behavioral advertising and selling the benefits to advertisers," Bradshaw said. In order for online journalism to successfully be implemented on an independent working basis, advertising must embrace a

revolution as well and most likely collaborate with the creators of web content to focus on viewers' interests.

Mitch Joel, author of "Six Pixels of Separation" and founder of Twist Image, said "people involved in online marketing know the banner ad is not the future of online advertisement or online marketing." Joel's assertion that banner ads will not suffice for investors or advertising revenue has proved to be true. Just as journalism online has become interactive and revolutionized, advertising cannot simply rely on similar banners produced in physical newspapers. The media outlets make their money by selling ads, not necessarily content, and this shift needs to be accounted for.

Gordon Crovitz, former publisher of the Wall Street Journal, remarked that "now, with online advertising in cyclical decline, news publishers of all kinds...newspapers and magazines but also online-only news organizations...see that it's hard to support a news department with only the advertising revenue stream." The combination of subscriptions and advertising among other forms of ads are how newspapers have always made profit. Online news must find a way to compensate for that – and advertising thus far does not have the means to fully do so for media outlets. For now, journalists must work with advertisers to be increasingly effective while maintain their journalistic standards to ensure democracy is continually represented to the public.

Infotainment & Professionalism

In addition to advertising strains, journalists are also struggling to remain rooted in factual, objective reporting while trying help their organization succeed in a competitive market as the public demands more colorful, sensational stories in a quick format. This vicious cycle, however, disconnects many distrustful readers from the news, believing it to be "infotainment." With the internet empowering the people, news organizations seek to maintain professionalism and trust.

Laura Lane, in Yahoo! Associated Content's "New Media: The 24/7 Age of Infotainment and the Compromise of the News Media," said every day decisions are made within the newspaper industry to determine how to approach news coverage and decide which stories should be covered. "The increase in tabloid journalism, the popularization of blogs and an increased demand to constantly be updated on the news has made it even harder to define the line between news and gossip. News is no longer something you read in the morning newspapers or catch on the 6pm nightly news. It is a 24 hours a day, 7 days a week stream of information. The ethical decision facing the news industry now is simply the question, 'What is news?'"

Furthering the blurred lines of communication, an increased number of competing voices make being heard simultaneously easier and more difficult. Sifting through the news is a task readers are increasingly being required to do. Burt Herman, co-founder and chief executive of Storify, said the democratization of media means anyone can reach out and find others who share their vision regardless of geographic boundaries. "That means everyone is competing for attention in a media environment that now is flooded with information. The noise from all these personal megaphones has come together in one global roar, so overwhelming that we are struggling to hear the voices that matter." According to Herman, the most authentic voices out there are the ones that move people to act and will always be the most important.

However, there will also be professionals or not-so-professional journalists out there looking for an entertaining story. Jay Rosen, author of "PressThink," relayed a story of OffTheBus reporter Mayhill Fowler who approached former president Bill Clinton and conducted something of an interview—anonymously—that ended up affecting the public's few of he and wife in office, Hilary. Though she did report what Clinton said, her lack of ethics are just one example of the fearful direction journalism could take if not handled professionally and objectively. This decline of "old media" and rise of "new media" has created a stream of information and the demand to be constantly updated, leading to a mixture of fact and rumor. In "Evolving Definitions of News," Tom Bettag said, "Journalists have decided to adapt and set the old school aside to accommodate the new

realities, but with the new realities there is no new ethic. The answers to the new ethical dilemmas have not caught up with the rapid evolution of the news.”

A similar view is reflected in journalists’ view of themselves. A 2005 poll of journalists by the Pew organization found that 53% of journalists felt that bottom-line pressures were hurting television news and 74% felt that news organizations are moving too far into entertainment. Lane’s solution for this blurring of news, entertainment and reader’s ability to trust in professionals comes in the form of balance. “There will always be the struggle between whether journalist should report on what they feel is newsworthy and what people want to know about. In the end, if people aren’t interested, they won’t be watching the news no matter how significant it is, which is why it is important to find a balance. I feel that news organizations should always strive for the “sacred trust” of the Old Media, while embracing the interests and demands of the New Media. While adapting to the 24/7 news feed, however, it should always be more important to be second and right than first and wrong. While we may never know exactly what news is, news isn’t news if it isn’t right.”

A Positive Outlook

With all of these shifting factors changing the face of an old print news industry that is, in fact, dying, it’s easy for those professionals relaying the news as well as the audience to bemoan such losses and upheaval. However, there are many positive and beneficial outcomes that can be gleaned from this altering media landscape

Mark Glaser, host of PBS’s “MediaShift: Your Guide to the Digital Media Revolution,” listed 10 reasons why he thinks “there’s a bright future for journalism.” He begins by discussing increased access to journalism worldwide, saying “one of the undersung advantages of the Internet is that it gives us access to content from newspapers, TV channels, blogs and podcasts from around the world. No longer are we limited to our local media for news of the world. Gone are the days of only receiving news from your local newspaper. We now have access to not only news across the nation, but throughout the world. As both a consumer and one disseminating and distributing the news, this access opens many doors in scope and depth of audience members reached. In that same vein, Glaser talks about – in points two and three – how aggregation and personalization satisfies readers and how digital delivery offers more (and different) ways to reach people. In this “information age,” people can personalize their media experience, selecting which outlets they wish to receive news through and what medium to view it through – whether it be video, audio, written or otherwise.

Glaser also discusses the way blogging and other forms of amateur communication play into the journalistic landscape now and in the future. Bloggers and other groups are now widespread fact-checkers, balancing out discrepancies in stories or perceptions, regardless of their own personal agenda. Amateur journalists and people in various communities are now working with professional journalists to uncover and tell stories. In addition, the influx of media voices puts the “power to the people” in a sense, giving the public more ability to express opinions and partake in the agenda-setting process formerly dominated by newsrooms. Their involvement has increasingly forced journalists to be more personal with their audience, partaking in further interactivity and connecting in a deeper way than ever before.

Glaser ends his list by demonstrating that not only is online news more eco-friendly with paperless production, but that growing internet ad revenue is providing a way for electronic publications to successfully function. The Internet Advertising Bureau (IAB) and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) found that Internet ad spending in the U.S. hit a new record high in the first quarter of 2007, at \$4.9 billion, marking the 10th consecutive record quarter. Glaser closes by mentioning the lasting effect of online news. The enduring discussion, online follow-ups and resulting discussions spurred on by the interactive nature.

Conclusion

Granted these positive points of our media future are searching for the potential benefits, but regardless, the future for journalists offer promise and opportunity coupled with hard work and perseverance. Many of our greatest fears -- such as the lack of reliable gatekeepers -- also can serve as theoretical strengths, with the “marketplace of ideas” effect in place. The bottom line is that there will always be a need for journalists with honed writing skills and storytelling ability. The times are changing, it’s true, and journalists are being required to become multi-faceted – but then again, when have jobs not required additional skills and training with new technologies and ways of business? As long as the public can recognize professional news organizations as the most reliable sources and not confuse objectivity with advocacy often found from amateur sources such as blogs, journalism in its raw form will continue.

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