

A Nation Without Newspapers Is Like...

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Abstract

Whenever a species goes extinct, it's a disaster for more than that form of flora or fauna. The loss is felt along the ecological chain. Are newspapers facing the same fate as the great auk, the speckled dodo or the ebony spleenwort? And if they disappear, will the ecology of American democracy be forever knocked out of balance. Have no fear, claim the "New Media" standard bearers, because the Internet -- with all of its search wonders, bloggers and citizen journalists -- will save the day. But will it? Will the "New Media" replicate the standards, principles and commitments of the "Old Media," the products of which have not-so-lovingly been referred to as "rags," "fish wrappers" and "bird-cage carpets." Although still in its infancy, the "New Media" has not so far. It would usher in a new "Golden Age of Journalism" if it did, but don't bet the ranch on that.

"Society undoubtedly needs the media to play a dynamic watchdog role. Nevertheless, watchdogs sometimes bay at the moon and disturb the neighborhood, they strew garbage over the front lawn, they can be obsessed by the scent of sex, they can invade the privacy of the neighbor's garden, and, alas, they have been known to bite innocent passersby."

That was the perspective of F. W. de Klerk while serving as the seventh and last president of South Africa in its apartheid era.

Although de Klerk is still very much with us, he should be able to rest in peace because those watchdogs -- even the wayward ones that he described -- are in a collective coma or in a death watch because of the demise of the professional news media in both its print and broadcast forms in the United States.

Newspapers have slashed reporting staffs. So have network and local television operations. Too made radio stations play canned music, air talk shows, and have absolutely no reporters.

So what's at stake here? The essence of the U. S. democracy, that's what.

The American newspaper industry, as it attempted to focus on the red ink on its books instead of the black ink that prints the words mirroring the communities it serves, has done a horrible job of delivering that message.

Here is what that message should have been as soon as the Internet and its tentacles began to wrap themselves around the newspaper industry like a giant squid.

Journalists -- either those trained at the nation's universities or those who can be described as lifetime news junkies while majoring in other disciplines -- are ethically bound

to be fair and balanced in their coverage, accurate in their presentations, and objective in their viewpoints.

Yet, they do have axes to grind, meaning that the political ideologues on the left and right are basically accurate in that one sense. Reporters do have a slant, a bias, but not in the context that the Limbaughs and the Hannitys or the Olbermanns and Maddows like to voice.

Journalists sharpen their verbal axes to deliver blows against:

- Those people, organizations or institution that thwart or ignore the Bill of Rights – especially freedom of speech and a free press – and the rest of the Constitution.
- Those who not only break the law, but bend it.
- Those who take unfair and dishonest advantage of people for personal gain.
- Those who refrain from honesty and integrity in their public dealings.
- And those who spit in the eye of honest, fair and effective government at all levels, and use their public positions – in the name of democracy -- to take advantage of those they should be serving.

Journalists are curious souls. They like to know what makes things tick. They have a healthy skepticism, they have patience in checking for facts, they have a passion for accuracy, and they are generalists in their knowledge of the community, the nation and the world.

These breeds of ax wielders with those kinds of credentials seem to be on the endangered-species list because of the deterioration of news-gathering operations.

But should we care? Damned right we should, especially those citizens of the planet who like to tell their neighbors that they “don’t read that rag/fish wrapper/bird-cage carpet.” That’s because they can “get their news from the Internet.”

Don’t take this as a stinging salvo or blistering broadside fired at this at-your-fingertips marvel. It is a wonderful tool when used properly and with critical thinking.

At first glance, the Internet is almost miraculous because it has the potential to usher millions of people into the national and global discourse. That is a booster shot for the concepts of free speech and free press.

But there are downsides, not the least of which is economics. Computers are not free; nor are Internet fees. Comparatively speaking, that “fish wrapper” is a bargain.

More troublesome is that this electronic two-edge sword is the millennium’s version of The Pied Piper because of the preponderance of false and misleading information that moves effortlessly through cyberspace’s hither and yon. There are too few checks and balances; hence the need for critical thinking.

Consumers are supposed to have the mental aptitude to differentiate between what is fact and what is propagandized fiction. But do they?

No doubt the Internet has spawned an infinitesimal increase in the quantity of information, followed closely by an infinitesimal decrease in the quality of information.

Should “paper” papers be saved?

Consider this. How much time do you spend on the Internet looking for information that interests you? What if there was a product that hired trained professionals who lived and worked in your community, and their job was to keep track of governments, organizations, industries and entertainment venues?

Each day, they would package all of the information that they collected – and verified – into a report tailored to your community and your neighborhoods. It would be delivered to your home at a fraction of the cost of color-ink cartridges, computer-access fees, and be free of any kind of virus. It can be consumed without the need for electricity.

In other words, there are quite a few pros to match the cons of “paper” papers. But the important point is what is printed in those “paper” papers.

What’s the response to the people who blindly state that they get all the news they need from the Internet?

The conservative estimate – note conservative – is that 80 percent of the “news” on the Internet – news -- not the garbage-in, garbage-out slants nor snide, smarmy, anonymous blogs responding to legitimate news stories – comes from newspapers. It could be closer to 90. No newspapers, no news on the Internet – just those useless blatherings.

More troublesome is the negative impact registered on the nation’s newspapers, large and small. These are time-honored institutions that people have counted on to tell them what the heck is going on. Thus, the Digital Age has giveth, and it has taketh away.

To survive, newspapers have triggered a tsunami of cutbacks, jettisoning cadres of seasoned reporters. These are veteran wordsmiths who never lower themselves to opinionated name calling that any hack, talk-show commentator or blogger stoops to.

Their calling was to report the facts, to ferret out graft, corruption and the truth-benders. They took seriously their roles as the eyes, ears and nose of the American people. Too many are being ushered out the door. Who will be doing the reporting in the Digital Age?

So what? Here’s what.

In the heyday of the “old media,” newspapers assigned reporters to beats – city hall, police, health care, higher education, K-12 schools, even sports. They had almost a daily presence on those beats, stopping in offices to talk to potential news sources and, in some cases, making a pest of themselves.

The majority of the visits were probably fruitless, other than the social value of putting a name, a face and a voice together in dealing with people. A reporter was not somebody who called on the telephone when something hit the fan. He/she was a person and, ideally, a trustworthy one performing an essential mission.

Until that one day. Beat reporters actually had a string of those “one days” if they were diligent. In a journalism symposium, John Carroll, former editor of The Los Angeles Times, spoke about one of those days for him when he was a young reporter on the medical, health and science beat for The Baltimore Sun.

He recalled weeks of visiting the office of a fellow whose job it was to keep an eye on health-care costs and insurance rates in Maryland. It was always “thanks, but no thanks” to Carroll’s inquiries about anything going on. Until that one day.

A provider of health-care insurance had already received a 15-percent boost in rates, quite a pocketbook hit even in those days. In the wings was another 26-percent jack-up. Until that one day.

Instead of the routine “thanks-but-no-thanks,” the fellow greeted Carroll, closed the door behind him, and spilled a few beans – the 26-percent boost down the road would provide the funds to build a palatial headquarters for the insurance provider.

In the wake of the banner headline in the next edition of *The Sun*, there would be no 26-percent hike, and no palatial headquarters.

Who will do that kind of intensive and expensive reporting in the Digital Age? Who will be covering the “routine” beats on police and lower courts as two fellows named Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were when they stumbled into a “routine” burglary case that led to the toppling of an American presidency?

That kind of reporting – not exactly manpower efficient because it requires a lot of digging – has been done almost exclusively by newspapers. Flashing back to people who say they get their news from the Internet, from Blackberry, from Google – they are news distributors, not news originators. At least, not yet.

Are blogs any better? Can they do this kind of reporting? Even if they could, how would a consumer know what the bloggers are doing? How would an Internet user know what to look for?

Other than the blog creator, can they employ a staff of trained reporters to do the required spadework to find the story that is under the story? Even if they can, how do consumers find them, know them, trust them? Do bloggers – or citizen journalists -- cover a community or only one aspect of it?

Is it too late to save “paper” papers? Does the newspaper industry’s business model no longer work? In the glory days, newspapers were cash cows, pulling in anywhere between 20 and 40 percent in profit margins each year, while General Motors crowed to stockholders about a single-digit profit.

What didn’t happen is that newspapers, as an industry, did not cast their eyes toward the horizon. They did not stockpile their ample earnings with the future in mind -- other than investing in the latest printing-press technology. Then, when the future arrived, they gave away their news-generating monopoly in the name of being “New Media” savvy. Imagine if the portals to the web were Knight-Ridder, Dow Jones or the New York Times Co. instead of Google and Yahoo. The opportunity was there. It was not seized.

A touch economic decision must be made, and it probably won’t. Newspapers – if they want to save themselves – must invest in their product. They must make the case to consumers exactly what is at stake. What did they say about advertising? In good time, you

should advertise. In bad times, you must advertise. Again, this would be a major economic decision, but the stakes are worth it.

If newspapers – even in their electronic form – fall by the wayside, the amount of “straight” information – information that is verified and re-verified before being offered to consumers – will shrink greatly.

Not only will this affect what consumers know, it will impact on what they don’t know, which is even more perilous a thought. This will all be good news for the next Illinois governor who walks the indictment tightrope, the next Detroit mayor who plays money games, or the next president who flaunts the Constitution.

Will the “Old Media” ethics survive the transition into the Digital Age?

In kind of a tribal custom, rank-and-file journalists take seriously the mission to tell the truth in their reports. There were virtual riots in the Cincinnati Enquirer and New York Times newsrooms in the wake of Chiquita Banana and Jayson Blair fiascos, respectively.

If Bill O’Reilly or Keith Olbermann knowingly gave out false information to their viewers, would the staffs at Fox News or MSNBC rebel? Would heads roll as they did at *The Times* and *The Enquirer*?

Print journalists have gone to jail for not giving up their sources, knowing that their spigots of information would dry up if they squealed. Yahoo, masquerading as a new institution of journalism, opened its files to the Chinese government and two journalists went to jail. In that context, it is not acting like one of the old institutions of journalism.

When the public reads, sees or hears something in the “New Media” that purports to be news, will it be true journalism, will it be marketing, or will it be propaganda?

Governments are bigger. Corporations and businesses are bigger. Financial empires are bigger. The instruments of public relations are bigger. All this leads to the prospects of mass deceptions becoming bigger.

Do bloggers – citizen journalists -- have the kind of financial and legal clout to stare these supersized institutions down, and stare them down in a fair and accurate way?

A case can be made that a powerful institution of journalism – in any kind of an effective form – is needed as a counterweight. So far, the Digital Age and its “New Media” have not stepped forward to serve as that counterweight.

Will the market step forward and fill that void? If the market really worked, there would be some form of meaningful journalism on commercial radio across the nation. Are there any Edward R. Murrows on the air waves?

The only throwback to the way things were in commercial radio is NPR, but that basically is a charity. It is not part of a market economy.

The transition from the “old media” to the “new media” is epochal. Affected is what the public knows and – more important – what the public doesn’t know. Like dominoes, that affects the public’s ability to govern itself under the American system of democracy.

Optimally, the “New Media” will continue to evolve and grow, but, please, not at the expense of the “Old Media” and the principles under which it operated. A combination of the two could be a powerful force.

How that comes into play might require one of those wisdom-of-Solomon decisions or the creation of a new business model. It could possibly lead to an even better “Golden Age of Journalism.”

A few moons ago, there was an editorial cartoon about career counseling in *The Wall Street Journal* that featured this caption: “Mr. and Mrs. Nelson, your son is vicious, mean-spirited, disloyal, and has a tendency to spread rumors. I suggest a career in journalism.”

No doubt, Mr. de Klerk would agree that those credentials describe a typical reporter. Maybe even Thomas Jefferson would as well, since he received his share of vilification in the journals of his day. Yet he had the perspective to write this in 1787:

“The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right. And were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate to choose the latter.”

The American people need a bit of that Jeffersonian wisdom these days.

