

Saving News and Saving Newspaper in the Digital Era: The Role of Investigative Reporting in Sustaining Print Industry and Democratic Traditions

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Abstract

The paper provides a rationale for the need of saving print papers' industry as an essential instrument for sustaining democratic regime. The presented evidence support the idea of print press as more inclusive than its digital counterpart and therefore more effective in maintaining political participation of all members of the society. The paper also argues that the Internet cannot become an equal changeover of traditional papers: Unlike print editions, digital media cannot be viewed as guardians of the news meant not as a commodity but a means of informing and educating. Since print journalism is first of all associated with an investigative reporting, or the most important instrument to keep the ruling elites accountable to the public, newspaper is also an indispensable part of the educated and thus active citizenship.

Why Print Press Still Matters in the 21st Century

In the recent years, the premature obituaries to the print press have become as a common phenomenon as the newspapers' editors' mantras that "We will survive" despite the dramatic decline of the traditional media readership (Jarviz, 2008; Hirshorn, 2009). The most popular reason of the demise is commonly known too: Why to pay for the newspaper content if it can be accessed for free on its website? Readers choose the Internet information variety rather than traditional papers' stories that you need to pay for. Therefore, the proponents of the total digitalization rushed to declare that the modern high-tech society could survive without the paper newspaper (Poniewozik, 2009). But can the same be said about democratic community? Do the Internet media always take the burden of social responsibility, the role that was traditionally ascribed to print papers? It is also doubtful that once the latter will become the museum artifacts, the digital media will be equally capable to carry out the watchdog mission.

This writing will present a rationale for the need of saving print papers as an essential instrument for sustaining democratic regime. I shall offer evidence for the model of print press as more inclusive than its digital counterpart. Therefore the Internet media cannot be viewed as an equal changeover of traditional papers. I shall also argue that the print paper journalism is the guardian of the news meant not as a commodity but a means of informing and educating (Altschull, 1996; Ettema and Glasser, 1998; Overholster, 2000). I shall provide support to the idea about print paper journalism that is first of all associated with an investigative reporting, or the most important instrument to keep the ruling elites accountable to the public (Schultz, 1988; Curran, 2000).

The paper will be organized as follows: I first examine other reasons, besides the growing role of the Internet as the information provider, which led to the traumatic change in the print

media industry. Following this, I shall elaborate on the arguments about print journalism as the indispensable part of the educated and therefore active citizenship. Then I will illustrate how high quality journalism can sustain the financial well being of print papers even in the current period of economic decline.

To Read or Not to Read – That Was the Question of An Advertisement Versus a Newspaper Story. The Case Study of Ukrainian Daily The Young Bukovynian

It was not an overnight process that the troubled waters of the newspaperdom have suddenly flooded the media industry (Sarno, 2009). This problem is also not limited only to the U.S. borders and the time framework of the 2000s. I shall use an example of once thriving Ukrainian independent daily *The Young Bukovynian*, whose then pessimistic story in the end of the 1990s is surprisingly similar to the current mournful weekdays of the Michigan and many other U.S. print papers.

The Young Bukovynian is headquartered in Chernivtsi, the capital of Bukovyna, the Western region of my native country of Ukraine. I used to work in this paper as a political journalist for more than a decade. I have witnessed how the daily successfully survived through the economically turbulent first years of Ukrainian state independence and the following epoch of the infamous president Leonid Kuchma. Kuchma's devastating policies against the press freedom have secured him a place in the list of the *Enemies of the Press* between 1997 and 2004, according to the data of the *Committee to Protect Journalists* (<http://cpj.org/reports/2001/05/enemies-01.php>). Yet within almost two decades – between 1986 and 2001 – *The Young Bukovynian* was the flagship among regional media. The daily enjoyed the circulation of 55 000 copies; this figure made jealous the editors of some mainstream Ukrainian papers. The key for the success was the daily's policy of pulling together the community and its sharp opposition towards the corrupted political figures in the region. The former was achieved by means of the in-depth coverage of the local topics and events. The latter was sustained by the investigative reporting.

I shall provide only a few examples: *The Young Bukovynian's* disclosing story about Yuri Dutko, the vice-mayor of Chernivtsi, resulted in the jail sentence for him in fall 1996. The series of revealing articles about the local leader of the Communist party Volodymyr Dovgeshko caused the failure of his candidacy during two consecutive parliamentary campaigns of 1995 and 1999. Not surprisingly, the paper's journalists were recognized as the winners of the readers' ratings and were the frequent guests of the local TV talk shows. In their own way, Bukovynian officials acknowledged the daily's high standard journalism too: The authorities were notorious in bringing actions against the reporters. Between 1994 and 2001, *The Young Bukovynian's* journalists were brought to courts nineteen times; the paper won most of the cases.

The situation changed radically around spring 1999. The paper's management decided to increase the daily's revenues by giving more pages to advertisement and soft news coverage as "the most desired eye-catchers" – according to the management. This was done at the expense of cutting off the journalists' stories. The daily's political course was gradually transformed as well through accepting more loyal approach towards those in power. First, the

paper silenced their wrongdoings; then, to the dismay of readers, it began publishing laudatory articles about the leaders. Certain stories were not run because their heroes, the owners of big businesses in Chernivtsi, might quit advertising. Investigation disappeared as a genre from *The Young Bukovynian*. Instead, the gossip stories about celebrities that were taken from the Internet dominated the daily's pages. The local topics were not seen as a priority any more. With a reduction of need in the qualified journalism, within 2000-2003 the top staff writers of the daily were ousted from the paper. All of them landed in better-paid positions in other Ukrainian media.

As for the paper, for the brief period of time it enjoyed gathering the advertisement revenues crop. The money was spent for the purchase of an expensive printing-house and a brand-new car for the chief editor. However, it soon appeared that readers were not interested in ads and chitchats only. The daily's circulation dropped to 10 000 copies in 2003, while its reputation of the independent newspaper was gone for good. Coupled with the unstable Ukrainian economy, this decrease of readership meant that *The Young Bukovynian* had to adjust to the new reality of barely making its ends meet. Today the daily does not differ from hundreds of other Ukrainian tabloids that get their almost twins-like contents from the Internet and share one more commonality of loyal attitude towards authorities.

It is worth mentioning that *The Young Bukovynian* has a Web-version too; three bloggers contribute to it. As it can be seen at the newspaper's website (www.molbuk.com), the last time these blogs were updated in October 2009; each got four or five readers' comments. Not an impressive figure for the region populated with almost a million people.

In Print We Trust: Why the Internet Cannot Substitute the Newspaper Journalism

The example above, though taken from the reality of the developing country, illustrates the universal axiom that "public interest should be put ahead of the maximization of profit" (Altschull, 1996, p.166) in the media industry. Once a guiding principle of journalism (Graber, 1986; Hagun, 1992; Graber, 1997), the priority of news as a nonprofit public service was not a must for many American papers within the last decade (Graber, 1986). Therefore, it is not solely the Internet to blame for the downfall of print media; rather, in the time of crisis the pain of demise became more acute. While tightening their belts, the readers did not agree to pay for pages soaked with advertisement and rarely diluted with information on public issues. Not unexpectedly, the papers lost their role of mediators between community and ruling elites (Bennet and Serrin, 2005), and the public was not allowed to play its role in the news decision-making process (Graber, 1986; Altschull, 1996; Kumar, 2005). Yet this does not mean that print papers deserve their funeral accompanied by cheers to the Internet. No matter how bad newspaper is, with its death the investigative journalism will die too (Alterman, 2008).

With all the respect to the on-line journalists and bloggers, the genres of their writings are represented mainly by opinion and column but not by an investigation, which is the core of reporting. One will have to spend a long time to find an in-depth interview or the well-researched story on *Yahoo!*, *America Online*, or even *Huffington Post*. Most probably, s/he will find a little or nothing, since investigation does not seem to be compatible with the

Internet journalism. By the latter I mean first of all bloggs and websites, but not the Web-versions of print papers.

Investigation is time-consuming. It may take weeks for searching and checking facts, while the Internet cherishes the real-time streaming data. What happened just yesterday, does not have any value today. This also explains why the Internet websites usually do not hire journalists and prefer subscriptions to the news agencies' products, like *Reuter's* or *Associated Press*.

In blogosphere, or yet another area of the on-line journalism, it is a very rare case that an author of the text goes to the site, observes events and details, talks with the source(s) of information, or, in other words, does the routine of the journalist's job. On the contrary, the blog is a reflection on what is already reported by others. The blog can add to the information the weight of the blog author's interpretation, yet it has nothing in common with the news as a result of original reporting.

Eventually, the existing culture of the Internet media does not embrace the idea of investigative writing sustained by the vast networks of information-gathering staff journalists and rich databases. The newspapers are experts in keeping the mentioned structure working, unlike TV or the Internet (Gates, 2002). Therefore, the newspaper's investigation is also an expensive business: One does need financial resources to publish a story that exposes corruption of those on the top of political ladder.

Alternatively, the Internet does not offer a model, which enables full-time reporters and editors to perform their watchdog role. It is hard to imagine a blogger dedicating his/her time and may be even putting at risk his/her well-being and safety for the sake of the investigation that will be never paid. After all, who pays bloggers? Blogs cannot replace newspapers in their job of maintaining public control over government. As it was already said, this is costly. Even so, society would have to pay incomparably higher price if newspapers die. Since there is nobody to keep an eye on officials, the system of checks and balances on politics will be lost as well; the democracy's days will be counted (Graber, 1997; Bertrand, 2000; Hallin and Giles, 2005).

In the same way, the Internet journalism cannot perform the gate-keeping role, or emphasizing more important issues over less significant, as effectively as the print media do. We need to recognize that what we often read on the website, is not always a news. When on February 27, 2010, *America Online* (www.aol.com) posted the story featuring how the US figure skaters used the latest beauty products during Olympics⁴⁰, this text certainly could not qualify as a news, if we mean the information's impact on the society. The mentioned story opened the website. Along with it, the website's visitor could also read about the earthquake in Chile, Barack Obama's health-care plans, and learn that major sponsors dropped Tiger Woods. Clearly, the huge mosaic of diverse information together with provided links to other

⁴⁰ (<http://www.stylelist.com/2010/02/25/olympic-figure-skating-teams-beauty-secrets-from-the-ladies->

[a/?icid=main|main|dl3|link1|http%3A%2F%2Fwww.stylelist.com%2F2010%2F02%2F25%2Folympic-figure-skating-teams-beauty-secrets-from-the-ladies-a%2F](http://www.stylelist.com/2010/02/25/olympic-figure-skating-teams-beauty-secrets-from-the-ladies-a%2F))

sources of information is an advantage of *dotcom* media; diversity allows users a better choice. Yet one also has to admit that only educated user is capable of making this choice.

As an “institution, whose mission is to gather, distill, and present a world of information to its readers” (Sarno, 2009), newspaper establishes the hierarchy of news priorities. It traditionally features major socio-political themes on the front pages, while the back pages are reserved for sport and celebrities’ life. The Internet approach is different. Literally everything is on the front page; from casualties in Afghanistan to fashion footage. Everything can be perceived as the top news; unlike the newspaper’s, this type of format does not motivate the user to distinguish between more salient issues and those less significant. One will not be attracted to the news about Obama’s health-care plans in the same way as s/he will be pulled towards an eye-pleasing picture of the figure skater that uses a new brand of lipstick; particularly, if the web page opens with a narrative about the lipstick but not a story on the health-care.

While using the Internet, the reader gets a benefit of his/her own individual content, dissimilar to traditional papers with their bundled content (Dou, 2004). However, the latter seems to be more affiliated with an educational and informative function of media, while the former offers more brain relaxation instead. A very few websites make a clear division between entertainment and a real breaking news while posting their opening stories. Even fewer of them feel an obligation to keep a balance between coverage of soft news and socially important issues.

Finally, the discussion on print versus the Internet is also about generational and digital divide. By the former I mean not only the established habit of the senior people to enjoy a morning coffee accompanied by reading a favorite newspaper versus the fast pace surfing on the websites loved by those of forty and younger. Rather, the concern is about older age groups who may not have access or skills to use the online resources. More over, if one is not trained information professional, s/he can get lost or confused on the Internet with its enormous variety of sources, since “With all its competing types of chaos, the Web is ill-suited to provide the peace and quiet that deeper reading requires” (<http://latimesblog.latimes.com/technology/2009/03/if-we-cant-save.html>), according to David Sarno, the staff writer and the blogger for *Los Angeles Times*. However, getting lost in information jungles can never happen while using more convenient newspaper format.

With a disappearance of newspapers, the news outlets will be limited for older generation. These people will also be automatically excluded from the information space that was a part of their lives. For the reason of this exclusion, their contribution to the collective decision-making, one of the basics of free society, will be significantly impeded as well.

The digital divide, coupled with the loss of newspapers, may have a similar effect. In the U.S., 40 percent of Americans do not have access to the high-speed Internet (Tessler, 2010). Of course, not all of those 40 percent reach for newspapers as the primary source of information. Yet for people who live in the remote areas, small local papers often are the most important sources, and their role in sustaining community is critical (Graber, 1997): These papers care about carrying the local news more in depth than any other outlet (Oliver

and Myers, 1999). Not the Internet, but the local press creates possibilities for political discussion and provides citizens with direct access to government (Mondak, 1995).

On the contrary, when the local paper shuts down, political discourse loses its component of public participation as well: As it happened after the closure of *The Cincinnati Post* in December 2007. The local politics became less competitive along the dimensions of incumbent advantage, voter turnout, and the number of candidates for the office (Moore, 2009). It can be easily predicted that with closing more newspapers today, the society will count more casualties in terms of its democratic institutions tomorrow.

Was Report of Newspapers' Death an Exaggeration?

Judging from the heated discussions on the Internet forums among media professionals, media readers, both opponents and proponents of saving newspapers, or those advocating the Internet as the principal and only source of information, one can notice that a definite thought still dominates: Newspapers are dying. This is an end of an element of daily habits, as well as of part of the democratic culture. But is the newspapers' death imminent?

Yet even in the era of the papers' demise, there are successful cases that give hope for the future of the print industry. The story of London *The Daily Telegraph* is particularly remarkable. In 2005, the *Telegraph's* reporter Ben Leapman filed a Freedom of Information Act request asking to see the expenses of six members of British Parliament (Carter, 2009). He was denied a number of times, yet after the request was finally satisfied in spring 2009, the biggest investigation in the daily's 154-year history also appeared to be its biggest business success. Forty-five staff members and numerous lawyers spent two months checking a long list of the alleged expense sprees by *all* the members of the Parliament. In short, the serious sums of taxpayers' money were used for the private needs of politicians. After the series of publication was released, the Speaker of the House of Commons had to step down; it was for the first time in three centuries that the person in his position had to do so.

In the meantime, though *The Daily Telegraph* released the story on its website, sales of the print edition exploded. The paper was sold out on the day of the story broke in print. Since then, the daily sold extra 600 000 copies and once again proved that print paper was a cradle of quality journalism.

No matter how trite it sounds, the high standard reporting also remains to be the only solid background for the survival of the newspaper industry and reviving the idea of press as the fourth estate. One can understand, that the reports about the newspapers' death in the digital era were pronounced ahead of time, since even the most advanced technology has not created yet a mechanism of keeping leaders accountable. Nevertheless, newspapers have already done this many years ago and still continue to do so through the ways of investigation.

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