

Forum Essay 3

Is the News About Journalism and Journalism Education Good or Bad?

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I've been teaching Journalism, mostly at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, for the past 28 years. I teach courses in journalism history, freedom of the press, literary journalism, and news writing. And I was department chair for 12 years. So I've learned that unlearning traditional approaches can be a fun thing. Lurking at the edges of this subject, however, is a slightly different question—"Is the news about journalism and journalism education good or bad?"

For newspeople, who thrive on chaos and disaster, you'd think this would be a great time. After years of complaining about chain ownership, some of the chains are breaking up. After years of one-newspaper towns, competition is increasing. Yet news people aren't happy.

The attitude of a lot of older newspeople on a listserv that I subscribe to might be similar to a quote in the Aug. 3, 2006 *USA Today* [p. D1] about a new Bruce Willis *Die Hard* movie: "Our villain is high-tech, but the way [John] McClane deals with him is low-tech," [filmmaker Len] Wiseman says. "A fistfight still solves a lot of problems."

Newspapers and broadcast news are losing audience to the Internet.

- Advertising is migrating to Craig's List, Google, and Yahoo, who do not yet see their jobs as originating news.
- The Pew Center and others document that newspapers are failing to attract or retain younger readers. Daily circulation is stagnant or declining.
- Thousands fewer traditional reporters are working news beats in the United States than 20 years ago. *The New York Times*, *L. A. Times*, and *Boston Globe*, among others, have laid-off substantial numbers of reporters and staff.
- Daily unique visitors to *The New York Times* on the Web is now double its daily sales in print.
- A Pew survey said one-third of all Americans under 40 consider the Internet their main news source.

Fewer stories are devoted to politics and public policy. Our ability to focus on driving social issues—inclusiveness, diversity, accountability, participatory democracy, and community—is in doubt.

So I've decided this is the most exciting time to be in the media since about 1700, and the most interesting time to be in media education in my lifetime. I mention the early 1700s because a cultural shift was happening then after the expiration of the Printing Act. Newspapers popped up in London. The real question in England and later in colonial America—and today with blogs—is who can say what ... to whom ... and with what effect?

Newspapers were a conversation tool in the 1700s with perhaps 20 readers per copy in taverns, coffeehouses, and rooming houses among people who were seeking a spot in the middle classes. As this new class of people gathered information about the world, they were breaking the aristocratic monopoly on information about the affairs of the state. In short, newspapers and pamphlets helped to create the “public sphere” where the public could think about political affairs and debate them, and presumably influence them. From the beginning, the newspaper and the public sphere—as opposed to the private sphere of the ruling class—were agents of democracy, and generally despised by the aristocrats who held power.

My comparison to the Internet journalism of today involves this concept of the public sphere. In today's world, the expensive corporate media empire can be compared to the aristocracy of the 1700s. Debate in the public sphere has been restricted somewhat to what we hear in the media from traditional sources—those with education, connections, or political clout. Increasingly, people are unhappy with that. Dan Okrent, the former public editor at the *Times*, says bias, questions about accuracy, and arrogance top the issues in the public mind when it comes to traditional media.

Internet news and blogs have upset that environment. They are the cheap conversation tools of this century. The range of public participation in debate has expanded dramatically to the point where some traditional newspapers may be threatened financially. Dan Gillmor and Jay Rosen have used the term “the people formerly known as the audience” as a way of indicating that those people are now also news producers. They are no longer just on the receiving end of an information pipeline. This is what Laurence Lessig called the “read-write culture” in his keynote address last night. A lot of people in the media despise blogs, as aristocrats despised the upstart newspapers, because blogs break their monopoly of information.

Some recent news items:

- About 8% of Americans write blogs (12 million?) and nearly 40% read them, according to a recent Pew study. Mostly they do it for self-expression, but the study also said bloggers are avid consumers of online news and information.
- During the recent shelling and warfare between Lebanon and Israel—even though Israelis aren't allowed in Lebanon and there are no phone connections—bloggers in both countries were talking across the front lines to each other. That literally cuts across lines of control.

- Last Saturday's *Wall Street Journal* in an article on the moguls of new media said, "As videos, blogs and Web pages created by amateurs remake the entertainment landscape, unknown directors, writers and producers are being catapulted into positions of enormous influence." I can imagine them asking, "How do we do lunch with these people?" (*Wall Street Journal*, July 29-30, 2006, p. P1)
- According to *The New Yorker*, Wikipedia receives as many as 14,000 hits per second. Yes, the *Britannica* should be worried.

What's wrong with this?

At a recent UMass conference on the future of journalism, the most frequent complaint I heard was about the public's use of Internet news. Critics said the public tunes in only to that which they already know or agree with. I compare this experience to the invention of the television remote control, which broke down the control of the networks over viewers, and allowed us to watch what we wanted. The same recent Pew study said that people who read blogs discover new stuff all the time on the Web, thus perhaps proving this fear incorrect. Even if you're being highly selective, you won't get Jon Stewart's jokes unless you know the news.

What have I learned or unlearned as a journalism professor?

- 1) Perhaps we're seeing a cultural or paradigm shift, of sorts. David Abrahamson called 2004 "the Year of the Blog" but things have developed even more rapidly since then. Right now we're training students for dramatically different careers, perhaps involving the same standards but perhaps not. Traditions are changing. Students graduate into an unpredictable and uncontrollable environment. It's chaos.
- 2) Not everyone agrees with my evaluation of education or of the Web. I was talking about this issue some months ago with Andie Tucker's Dean, Nick Lemann, who said, "Not everyone would agree with you." Exactly! Debate and uncertainty are everywhere, and it is exactly such uncertainty that creates a market for our services as scholars and professors. That's great.
- 3) I think more of our students will actually become journalists. We've been educating far more than were needed for an "aristocratic" industry. Today our students enter a world where every person can be a journalist. As Nick Lemann says, perhaps satirically, in this week's *New Yorker*, which I read on the Web, "If you add everyone abroad, and everyone who practices other forms of Web journalism, the profession must have increased in size a thousandfold over the last decade."
- 4) I'm not one who believes that Internet news will completely change traditional news—in fact, I'm working hard in something called The Media Giraffe Project to get both sides in the same room to discuss their points of common interest. Internet journalism has yet to completely prove its value and to make money ... while attacks on traditional media

- 5) are frequently misplaced. For example, at that UMass conference, a blogger said the mainstream media should have done a better job examining the Florida voting that elected George W. Bush. Marty Baron, editor of the *Boston Globe* and one of the panelists, replied that he was at that time the editor of the *Miami Herald* and they spent \$800,000 recounting the votes. Did any citizen journalists have the resources to do that, he asked? But I do believe there has been an opening up in the media and in the public sphere as a result of the Internet, a small but important point.
- 6) The transformation we are seeing is not confined to the world of newspapers. The same wave is sweeping over the world of universities. Perhaps only 10% of us have taught a course online. As professors we may be in the same situation as newspaper were in about 1997. We see the University of Phoenix on the horizon but we don't yet recognize it as a disruptive innovation that may change our working lives.

If our students are riding the wave of a paradigm shift, what could be more *exciting* and *terrifying* than that?