

Future of Journalism

Gaurav Sood

Stanford University

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There was a time when each medium produced its own kind of journalism - television journalism, newspaper journalism, and radio journalism. Future, we are told, doesn't care for such distinctions. So while in future we may be able to talk about 'journalism', without a qualifier bolted in front, for now, discussing the future of each of the varieties may be more appropriate, especially since prognosis for each variety is different.

Making forecasts about various forms of 'journalism' has of late reduced to extending the trend line from recent past well into the future. Such exertions typically produce the following forecast - Newspapers are dead or dying. Both network newscasts, and cable news channels, are shedding audiences, and will continue to do so. Radio is generally ignored.

We even know the exact causes of all of this harakiri -

1. Economics: Of the three ways through which journalism was typically supported - a) revenue from other programs, sections; b) selling print ads (especially classifieds); c) subscription - C is no longer in vogue as there is plenty of good free content, B was thrown under the bus by Craigslist, and public media corporations are less likely to support loss-making endeavors than say private media magnets like the Grahams.

2. One-step flow: People can directly get 'news' from elite actors (political and Hollywood). PR, which was always a critical ingredient of most stories, may systematically replace hacks who paraphrase what the PR people tell them.

3. Information overload: People are more likely to read things that are succinctly

written¹, especially when they are on topics that are of little interest to them.

A sliver of more honesty, and effort, applied to the same task of extrapolation will lead us a little differently - Some types of journalism (entertainment, etc), and some styles of journalism (Fox) are still making money. More such journalism will follow. Internet allows media companies to track user preferences very closely. Media companies will learn those preferences (celebrity, sex, travel, food, fashion, etc.) and deliver those. Internet's second great bequest, social networking, can be exploited for increasing readership, and monetization of advertisements. Such innovations will be exploited. User generated content (a genus of free content) abounds, is popular, and free. Media companies will increasingly use it.

Bluntly, if the typical prognosis is that the news is dead, the slightly more honest extrapolation yields that- yes, the news will die, and then enjoy an afterlife pulling successful tricks at the intersection of Hollywood, and George Washington. This seems probable.

Tailoring individual company strategy to general extrapolations will still involve some careful thinking. For example, following reader's preferences may just mean an accelerated race to the denominator, and that race has already been won by people who specialize in just serving the lowest common denominator, and keeping it lower than everyone else (TMZ?). And while there may still be room at the bottom, it may not be in peddling celebrity sleaze. And of course, one may not want to do that for brand issues. So one may want to do 36 hours in Madrid instead.

Not all conjecture about journalism has been limited to extrapolation. Some have used the upheaval in technology to be inventive. Inventiveness doesn't mean plausibility, in fact it generally means the opposite of that - and it does so here. For example, it has been suggested that future of news is hyper local. Future of news isn't hyper-local. Once people may have been interested in their communities, and some still are, but future of news is few big stars, more of the time.

Similarly it has been forecast that mass media will yield to personal media. It is true,

¹The Atlantic

but it isn't exactly what it is interpreted to be. The 'Daily me', which will soon replace the broadcast era, has been confused with the idea that everyone wants something different. Not quite. They all want Snookie. Plus, the world hasn't changed. There is still largely a small sliver of people, largely collocated, that produce majority of the entertainment that people want to consume, and only a few people that other people want to know about. Similarly, there are still essentially two political parties in US, still the same political system. There may be some expected fractionalization of audience due to partisan preferences, not seen in entertainment, but nothing far more grievous than that. One only has to look at all cable channels, all local news channels, carrying exactly the same drivel, at exactly the same time, to be convinced of the fact that the game is essentially limited.

Posing the question anew

Newsrooms all across the nation are cutting staff, and newspapers are shuttering doors. It turns out that you don't need people to dig information when you pay people to make up information, and when this all is profitable because the most lucrative news programs is now the 'views' programs. Driven by this, and more, serious journalists are either with jobs and anxious, or without their regular jobs and already on to either of the following three trades - writing books, teaching, or opinionating; they are also eagerly crowding universities and Congress to offer their views on the 'crisis of journalism'.

The feeling is that the journalists never produced anything worthwhile. That over the years when they were kings with stupendous resources, and staff, they never set a particularly high, or a consistent standard. By all accounts, their only crowning glory was Watergate, and the rest pales so far into comparison to almost be pointless. They were late, wrong, in cahoots with the elites, or never covered, many other critical topics, for e.g. Iraq, and early days of Vietnam.

Assuming that serious journalists provide a public service, the story runs like this: Serious journalism requires money. It also requires institutions that nurture journalists, allow for generational knowledge to be transferred, which is important in a learn-by-doing

field that generally requires apprenticeship, support investigation of important issues, etc. Serious journalism was always short on consumers, but it appears that even the feeble horde is declining, or in any event not interested in paying for the privilege. Compare this situation to celebrity, sports, business, travel journalism, since all these have been deigned 'journalism', whose audiences have only multiplied. Anyways, what is threatened is watch-dog journalism, coverage of local affairs, journalism that holds government officials accountable to the legal and moral standards of public service and keeps business and professional leaders accountable to standards of fairness, and integrity.

So what can be done. Various alternatives have been proposed including -

- Tax supported journalism. Think PBS, or better yet, BBC.
- Non-profit supported journalism
- Newspapers becoming non-profits (Charge for a lucrative section of the site, etc.)
- Kindle method: what Ipod did for mp3, Kindle may do for newspapers
- Exploit social networks to increase readership of stories. Use user-generated data

wisely to ensnare people.

- Crowd funded journalism - can be issue based, or can support organizations, in which case it will be interest group (interests may be broad or small) based journalism, or charity based journalism.

- Entrepreneurial journalism

- Plenty of people willing to contribute for free. Some reasonably good. Citizen journalists, weekend journalists. Scholars are open to providing services. (So are scoundrels. Scoundrels are winning.)

- Newspapers spent a lot of money. A fair bit of it unnecessary. Significant cost savings can be achieved without compromising quality.

- Cost cutting in terms of eliminating highly paid opinion columnists (Krauthammer, etc.), travel, dining journalism may be one way to go. Expanding them to fund news, may be another way. Reputation is squished somewhere inbetween, and balance will be different for each organization.

- Expertise still sells and will probably become more important. Think about Robert Peston in UK

Prognosis for the public good The wider question however is about the public good. There it seems the critical limitation is demand. Supply side situation isn't as dire as it generally made out to be. In some cases, it may even be improving. Here are a few items to think about:

- Scholars, prominent intellectuals, can disseminate information
- Once upon a time people could read news about another country only through foreign correspondents - not quite true today. Lot of world is available to you.
- Washington Post digital is read by far more people than circulation in print.
- New sites to track government spending, congressional votes, and generally increasing access to vital data etc. And Wikipedia anyone?