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New Media Effects on Traditional News Sources: A Review of the State of American Newspapers

The internet is eating up newspapers. The New Media are having dramatic effects on all parts of American culture and on all types of Old Media, but newspapers seem to be suffering the most. Basically, the internet is taking away newspaper readers, lowering the value of information, and destroying the newspaper's traditional revenue source. The future looks rather grim if you are a newspaper editor, reporter, or reader.

Dave Barry, a respected long-time reporter for the *Washington Post*, stated the situation rather succinctly in a recent article which summarized major trends in 2009, saying, "The downward spiral of the newspaper industry continued, resulting in the firing of thousands of experienced reporters and an apparently permanent deterioration in the quality of American journalism." Referring to the technological trend that is at least partially responsible for the deterioration of American newspapers, he notes that more people are tweeting.

It was way back in 2000 that the number of U.S. households subscribing to internet access outnumbered those subscribing to daily newspapers (Dimitrova and Nezanski, 249). Since then news audience behaviors have changed dramatically. The number of Integrators, those who get their news from a variety of sources, and Net-Users, those who get their news primarily from the internet, have increased, comprising at least 40% of the American news audience ("Key News Audiences"). For those under 30 years of age, a full 64% get most of their national and international news from the internet ("Press Accuracy"). Peter Johnson reports that now "everyone is consuming their own kind of mix of media . . . [so that] most news consumers now get their news from four different types of media in a typical week," referring to a mix of broadcast TV, cable and satellite, radio, newspapers, and the internet. A 2009 Pew Center for the People and

the Press research study concludes that “audiences now consume news in new ways. They hunt and gather what they want when they want it, use search to comb among destinations and share what they find through a growing network of social media” (“The State of the News Media 2009”). It is difficult for traditional, hand-held newspapers to fit into this kind of consumption mix.

The result is a decrease in the scope and quality of newspaper reporting. Home town newspapers now focus more and more on local news, so that national and especially international news is disappearing from their pages. Another Pew study, “The Changing Newsroom: Gains and Losses in Today’s Papers,” explains that the typical paper contains fewer pages, shorter stories, less national and international news, and fewer articles about science, the arts, business or features. Recent studies show that local news has become the strong suit for newspapers. While television remains the main news source for all age groups and all types of news (national, international, and local), newspapers are a close second when it comes to local news, outstripping the internet: 64% get local news from TV, 41% from newspapers, and only 17% from the internet (“Press Accuracy”).

Trust is another area where newspapers, and TV, have an advantage over the internet. In fact, the internet rates lowest among American news audiences when it comes to issues of believability, accuracy, and validity. However, for the media as a whole, the picture is not good. “The public [has] a deep skepticism about what they see, hear and read in the media. No major news outlet—broadcast or cable, print or online—stood out as particularly credible”. On the whole, Americans think that “the news media are politically biased, that stories are often inaccurate, and that Journalists do not care about the people they report on.” Only about a quarter rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as high or very high (“The State of the News Media 2009”).

Yet most Americans rate traditional local news sources, local TV news, daily newspapers, and network television, as largely credible and trustworthy. The Pew center reports that 65% rated their daily newspaper as believable, while internet news sources rated only 13% and as low as 4 % (“The State of the News Media 2009”).

One of the biggest effects of the internet on the journalism industry is especially disturbing. It relates to the amount of information available and the way it is presented online. A study by the Associated Press, reported in the Columbia Journalism Review, shows that the information age produces far more information than people can manage or absorb. And it is presented in “a flood of unrelated snippets.” Internet sites contain many distractions, and they tend to compete for attention rather than for quality reporting. This atmosphere creates “news fatigue” and a “learned help-

lessness” where users show a tendency to passively receive news, rather than actively seek it. The result is that “the massive increase in information production and the negligible cost of distributing and storing information online have caused it to lose value.” And the problem is that the lowering of the desire to obtain news can spread to other outlets as well. The AP study concludes that “in order to preserve their vital public-service function—not to mention to survive—news organizations need to reevaluate their role in the information landscape and reinvent themselves to better serve their consumers. They need to raise the value of the information they present . . .” (Nordenson).

With all the changes and complexities in the journalism industry, and the challenges of the information age, of which the internet is a primary element, the bottom line for the industry as a whole, and especially for newspapers, may just be the bottom line. Technological advances have made the gathering and distribution of information easier than ever, but have created “financial pressures [that] sap [industry] strength and threaten its very survival,” so that newspapers face “steadily deteriorating advertising revenues and rising production costs” (“The Changing Newsroom”). The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism concludes that “it is now all but settled that advertising revenue—the model that financed journalism for the last century—will be inadequate to do so in this one. Growing by one third annually just two years ago, online ad revenue to news websites now appears to be flattening; in newspapers it is declining.” In fact, traditional newspaper ad revenue has fallen 23% in the last two years (“The State of the News Media 2009”).

Classified advertising, once the bread and butter of local newspapers, has shrunk by 50%, taken over by web sites such as Craig’s List. Traditional shopping ads are increasingly made unnecessary by online shopping sites. Newspapers, therefore, are especially vulnerable to the decreasing revenue flow and the competition for customers. It is in a race to find new ways to underwrite online news offerings while using the declining revenue from traditional publication practices to finance the transition.

With the issue of trust on their side, traditional Old Media news outlets have managed to hold on to most of their audience so far, even Integrators who use both traditional and internet media sources. Online sites of mainstream Old Media news sources, such as newspapers and television networks, have far larger internet audiences than do New Media sites. But will Old Media outlets, especially newspapers, be able to survive? Or will they be eaten up by the attractive, non-stop flow of flashy information on the web? The final conclusion of the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism is: “The problem facing American journalism [and newspapers in particular] is not fundamentally an audience problem or a credibility

problem. It is a revenue problem—the decoupling . . . of advertising from news.” If newspapers can find a way to make money from online news offerings, or build alternative web-based revenue sources, they may stave off the technological mantis from eating them alive.

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