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Sustaining quality journalism

It is well past time to reject the artificial divide between the guardians of print journalism and the boosters of blogs, Internet news aggregators, and other new media. Rather than battling over whether bloggers are real journalists or whether newspapers need to be preserved, the fight should focus more on championing serious, quality journalism, no matter who produces it or where it is published.

Rigorous news-gathering plays a vital role in our society, especially in holding the largest and most important institutions accountable. It is easy to forget how afraid of centralized power the founders of this country were, and how the press was envisioned by them as a bulwark protecting the free flow of critical information about the powerful. No single form of news-gathering, single platform, or single news organization can by itself uphold this mission or supply all the intelligence, energy, and muscle needed to dig behind the most complex stories and cover them with the kind of depth that has elevated journalism's civic role over the last century.

There is a human need and desire for quality journalism. In the Age of Too Much Information, it seems absurd to

argue that the supply of quality news is running low, but it is. The most expensive forms of news-gathering, especially international coverage and investigative reporting, are suffering deep cuts in many of the country's newsrooms – which are themselves dwindling in number. While many promising, Internet-based news sites have sprung up over the past few years to help fill the gap, they have not kept pace with what has been lost.

Meanwhile, during a difficult digital transition, the business model for supplying quality journalism has come under severe stress, and an industry-wide rethinking is under way. Until now, the idea that news on the Web should be free has prevailed, and during years of expansive advertising, this ethos saw the flowering of thousands of different news sites and a healthy democratization of voices of authority. Journalism became more participatory and collaborative. “Content, like wild horses, wanted to be free,” wrote Richard Perez-Pena in *The New York Times* in December 2009, and consumers grew accustomed to a huge assortment of free news, photos, and videos.

But the severe economic downturn, accompanied by steep advertising cutbacks, has meant that new revenue sources are

needed to sustain quality journalism. It takes millions of dollars annually, to cite but one example, for the *Times* and the few other news organizations able and willing to commit the necessary resources to maintain fully staffed bureaus in Baghdad and Kabul for coverage of two international wars. Most major news organizations are now weighing whether to ask their online readers to pay for at least some of their content, as some newspapers already have. The *Times* recently announced it would institute a paid metered model on its website and some other digital platforms in 2011.

Many different versions of pay walls have been proposed, as well as partnerships among the major news-gatherers. While this may limit consumer choice and reduce the audiences for some paid sites, media companies that once assumed that advertising on the Web would continue to expand exponentially are faced with the cold reality that without shifting some of the cost burden to consumers, they may be forced into ever more drastic cuts or even face the prospect of shutting down. These challenges have been especially acute for the newspaper business.

Indeed, just as newspaper executives were trying to hang on and adapt to new realities, the economic crisis of late 2008 hit. For newspapers, disappointing third quarters were followed by murderous fourth quarters, with huge drops in advertising revenue as many sectors – especially help wanted, financial, and real estate – severely cut their ad budgets.

Alex S. Jones, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, provides a cogent history of these stormy times in his recently published book, *Losing the News*. He notes the constant drumbeat of bad news, including the shuttering of foreign and domes-

tic news bureaus. As testament to the rough times, he cites his own inbox crammed with email messages from newspaper journalists who have lost their jobs. In a particularly chilling example, Jones describes the excellent reporting done by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, which won a Pulitzer for its investigation into allegations of corruption surrounding former California Representative Randal “Duke” Cunningham. The paper’s Washington bureau, which did most of the reporting on that story, was closed during a round of cost-cutting, along with the Washington bureaus of many other newspapers.¹

Given that the news media were criticized for being too compliant during the Bush administration, it would seem a dangerous and inopportune moment to be cutting the collective investigative muscle of journalism in the nation’s capital. Indeed, without robust investigative reporting by *The Washington Post* on secret CIA prisons or *The New York Times’* revelations about warrantless eavesdropping by the NSA, readers might still be ignorant about such secret counterterrorism policies. Given the keen national interest in the Obama administration and in the administration’s approach to governing, news organizations should be beefing up, not diminishing, their coverage. Without aggressive, professional reporting, the public might not have known about the special deals buried within the health care reform legislation or how Wall Street is currently lobbying to water down new financial regulations.

The few cities that still had competing newspapers have seen the weaker ones fail: for example, the closing of the print editions of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and the *Rocky Mountain News*. Two major metropolitan newspapers, the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, have been teetering on the brink and

have endured extremely deep staff cuts. Other storied names, like the Tribune Company and Knight-Ridder, have filed for bankruptcy or gone out of business.

International reporting has also taken a terrible hit. In 2003, there were more than a thousand foreign journalists covering the war in Iraq. Today that number has dwindled to fewer than one hundred. Even in major and news-intense cities like Moscow, there are few U.S. journalists left, with the recent retreats of *The Baltimore Sun*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. *The Boston Globe*, a member of the *Times* family and a newspaper with a distinguished tradition of international reporting, was forced to close all of its foreign bureaus and eliminate the job of foreign editor. The *Times*' bureau chief in Cairo, Michael Slackman, said that when he was assigned there less than five years ago he had an array of print and broadcast competitors. Now he has just a single full-time American newspaper competitor: the *Los Angeles Times*. Full-time American correspondents are seldom seen in many other international capitals.

Large layoffs in newsrooms have become a daily reality. It was sobering to read the recent assessment offered by one of journalism's cheerleaders, Warren Buffett, who in his 2007 report to shareholders wrote: "When an industry's underlying economics are crumbling, talented management may slow the rate of decline. Eventually, though, eroding fundamentals will overwhelm managerial brilliance." Buffett took little comfort in the Internet as a remedy for the decline, noting, "The economic potential of a newspaper Internet site – given the many alternative sources of information and entertainment that are free and only a click away – is at best a small fraction of that existing in the past for a print newspaper facing no competi-

tion." Although Buffett reiterated his belief in the centrality of a free and vigorous press, even he conceded that if the news became an irreversible cash drain on his company, he might be forced to sell his beloved *Buffalo News*.²

At *The New York Times* there is a fierce determination to protect the core of our news-gathering, including the most robust international and investigative coverage. As part of a business strategy developed years ago, we have integrated our Web and print operations, overcoming a once ingrained internal culture that sprouted from the world of print. We have avoided some of the destructive rivalries between different platforms that have erupted at other news organizations. While the Web has added to the workload of many in our newsroom, it has also excited and broadened our staff, who have learned to tell stories in new ways. For our journalists based abroad, the Web has given an immediacy and greater impact to their work that goes beyond the satisfaction of seeing their articles in print.

For example, when the *Times* published a recent investigative series on Putin's Russia, the articles were translated into Russian simultaneously so that readers there could dissect the stories and post their comments, which were translated back into English on the *Times*' site. So the Web does, quite literally, democratize the news.

Quality journalism is produced on many platforms. I applaud the announcement that *The Huffington Post* will be underwriting original investigative reporting, perhaps giving work to journalists who have lost their jobs. ProPublica, a nonprofit established to produce the highest quality investigative journalism, is also doing important work. (I am a member of ProPublica's outside Board

of Advisors.) In the international arena, GlobalPost is supplying quality content by professional journalists, some of whom were laid off from traditional news companies, and is partnering with several of these same news organizations, including CBS News.

However, when millions of voices boom on the Web, there is also space for rumor, incorrect facts, and just plain nonsense. Amateur citizen-journalists sometimes do not have the skills and background to produce the most accurate journalism. Newspapers, with professional reporters and editors, still account for breaking the vast majority of important news stories, and some websites and bloggers are mainly drawing from news already published by newspapers. On some stories, especially those dealing with intelligence matters or complex business deals, it can take months for experienced reporters to convince sources to talk and for the reporters to obtain sensitive documents. They win the confidence of their sources because of their knowledge, the depth of their reporting, their courage, and their reputation. The work of *Times* correspondent and author Dexter Filkin in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, required years of training and experience.

Our challenge, then, is to find a business model that suits Web-based journalism while sustaining quality journalism. Advertising on the Web, even in more robust times, is still less profitable than advertising in print. Readers spend less time with the *Times* online than in print: on average, a visitor to the website spends about thirty-six minutes per month, just a little more than the typical print *Times* reader would spend per day. As a 2007 report by Harvard's Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

notes, "It is estimated that a newspaper has to attract two or three dozen online readers to make up for, in terms of lost advertising revenue, the defection of a single hard-copy reader."³

While some media analysts have argued that newspapers should ditch their expensive printing presses and elaborate distribution chains and go Web-only, it is hard to envision, especially in the current economy, how enough revenue would be generated to support a paper's large and highly experienced news-gathering staff.

Everywhere, the self-assured prophets of journalism are spouting their proclamations: readers will never pay for news on the Web; readers must pay for news on the Web. Journalism must find a way to generate more profits; journalism must become a nonprofit.

Anyone who claims to have a silver-bullet solution isn't playing straight. There isn't one answer that will save every news organization. The differences within the news industry, from small, hyperlocal newspapers and websites to national publications like *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, are too vast. Not every newspaper is going to make the transition across the digital divide.

There have been some serious proposals put forth that bear consideration, but almost all carry risks. As *The Economist* noted in August 2009:

It will not be easy. For ten years readers have been enjoying free news online, and the BBC, public-radio stations and commercial television news outlets like CNN will continue to supply it. A newspaper that tries to charge will jeopardize online advertising, which often accounts for 10 – 15% of revenues.⁴

One approach is to erect a pay wall around stories on the Web, while making an exception for print subscribers. With its business news focus, *The Wall Street Journal* has charged for online subscriptions for years, but its formula may not necessarily apply to other general-interest newspapers. Some publications have charged for a digital simulacrum of their print editions, which certain readers find easier to navigate than a newspaper website. (*The New York Times* offers the Times Reader.) The *Financial Times* keeps readers on a meter, charging those who look at more than a certain number of stories a month. Some, including former *Time* magazine editor Walter Isaacson, have proposed micropayments for individual articles or a menu of coverage. Smartphones, with customized news applications, are another possible source of paid revenue.

The best minds in journalism are mapping out new strategies to adjust their business models for producing quality journalism in the digital age. I am confident that in the next few years we will see experimentation and adjustments along the way.

Decades from now, the quality newspapers that remain may not be literally on paper. They may be on portable tablets or some other device we haven't yet envisioned. But journalism will continue to thrive. My optimism is based on the fact that there is a human craving for trustworthy information about the world we live in – information that is tested, investigated, sorted, checked again, analyzed, and presented in a cogent form.

Yet people don't crave just information. They seek judgment from someone they can trust, who can ferret out information, dig behind it, and make sense of it. They want analytic depth,

skepticism, context, and a presentation that honors their intelligence. They want stories that are elegantly told and compelling, with quality pictures and videos. And they want to be part of the conversation.

In print, the *Times* has developed a loyal audience of highly educated and informed readers who are passionate about their relationship with the newspaper and who have proved willing to pay handsomely for it. While Web news browsing and the habits of Internet readers are different, the digital audience also turns to trusted brands and reliable news filters. During the months leading to the 2008 election, for example, nytimes.com had an audience of more than 20 million unique visitors per month. These readers, of course, were also likely supplementing their journalism diet with other sources of political news. The process of creating an engaged and informed citizenry takes a variety of forms, none necessarily more perfect than the other.

Quality journalism plays an irreplaceable role in our society. It is time to move past all the shouting over which platform or which business model is best and to join in an urgent and collective effort to protect what matters most: quality journalism and the journalists who create it.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Alex S. Jones, *Losing the News: The Future of the News That Feeds Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xviii.
- ² *Ibid.*, 164.
- ³ *Creative Destruction: An Exploratory Look at News on the Internet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2007), 13.
- ⁴ *The Economist*, August 29, 2009, 56.