

TWILIGHT OR NEW DAWN OF JOURNALISM?

Evidence from the changing news ecosystem

Robert G. Picard

Introduction

The enormous business challenges confronting newspapers, news agencies, and other news providers have multiplied in the Western world in the twenty-first century. Mature and saturated markets, loss of audiences not highly interested in news, the diminishing effectiveness of the mass media businesses model, the lingering effects of the economic crisis, and the impact of digital competitors have all taken a toll on news organizations.

Compounding these factors are changes in technology and communication economics that are dismantling the traditional financial configurations that made Western media wealthy. Digitalization has destabilized business models—arrangements that were based on high market power over distribution platforms, mass audience, and mass advertisers. Simultaneously these changes have created opportunities for many more news, information, and commentary providers to emerge, and these afford access to content through multiple platforms. The combination of these factors has produced lower returns and resulted in redundancies and restructurings as it stripped wealth from the established enterprises of the news industry (Küng, Towse, and Picard 2008; Currah 2009; Levy and Nielsen 2010; Picard 2010).

Understanding of the conditions has been difficult because media and scholarly portrayals of the causes and solutions have been so poor. Much of the journalistic coverage of the news industry has been anecdotal, narrow, and inordinately concerned about journalistic employment rather than social effects and opportunities. News coverage of changes has been criticized as shallow and self-interested (Chyi, Lewis, and Zheng 2012). Scholarly work on the subject has been polemical, offered limited historical or comparative context, much less direct evidence of social effects from which to more fully comprehend the impact of the changes (Siles and Boczkowski 2012). Consequently, there is a widespread perception that legacy news providers are dying, that quality journalism is disappearing, and that we are witnessing the twilight of an age in which journalism informed and ensured democracy.

Many commentators cling to an idealized and illusory vision of journalism in days past and are now dancing in circles, beating their chests, and chanting that the end of journalism is nigh; but that does not make it so. Journalism scholars and critics, who used to bemoan the lapses in the press five years ago, lament the loss of those “golden” days. Corporate owners who were vilified for buying papers from independent owners three decades ago are suddenly lionized because private individuals—many with economic and

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political interests—have begun buying papers from the media corporations, especially in the United States. Time clearly changes perspectives.

Change is Producing Opportunities

Certainly things are changing. The unusually lucrative moment of the late twentieth century is over, but it was an anomaly not the norm in the history of news provision. The income from advertising that funnelled riches to news organizations and their investors—and provided journalists with comfortable, upper middle-class lives—has diminished. Its departure is lamented as much by journalists as capitalists, for much the same self-interested reasons.

The changing ecosystem does not mean that opportunities for quality journalism have disappeared, however—only that the opportunities are different and that we require new ways of providing it. Interestingly, while journalists and social critics continue their dances of mourning for the loss of news organizations' capabilities, there is growing optimism among news company executives and fresh forms of operation and funding are emerging. Consider these examples:

- *The New York Times* revenues from readers surpassed advertising in 2011 because of income from the rising numbers of digital subscribers, making readers pay higher prices for quality news, and the decline in advertising revenue. Despite challenges, it paid dividends to investors in 2013 for the first time in five years (BBC News 2013).
- *The Globe and Mail* in Canada has 300,000 print readers and now has 100,000 digital readers. It is one of the vast majority of newspapers in Canada now charging for digital news.
- *The Times* of London has about 400,000 print subscribers and now has about 130,000 digital subscribers paying between £104 and £312 annually.

Foundations are stepping in to providing funding for specific types of coverage and legacy media are benefiting:

- The *Los Angeles Times* received a \$1 million grant to bolster its coverage of immigration and ethnic communities (Rainey 2012).
- The *Miami Herald*, *Seattle Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Texas Tribune*, and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* received grants from Kaiser Health News to improve coverage of health-care issues (Young 2013).

Numerous digital journalistic start-ups and smaller news firms operating online are becoming sustainable enterprises:

- The digital-only investigative site Mediapart in France has acquired 62,000 subscribers, produces €6 million in revenue, and generated €700,000 in profits last year. Its work is of such quality that it has brought down ministers in the last two French governments (France 24 2013).
- *Arkansas Times*, a weekly alternative newspaper in the central United States, became the first alternative weekly to operate a daily online site funded by digital memberships. It now has 600 members paying enough to provide \$66,000 for the online operation (Millar 2013).
- The *St. Louis Beacon*, an online site now working in partnership with the local public radio, attracted 66,877 average unique monthly visitors in 2012, has 6400 Twitter followers, and produces a daily and weekly digital newsletter. It operates on a budget of

more than half a million dollars, with the bulk coming from individual donors (Knight Foundation 2013).

Such developments are not signs of an apocalypse in news provision, but of journalists and enterprises adjusting to new conditions, undertaking regeneration and renewal, and pursuing new opportunities.

Charitable/Not-for-profit Activity is Not Sufficient

Although some put great stock in charitable enterprises, not-for-profit operations, and foundation support to fund news provision in the future, they are no panacea for contemporary challenges. Not-for-profit and charitable news enterprises are just as beholden to economic imperatives as commercial news firms, so ignoring those factors places at peril any initiatives designed to overcome limitations of contemporary commercial news provision. New forms of news providers require start-up capital and working capital, all of which carry implications to their operation (Picard and van Weezel 2008); they incur costs that must be met with revenue; and they require reinvestment to sustain their operations (Picard 2011). These factors, along with lack of business acumen and conflicts of interest with new funders, often impede their effective operation (DeLorme and Fedler 2008; Naldi and Picard 2012).

These alternative forms of ownership and operation, however, do reduce demands for owners' profits, lower tax payments, and allow supporters to benefit from charity and tax laws (Levy and Picard 2011). They provide some advantages for smaller, community-based news providers and news organizations providing specialized coverage that is not itself commercially sustainable.

Many start-ups in recent years have gained foundation support because of their perceived importance to communities, but they will have to achieve growth in other revenue sources to sustain themselves over time. "Foundation support ... is primarily limited to start-ups and is unlikely to provide a long-term, sustainable revenue stream", Shaver (2010, 26) has observed. Consequently, it is only one of a growing range of revenue sources, including syndication, corporate sponsorships, events, and advertising services, that are helping finance born-digital journalism sites (Knight Foundation 2013).

Despite the increasing sustainability of online news providers, it appears that online news enterprises are not replacing traditional media. A review of scores of digital start-ups worldwide found they are "not challenging the legacy media, rather supplementing it by serving smaller niche audiences or finding a place in the media ecosystem as suppliers of niche content to bigger media outlets" (Sirkkunen and Cook 2012, 17).

A number of large well-established news organizations are being preserved under charitable and trust ownership forms, but these differ widely from most of the newer forms of charitable news organizations. Most of these were formed to handle succession issues when the companies were financially successful and obtaining approval for such structures under charity laws is difficult in many countries today (Levy and Picard 2011). Shaver has observed that "The traditional not-profit model represented by the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *St. Petersburg Times* and *The Guardian* are unlikely to provide a satisfactory alternative to the problems affecting for-profit newspapers" (Shaver 2010, 26).

Most existing, for-profit news organizations have no inclination to become charities at this point, however, because they are starting to reap financial benefit from the digital opportunities. Legacy news providers are moving from protective strategies in digital activities to opportunity-based strategies and are showing greater willingness to charge for

digital news because more users are evidencing willing to pay for access to digital content (*Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2013*). Canadian newspapers are leading the way in pay systems, with about 80 per cent charging for digital content, compared to about 40 per cent in the United States and about two-thirds in the United Kingdom (Toughill 2013).

What is the Transformation Doing to News?

All of these developments show news production is in a period of transformation and, like many previous transformations, the process is creating and emerging from turmoil. It should not be a reason for fear or dread about the future of journalism. Research has shown that technological and economic revolutions based on general-purpose technologies have profound economic benefits for society, even if they are harmful to existing companies and industry (Lipse, Carlaw, and Beker 2006) and that such technologies create instability only until new norms and practices of operation are established and accepted (Spar 2003). Why should we expect any difference in the transformation to digital media and news production?

The fundamental challenges that news production faces today are not monetary, but reflect the changing mode and structures of production. Although technology, recent economic conditions, and changes in audience preferences are all contributing to the transformation, a more consequential shift is altering the nature of news production and the actual work of journalists. These create changes in the institutional logics of organization and activity (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012) that need to be considered separately from the general performance trends of news enterprises.

For more than a century news has been produced within an industrial mode of production. Companies brought together the resources and equipment to gather, mass produce, and disseminate news, and they relied on trained and professionalized news workers to undertake the task. Although elements of that production mode remain in place, new modes are emerging and traditional news production is being split into a service production mode and a craft production mode.

The service mode is one in which news products (traditionally newspapers and broadcasts) are being transformed into services that firms stream across a variety of platforms (print, computer terminals, tablets, and smartphones, and other screen-based devices). The companies are becoming more focused on distribution rather than gathering and producing news. They are increasingly relying on news and commentary available through syndication, content provided by the public, and linkages to other news providers. The change to the service mode is altering the functions of news organizations, the actual work carried out within them, the types of skills they require, and their relations with journalistic labour.

Because of that shift, news service providers are relating to consumers differently than in the past and employing pricing models that differ from those of the original print and broadcast products. Many offer varying prices for access to different bundles of platforms and for different levels of access to premium and specialized news content. No longer is all content provided to all consumers at the same price. Assisting in this process are pay systems such as Press+ and Piano Media that are providing paid access to multiple news providers—a new form of service.

Concurrently, a craft mode of news production has emerged. Although this is a long-established form of production, it is novel to contemporary news production. In this mode,

news is produced by individual entrepreneurial journalists and small-scale journalistic cooperatives that emphasize the uniqueness and quality of their news. Journalists working in this craft mode are focusing on special topics such as climate or defence, employing specialized techniques such as investigative or data journalism, or serving smaller localities as general news providers. Most are providing news directly to consumers, but some provide their materials to companies that practise the service mode of news provision. These journalists act as suppliers and partners in a business relationship that is very different from that of freelance journalists in the twentieth century.

Both of these new production modes have important implications for how journalists work, the resources available to them, how they organize their careers, compensation, insurance, and pensions, and how they construct their professional identities, values, and behavioural norms.

Central to this shifting ecology of news provision is the deinstitutionalization of news and the profession and trade of journalism. In the past, journalism was typically provided by media and organizational structures located within geographically determined markets. Journalism was often provided by insular news organizations that rarely cooperated with other news providers and that detached themselves from the society they claimed to serve. Institutional elites owned or controlled these news providers, determining what news organizations would focus upon, and how it would be framed. They used the journalism as a tool for social control and influence; they aligned themselves with business interests and created commercial news enterprises whose self-interests came to dominate news provision and their relations with the public and with journalists. Concurrently, journalists created trade and professional standards, trade unions, and professional societies—all of which institutionalized the practices of journalism. This separated journalists not only from their employers, but from the public at large—a factor that is hindering journalists' relationships with the public in the age of digital interaction. All of these factors created institutionalized forms of news provision based on common belief systems, structures, relationships, and standardized practices and norms—key elements of institutionalized organizations and professional fields (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Scott 2010; Greenwood et al. 2013).

The journalism of the twentieth century was itself constrained by an institutional bias in news coverage. Because of the organization of labour under the beat system in most newsrooms, coverage focused on selected institutions—government agencies, educational institutions, financial institutions—and consequently much news became based on official statements at press conferences and the self-interested press releases from those institutions that were designed to service the working needs of journalists. Other parts of public and individual life were downplayed or ignored. Social lives, social histories, ordinary individuals, and the activities of day-to-day life tended to fall outside traditional beats, to be ignored, or gain only occasional attention from professional journalists.

The structures, work division, and focuses of news production are changing as part of the broader transformation taking place today. The new ecosystem is allowing for the emergence of new, more flexible means of providing news. Large, inefficient, slow-moving news organizations are being transforming into smaller, more agile forms and embracing new processes and approaches to news. They are becoming more networked, cooperating with other information providers and producers, and engaging with the public itself. This is producing competing and colliding logics of professional journalism, commerce, and participation, and the tensions between these is forcing negotiations of values, norms, and

practices. As of yet, however, those changes have induced few new policies and editorial guidelines in established news organizations (Olsson and Viscovi 2013).

News providers of all sizes are now employing multiple platforms for reaching and engaging with the public. They are reconceiving the nature of audiences and rethinking what information the public needs in different places, at different times, and the methods in which that information is conveyed. These are all indications of the appearance of new journalistic relations and practices.

Journalistic cooperatives have developed, in which small groups of journalists are preparing specialized and localized news; some are doing so with great quality. These organizations are acting as entrepreneurs, and creating and distributing news without the large organizational investments required in the past.

Citizens have become the primary providers of breaking news—using social media to provide real-time information about events and developments—and have taken the monopoly on that news away from news producers. Similarly, the ability to blog and operate specialist news sites is creating a rise of expert journalism in which scientists, economists, bankers, nutritionists, and others provide news and information. Because their views are not mediated by news providers, errors due to misunderstanding or abbreviation of information conveyed are reduced. Expert providers are, of course, subject to the same temptations as journalists to hype stories or to make it entertaining for audiences and they are no less immune from factual errors.

The transformation under way is not only altering the methods of news production and distribution, but the functions of journalism itself. The traditional functions of bearing witness, holding to account, opinion leadership, and shaming are no longer provided solely by the news media. The bearing witness function—observing and providing accounts of what happened—is being switched to social media and increasingly practised by public witnesses and activists. Holding to account—assigning responsibility and making others accountable for their conduct—is now a function shared with experts, non-governmental organizations, and individuals using the range of digital and social media. Large media still play a role in opinion leadership through commentary, but enormous opportunities for wider voices now exist in digital media. Acts of shaming—exposure of wrong doing and bad behaviour (Petley 2013)—are now practised widely in social media, getting around the reticence of some media to do so when elite power is involved (Entman 2012).

Consequently, the practices of journalism are shifting from a relatively closed system of news creation—dominated by official sources and professional journalists—to a more open system in which news emerges from the public observations, data, and flows of information and commentary that were not possible before (Van der Haak, Parks, and Castells 2012). This new ecosystem accommodates a wide range of different types of news and information providers that employ print, broadcast, online, blogs, and social media, and are fluidly moving news information amongst them.

This is not undesirable because it means that fewer institutional elites are deciding what gets attention and how it is framed than in the past. We must be realistic, of course. We need to be aware of, and wary of, the new institutions that are being created within the transformation processes. New institutions are able to skew the availability of news and information through search, aggregation, and digital distribution infrastructures. These are creating new mechanisms of power and a new class of elites influencing content, although suppression of news and information has become harder in the new

environment than ever before—though many elites and authorities continue to try to do so.

The emerging ways that journalism is being practised in the digital era are creating new practices, norms, structures, and relationships themselves. This should not be surprising because deinstitutionalization is not permanent, but leads to reconfiguration of organizations and re-institutionalization of fields of activity (Scott 2010; Greenwood et al. 2013). Thus, utopian visions that the digital age will create unimpeded and uninfluenced news and information flow must be viewed with some suspicion.

Where the Transformation is Taking Us?

What will news provision look like in future decades after the contemporary changes in the journalism ecosystem stabilize? It is too early to foresee knowledgeably what the ultimate outcomes might be, but some prominent tendencies are perceptible. We can expect significant change in structures and competition surrounding news provision, a growth in the number of forms of news and information providers, and that definitions of journalists and journalism become based on practices not employment.

Because digital news provision provides different economic conditions for production and distribution than in physical production, there will be opportunities for a wider variety of providers operating with dissimilar motives, differing organization, and varying sizes and scope. This will require us to be more conscious of the differences amongst providers of our news and information.

There will be space for commercial and non-commercial new enterprises, but it is likely that a few large general, commercial news providers (print, broadcast, or digital-only) will dominate provision in most countries in digital form. A limited number of regional/local general news providers are also likely to find sustainability niches. At the global level, there will be space for a limited number of commercial general news providers and the struggle to become one of those is already influencing the strategies of large news organizations such as the BBC, the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, the *Guardian*, and the *Daily Mail*.

As these changes occur, some players will reduce the frequency of their print publications, cutting out the unprofitable days, and publishing on only four or five days a week—frequencies that were normal four decades ago. They will switch the focus of their daily operations to digital platforms.

The concentration into a few major commercial national and international providers will leave significant space in which smaller digital enterprises can operate. More independent, entrepreneurial journalists and production cooperatives will emerge to provide specialized coverage and localized news and information. We will see more cooperating, networking, and alliances among news providers than in the past. These will become more important in providing the social and political news coverage necessary for society to function.

Some of these enterprises will find ways to operate as for-profit entities with funding from syndication, paying audiences, and advertising; others will operate not-for-profit enterprises and obtain funds from a multitude of sources including foundations, community organizations, and other sponsors. Branded content—often funded by corporations—is already appearing to support audio-visual productions of documentary and public affairs content and it can be expected to migrate increasingly to digital journalism.

These new methods of funding raise ethical and transparency issues for journalism, of course, so norms and practices to account for effects of the revenue sources will need to be established. These were developed for advertising in the past century and we can expect their emergence for the new forms of funding.

What is clear is that news providers are becoming less dependent on any one form of funding than they have been for about 150 years. Multiple revenue streams from readers and advertisers, from events and e-commerce, from foundations and sponsors, and from related commercial services such as Web hosting and advertising services are all contributing income. It is too early to fully assess the efficacy and sustainability of these sources, but they provide reason to believe that workable new business models are appearing in news provision.

One beneficial effect of this broadening of financial support for news provision is that it is reducing the influence of commercial advertisers that significantly influenced the form, range, and practices of news provision in the twentieth century. It is also clear that digital news provision is altering the form of news by creating opportunities for new narrative forms, interactive visualization of news and information, and additional types of long-form journalism. It is also making iterative journalism, based on incomplete information that is expanded over time through journalistic and user additions. All these forms are increasingly driving news providers to create new types and practices of curation and information vetting to increase the veracity and accuracy of the content.

This increasing participation of the public in news and information is creating tensions between traditional news producers and their audiences. For more than a century these news organizations and journalists have perceived their positions as educators of the uneducated, protectors of social order by steering the unkempt masses away from dangerous ideologies and undesirable actions, and as guiding their minds through authoritative commentary and directional information. The new environment is thus producing friction about the roles and philosophies under which news providers operate and the very ways that journalists perceive their audiences.

We are entering a period in which journalism is being perceived by the public as too important to be left passively to commercial news organizations, editors, and employed journalists. This is a healthy development because journalism does not belong to journalists and news organizations; it belongs to all of society. The technical, commercial, professional, and trade orientations that separated journalism from audiences, reduced its functionality, and limited its contributions to society are being breached and I am not unhappy to see those changes. It is better for citizens and better for news consumers.

Twilight or Dawn?

This brings us back to the fundamental question of whether we are experiencing the end of journalism or a new dawn of journalism. History has shown we do well to eschew polarized conceptualizations of issues because they over-simplify extraordinarily complex arrangements and developments and ignore broader contexts and critical subtleties. We are experiencing neither an end nor a new dawn of journalism; we are experiencing both. The historical, social, and economic contexts of the changes occurring in journalism indicate we are in a *transition* not a demise of journalism.

It is easy to be pessimistic if one equates journalism with the fortunes of legacy news enterprises and institutions. Journalism, however, involves information practices that—although

they have been resident in enterprises and institutions—are independent of them. Journalism is a collection of processes and procedures designed to separate fact from fiction and rumour, to provide information fairly, and to produce accuracy and credibility. We are all painfully aware that these processes may or may not be facilitated by practising journalism within specific news enterprises—it is not the organization itself, but the institutional arrangements within the enterprise, that matter.

As part of the transition there is a debate whether society should be trying to save news organizations or journalism. It is a debate over whether one should try to preserve the current *forms* in which news is provided or whether one should try to preserve the *functions* of journalism—perhaps in different forms. For those concerned with society, the most important issue is not whether traditional news providers survive, but how news will be gathered and distributed in the coming century.

To assume that quality journalism cannot be practised outside large enterprises defies history and denigrates the contributions of the multitude of independent and freelance journalists who have covered society and the world for nearly three centuries. It is clear, however, that they alone cannot provide the scale and range of information needed in contemporary society, so we face fundamental questions about what institutional and organizational arrangements will emerge to support the necessary news gathering, curating, and analysis.

Although legacy news providers and online service firms are increasingly in a symbiotic relationship, competitive animosity and rising tensions between them keep them from cooperating to create value networks that are mutually beneficial to society. Distribution of news is no longer the challenge, but the business arrangements surrounding it clearly are in question.

The influences on the structures and financing of news have changed significantly over the centuries, but it is unclear today whether we will continue the current trajectory of arrangements or abandon them for something entirely new. What is clear, however, is that markets remain useful for providing some types of information and content, but that they cannot fully meet the fundamental information needs of a democratic society—and the scope of what they cannot offer is widening today. We can no longer take quality news and information for granted and need to give it the attention that such a crucial factor to democratic and social life deserves.

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Robert G. Picard, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, UK.
E-mail: robert.picard@politics.ox.ac.uk. Web: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/about/institute-staff/prof-robert-g-picard.html>