

Essay Question 4: Response to the Pew Research Center Survey

Is journalism headed in the right or the wrong direction?

Even allowing for the fact that they are notorious professional kvetches, journalists' responses to this year's Pew Research Center survey are noteworthy -- if for no other reason than that they represent a depressing milestone: In past surveys, the biggest concern of reporters and editors has been quality of work and quality of life issues. Now, it's all about business and money.¹

That's unseemly by traditional standards, which hold that there should be a firewall between the editorial and business sides of media operations. And it raises questions about how much financial concerns are affecting editorial decisions. One sign that the firewall is being breached: A recent, otherwise hard-to-object-to book about training for journalists includes the unqualified recommendation that newsrooms promote business literacy.² No discussion of ethical issues; no caveats about potential conflicts of interest. Just do it.

Despite the ick factor, it's hard to fault journalists for their new fixation on the bottom line. A recent glance at headlines from Jim Romenesko's media news Web log (See attached appendix) confirms this isn't a matter of the usual newsroom whining: One

¹ Pew Research Center for People and the Press, "Financial Woes Now Overshadow Other Concerns Among Journalists," March 17, 2008. See Table 1, "Coverage, Credibility Concerns Recede," Link to full report at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=403>

² Michele McLellan and Tim Porter, *News Improved: How America's Newsrooms Are Learning to Change*, Washington, DC, CQ Press, 2007. p. 43

brutal newsroom purge follows another in unrelenting succession. The business seems to be in free-fall. While they were writing their report on the Knight Foundation's training programs, Michele McLellan and Tim Porter note, the vaunted Knight-Ridder newspaper chain vaporized and Google became the world's biggest media company.³

That fact alone says a lot about the perverse trends in the media business. At a time when there seems to be a greater appetite for news consumption than ever – albeit not through traditional channels – the number of people who produce and edit news is diminishing. Google did not become the world's largest media company by hiring journalists. It is an aggregator, not a producer of news. The danger, if current trends continue, is that future Google news searches will produce thousands of hits – all on the same story written by a single AP reporter. If, that is, the Associated Press can survive. After all, it relies on support from member news organizations.

There's no question that the Internet poses massive financial challenges to traditional media outlets. Online classified ad services such as Craigslist are causing traditional revenue streams to dry up faster than the stereotypical ink-stained wretch's first glass of beer after deadline. In the same month that Pew released its depressing survey of journalists' attitudes, the Newspaper Association of America reported the worst drop in ad revenue in 50 years.⁴

Yet as Philip Meyer has noted, the new technology also presents opportunities – not just for news reporters and editors, but for the business side too: The Internet

³ Ibid. p. 111

⁴ Jennifer Saba, "NAA Reveals Biggest Ad Revenue Plunge in More Than 50 Years," Editor & Publisher, March 28, 2008. Link to story at: http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/news/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1003781895

eliminates the high variable costs, such as newsprint, ink and printing presses, that in the past have inhibited news organizations from growing.⁵ So, where are the swashbuckling news entrepreneurs willing to take a contrarian's leap? Where are the visionaries who can see that this is a moment, not to offload employees and slash costs, but to pour resources into the kinds of experiments that hold the promise of long-term payoffs?

Not, alas, in many media company boardrooms. Financial pressures, exacerbated by what Philip Meyers describes as Wall Street's stranglehold on many newspaper chains,⁶ and the rise of what Doug Underwood has called "marketplace journalism"⁷ have combined to erode journalism's public service mission. Not only is there less news coverage; there's less news that's serious. The unease about maintaining audience has resulted in unwholesome pandering. Car chases are favored over legislative marathons, celebrity profiles over investigations.

In their study, which contains much laudable advice about investing for the long term, Michele McLellan and Tim Porter perhaps inadvertently encourage this. They repeatedly encourage newsroom executives to eschew "institutional news" and "turn of the screw" coverage.⁸ This is not necessarily bad advice, but it has been abused. There's nothing wrong with stories that are innovative, cheeky, reader-friendly, or that go beneath the surface of the latest school board meeting agenda. The problem is that in too many newsrooms, the directive to abandon institutional **stories** has been interpreted to mean that it's OK to abandon **coverage** of important institutions. Just because you're not going

⁵ Philip Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age*, Columbia, Mo., University of Missouri Press, 2004. p. 210

⁶ Ibid, pp. 174-200

⁷ Doug Underwood, *When MBAs Rule the Newsroom*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993. p. xv

⁸ McLellan and Porter, op. cit., pages 24 and 62

to write an account of the city council meeting doesn't mean you shouldn't be there. Yet it's clear that in many cases, journalists aren't. As early as a decade ago, the *American Journalism Review* was cataloguing an alarming decline in the number of reporters assigned to cover state legislatures.⁹ The danger should be obvious to any student of journalism – or, for that matter, of democracy.

The good news is that the vacuum is beginning to be filled. Some statehouse reporters-turned-entrepreneurs are successfully making a living by offering online the news that newspapers no longer carry. See Wispolitics.com and Iowapolitics.com. Stateline.org, a Pew-funded project, provides a national outlet for statehouse news. More recently, a group of philanthropists hired several big-name journalists to launch ProPublica, a non-profit that aims to perpetuate and disseminate the kind of investigative reporting that is often the first casualty of newsroom cost-cutting.¹⁰

What's interesting about this trend is that it all seems to be heading down what Charles Lewis has called “the nonprofit road.”¹¹ Lewis founded the Center for Public Integrity, another nonprofit that has taken on the kind of long-term, labor-intensive projects in which traditional news organizations increasingly are reluctant to invest. Another example: Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, co-founded by former *New York Times* reporter David Burnham.

⁹ Charles Layton and Mary Walton, “Missing the story at the statehouse,” *American Journalism Review*, July/August, 1998. Link to story:

<http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=3279>

¹⁰ Carol Guensburg, “Big bucks for investigative reporting,” *American Journalism Review*, February/March, 2008, <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=4455>

¹¹ Charles Lewis, “The nonprofit road,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October, 2007. Link to story:

http://www.cjr.org/feature/the_nonprofit_road.php

As some critics have noted, ProPublica is, at least initially, seeking high-profile outlets to showcase its work, which probably eliminates the very organizations – and communities – which could use its resources the most.¹² Yet if, as Lewis and Meyers have suggested in their writings, the nonprofit model is a promising one for journalism, there seems to be an easy and obvious way to bring it to the community level: journalism schools.

They are filled with students hungry for real-world experience. Why not turn these students loose to cover the cop shops and the school board meetings and the state legislative races that are now being neglected? Their challenge: to report the news and to figure out how to turn it into something more than mundane “turn of the screw” stories. Encourage the use of new media. Put the finished projects on a website. Give news organizations access and the opportunity to pick up the stories. The students will get useful exposure (and educational feedback from the subjects of their stories), the media outlets will get stories they otherwise would not have had, and the community will be served. If the Internet is made for niche marketing, as Chris Anderson persuasively argues in *The Long Tail*, then it’s the perfect medium to deliver all the news that doesn’t fit in the increasingly constrained world of print. It’s the kind of community-based coverage that Backfence.com founder Mark Potts spoke so enthusiastically about to our cohort – an enthusiasm undiminished by the fact that he could not make Backfence a financially going concern. The economic theories that underpin *The Long Tail* suggest that moment will come. Some big companies are experimenting, as we heard from the

¹² Guensburg, op. cit.

Washington Post's Jonathan Krim, one of the masterminds behind the paper's LoudounExtra.

But in many communities, the journalism of the future likely will have to be incubated in nonprofit laboratories, which is where universities can come in.

A good example of the possibilities is the work that former *Louisville Courier-Journal* political reporter Al Cross is doing at the University of Kentucky's Institute of Rural Journalism. For one project, Cross is assigning students to create an online publication for one rural town that doesn't have its own paper.¹³

Amidst the gloom, there are those who refuse to give up on a craft they love. One of the striking aspects of the Pew Center's survey about journalists' attitudes was how positive they remain in the face of seeming financial disaster. Majorities said they would want their children to follow them into journalism. Majorities expressed positive views about Internet-driven innovations in the business. Journalists aren't scapegoating technology for the crisis that's upon them. They see it as a means for telling more and better stories. Could it be that the professional kvetchers see opportunity knocking where the MBAs, for all their motivational happy talk, don't? The news *business* may not be going in the right direction. But at least some newsmen and newswomen are trying to find the way.

¹³ Al Cross, conversation with the author.

Appendix, Essay Question 4

Read it and weep:

Recent headlines from Jim Romenesko blog re: layoffs and buyouts

FRIDAY, MARCH 7, 2008

MediaNews papers avoid layoffs as 107 staffers take buyouts

Contra Costa Times | Politico.com

The staff reductions are at the Contra Costa Times, Oakland Tribune, and other papers are operated by Bay Area News Group-East Bay, a MediaNews division. || Michael Calderone: The Los Angeles Times buyout list is oversubscribed. || Duluth layoffs: Fifteen to 30 of the News Tribune's 225 employees will be cut.

FRIDAY, MARCH 7, 2008

San Jose Mercury News cuts 50 jobs, names two new editors

San Jose Mercury News

The MediaNews-owned paper had a combination of layoffs and buyouts. Barbara J. Marshman, associate editor, replace Stephen E. Wright as editorial page editor. Deputy business editor Stephen R. Trousdale replaces Rebecca Salner as business editor. Wright and Salner took buyouts.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2008

New York Times to eliminate 100 newsroom jobs this year

New York Times | NYO Media Mob | Portfolio

Keller

The cuts will be achieved primarily through attrition and buyouts, but layoffs are a real possibility, says executive editor Bill Keller. The New York Times has 1,332 newsroom employees. || ALSO: In a Thursday staff meeting, Bill Keller "made the point that we don't want to bleed forever and we want to get this over with," says a Timesperson.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2007

San Antonio paper offers buyouts to cut staff by 40 to 50

Romenesko Memos

"The near-term economic outlook for newspapers remains soft," says Tom Stephenson, publisher of Heart's Express-News. "This requires us to take steps now to reduce our cost structure. Our goal is to reduce between 40 and 50 positions If we don't reach the necessary level of cost savings we face possible job eliminations or layoffs."

THURSDAY, JULY 26, 2007

Fourteen take buyouts at Singleton's St. Paul Pioneer Press

St. Paul Pioneer Press

The paper, owned by Dean Singleton's MediaNews, says: "The buyouts, along with attrition and decisions not to fill currently open positions, are expected to minimize the need for layoffs." || Minnesota Monitor: One departing staffer plans to attend poker-dealing school.

TUESDAY, APRIL 24, 2007

Denver Post offers buyouts to trim newsroom staff by 37

Denver Post

The Denver Post has extended voluntary-buyout offers to about 90 of the newsroom's 268 workers and will accept as many as 37 buyouts by early June. The offers come one year after MediaNews-owned paper eliminated more than a dozen newsroom positions, also through voluntary buyouts. Will Shanley reports layoffs are possible if the new round of buyouts fails to achieve the needed cuts.

FRIDAY, APRIL 20, 2007

Tribune to offer buyouts, hopes to eliminate 100 positions

Chicago Tribune

If the buyout offers -- expected to be announced Monday -- don't generate enough savings, the company may resort to layoffs. ALSO: CEO Dennis FitzSimons tells his execs the company is adopting Harvard professor John Kotter's eight-step program for guiding change, and that their only choice is to get on board.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 21, 2007

Guild: "It's a very, very difficult bargaining environment"

Columbia Journalism Review

The threat of layoffs, which are replacing buyouts, is becoming a powerful tool to extract concessions from newspaper unions, writes Julia M. Klein. "As companies continue to shed workers, they are also rolling back benefits and eliminating contractual constraints that they say are hindering efficiency," she reports.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2006

St. Paul Pioneer Press to cut 40 jobs, newsroom to lose 20

St. Paul Pioneer Press | Star Tribune

The jobs will be cut through a combination of attrition, buyouts and layoffs. The reductions represent about 5% of the paper's workforce. Formerly a Knight Ridder paper, the Pioneer Press is currently owned by the Hearst but is managed by Dean Singleton's MediaNews. || Deborah Caulfield Rybak: Singleton told Pioneer Press employees in April that no jobs, wages or benefits would be cut as a result of the sale of the paper.

FRIDAY, JUNE 23, 2006

Dallas Morning News to offer buyouts to at least 50 staffers

Dallas Business Journal

The Belo-owned paper is offering the buyouts as it restructures its news operation to focus more heavily on the Internet. The Business Journal hears there will be downsizing at the company's Providence Journal, too. "Belo Corp. began transforming its operations to be more multimedia oriented earlier this month with some 60 layoffs at The Press-Enterprise in Riverside Calif.," says this report.

FRIDAY, MARCH 10, 2006

WP to cut 80 newsroom jobs through attrition and buyouts

Editor & Publisher

That's about 10% of the newsroom staff. A staffer says Post management is hoping to avoid layoffs. Newsroom bosses didn't return Joe Strupp's calls. I received this e-mail late Thursday afternoon: "Len Downie told Metro staff today that by end of next year (2007), Washington Post editorial staff will be cut by 80 job positions (full-time-equivalents). No layoffs. Attrition and buyouts." Via e-mail, I asked executive editor Leonard Downie Jr. for confirmation. He hasn't replied.

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