

Freedom of the Press

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The US media are undergoing a massive transformation, approaching a crisis in journalism, which may portend similar issues in Europe and the rest of the world. Historically, most professional journalism has been done by the print media, especially newspapers. Today, American newspapers are in a state of collapse with circulation dropping at a rapid rate and profitability going to nil or negative. This business is leading to an information crisis that is already having effects on the society and will likely become even more profound, polarizing and perhaps misinforming an entire nation. Print journalists have been the primary suppliers to the electronic media, including television and the internet. This article supplements a speech given at the American Academy in Berlin in May, 2008. It summarizes US media metrics and raises issues of concern about the sustainability of serious journalism in America. While the internet has been the cause of this dilemma, the author sees no economic model that will allow the web in the short term to support major, serious reporting at a large scale. Is the rest of the world about to experience a similar crisis or are media models different enough to avoid such a dramatic fall? This article reflects Baker's view as a longtime media executive and an academic.

Fundamental transformations currently taking place in American media signal an approaching crisis in journalism, a crisis that may spread to Europe and the rest of the world. Until recently, most professional journalism in the United States was carried out by print media, especially newspapers. But with a sharp decline in their circulation and the near elimination of their profitability, American newspapers are near collapse.¹ In December of 2008, The Tribune Company, America's second-largest publisher of newspapers, filed for bankruptcy.

Starved of the flow of accurate information formerly provided by print media, the American public has grown increasingly polarized and misinformed. The effects of this information drought have already been profoundly felt, as evidenced by the behavior of the news media before the invasion of Iraq in 2003.²

Print journalists continue to be the primary providers of news to all electronic media, including television and the internet.³ The rapidity and wide dissemination possible through electronic media are no guarantee for the accuracy of their content. The internet in particular has actually undermined the print media it relies on for much of its accurate news content: both by drawing away much of the print media's readership and simultaneously attacking the profit-streams that have, for so long, kept print media in business. For accurate information to continue reaching the public through any medium, it is imperative that existing conditions not be allowed to make the well-funded professional journalist extinct.

Yet no economic model for web-supported journalism on a mass scale has yet arisen. The number of websites that produce news content through journalists they employ is small, although among them are *Slate* and *Politico*. Standalone internet-only local news operations are also rare, and access to them is unavailable in most markets. Although this article will not do so, it is worth investigating whether this state of affairs will soon arise elsewhere in the world, or whether media models in other countries are different enough to avoid the problems of the American system.

The changes in American media over the last decade are the most dramatic since the introduction of broadcasting in the early 20th century. Print and broadcast media coexisted right up to the end of the 20th century, and throughout that time the substantial news departments of television stations relied on newspapers for most of their stories. This situation was still true in the mid 1990s, when Tom Brokaw said on the air '*The New York Times* still sets the agenda' for national news.

Unlike the large staffs of television stations and newspapers, internet news operations employ few people. But this has not stopped the internet from taking away large amounts of the ad revenue that once formerly supported newspapers. Classified ad revenue in particular, which once accounted for nearly half the total ad revenue at most major newspapers, has been sharply reduced by internet sites such as Craigslist, which allows people to post classified ads for free.

Rather than pay \$1.50 for an ink-and-paper copy of *The New York Times*, it is now possible to go online and get the same content for free, and also be assured that that content is more current than the print edition of the *Times* could possibly be. The same situation exists for nearly all of the 1500 daily papers still in circulation nationwide.

The internet, in combination with the profusion of cable TV stations, has reduced the audience for broadcast television. As recently as the early 1980s, cable television content was still dominated by channels also available on broadcast TV. Today, most cable systems offer 500 or more channels in addition to broadcast-available stations. The number of people watching broadcast TV has declined sharply.⁴

The prestigious private equity firm Veronis Suhler Stevenson predicts that in 2008 broadcast TV will surpass newspapers in ad revenue for the first time in

history. Newspapers took in \$51.5 billion in ad revenue last year, compared with \$48 billion for broadcast TV. In 2008, TV ad revenue will jump to \$51 billion, while newspapers are expected to slip to less than \$47 billion. But broadcast TV's new position ahead of print journalism as the nation's chief generator of ad revenue won't last. Within three years, the internet will leap ahead of them both.⁵

Although most marketers say television advertising has become less effective in the past two years, interest in some form of television marketing remains.⁶ There is a famous anecdote about the advertising department of Coca-Cola in the early 20th century, which held that 'we know fifty cents of every dollar we spend on advertising is a total waste of money, but in fifty years we've never been able to determine which fifty cents works, and which fifty cents isn't working, so we continue to spend the whole dollar.' For television advertising, it is increasingly clear that many companies are no longer willing to spend the whole dollar.

Sixty-six percent of the American people get most of their information from local TV news, compared with only 28% who get it from their local newspaper.⁷ This alone is troubling since local TV news is notorious for favoring crime, scandal, and disaster over the affairs of local government. By adhering to the TV journalist's notorious rule of thumb, 'if it bleeds it leads,' local TV news prevents people from knowing how their own local government functions. Yet even the viewership of local television news is in decline. Since 1997, the audience for early evening newscasts around the country has dropped 18% and the audience for late night, post prime-time news has dropped by 16%.⁸

As their viewership, and thus potential ad revenue, declines, expenses for TV networks rise.⁹ In order to provide the same quality of programming, lost advertising revenues to TV networks must somehow be replaced.

Many people who once gave their media time to television are now giving it to the internet. As digital media moves into the American mainstream, it is increasingly not just younger Americans who are using it. With the explosion of sites such as YouTube, MySpace, and Blogger, the percentage of internet ad revenue from people 35 and younger has declined: 15% for YouTube, 5% for MySpace, and 2% for Blogger. This does not mean that fewer younger people are using these sites, but rather that the number of people over 35 who use them is on the rise. More than half of visitors to MySpace are over 35 years of age.¹⁰ Of people who listen to podcasts, nearly half are over 35.¹¹ All of this represents time people are not spending with newspapers, time not spent looking at print advertising.

In the year and a half since CNN became the first mainstream national news organization to open up their content to submissions from internet users,¹² they have received over 60,000 such submissions. Although CNN still employs a traditional editorial staff, this represents a significant shift in the mode and standards of news-gathering as exhibited by a major national organization.

Unlike CNN, the content of Wikipedia – an online collaborative encyclopedia that includes entries on current events – is created entirely by its users. Forty-six percent of students aged 18 or older use Wikipedia as a source of information. Once heralded as a miraculous example of accurate information on the web, it has become clear that errors, both deliberate and accidental, do occur on the site. Wikipedia’s own founder spoke in 2005 of serious problems with the accuracy of the site’s content.¹³ If this is true for a prominent site such as Wikipedia, one can only imagine what the standards of accuracy must be like in the currents of the internet farther away from the mainstream.

We must ask whether the internet will ever be able to provide enough revenue to support the kind of reporting that insured the accuracy of newspapers and TV news for so many decades in the 20th century, and which still make print media the main source of accurate information in the American media landscape.

The free flow of information is vital to any democracy, and newspapers, more than any other media, ensure that free flow.¹⁹ America’s founding generation understood the relationship between representative government and a healthy print media, in part because newspapers are older than the United States itself, and the unhindered spread of ideas in the American colonies before 1776 made possible the intellectual conditions under which American democracy was born and flourished. Thomas Jefferson himself said ‘Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter.’¹⁴

Jefferson surely had such sentiments in mind when he authored the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which recognizes, among other freedoms, the Freedom of the Press. Jefferson and his contemporaries understood that a free press is the mechanism by which the people of a nation hold the power of accountability over their own government. This simple but powerful relationship is preserved only as long as newspapers prosper.

Despite their political wisdom, America’s founding generation forged a governmental system that was designed to operate in a world dominated by print media; they could never have envisioned economic conditions that would starve newspapers and magazines of the revenue needed for survival.

To imagine how the future of democratic government and a free press will look in a more digital America, it is instructive to see how the challenge of maintaining a free press has been met in America’s past, and also to examine what benefits to the nation and the world the free press has provided.

First Amendment freedom has always been an evolving concept in the United States. As recently as the First World War, anti-government speech was illegal and could be punished by imprisonment.²² In the latter half of the 20th century, the Freedom of the Press was broadened by the actions of the court system. In *New York Times v. Sullivan*, the US Supreme Court established the ‘actual

malice' standard, which determined when the work of journalists could be called defamation or libel. This landmark ruling made possible the free reporting of the civil rights campaigns in the American South.²³ While local newspapers in the South were unable to report on the dire condition of African-Americans in the southern states,²⁷ the news wire services, especially the Associated Press (AP), did not suffer from locally imposed pressures. The national TV networks were able to act on the reports of the Associated Press by sending reporters to document the struggle of African-Americans for civil rights, resulting in the iconic images that awakened the conscience of a nation: the unleashing of dogs and fire hoses on citizens, and the then Alabama Governor George Wallace blocking the entrance of black students to a building at the University of Alabama and shouting 'segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!'²⁸

Outside of America in the 20th century, a rigorous adherence to accurate journalism also worked for the public good. In Hitler's Germany, the government maintained total control over the German national press, ensuring that news favorable to the Nazi war effort was disseminated regardless of the actual state of the war.²⁴ Conversely, the BBC remained devoted to reporting the truth, and refused to alter its reports, even when that meant informing Britain and the world of devastating Allied defeats. Because of the unflinching honesty of BBC news reporting, when the tide of war began to turn against the Nazis, the BBC's reports of Allied victory were believed all over the world.

After the Second World War, the notorious Senator Joseph McCarthy created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation in America, ending the careers and ruining the lives of thousands of American citizens in media and the arts. The one medium that was able to stand up to McCarthyism was commercial television. The efforts of Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly lead directly to the Senate's eventual censure of Senator McCarthy in 1954.²⁶ In their news telecast *See it Now*, Murrow and Friendly showed clips of McCarthy that displayed to the American people his belligerent and ruthless abuses of power. Without such exposure, McCarthy's abuses would perhaps have gone unchecked.

The Vietnam War is another illustration of how America's free press enables citizens to hold their government accountable. A flood of iconic images, on television and in photographs, showing the true horror of combat, or showing the staggering size of American protests against the war,²⁹ made it impossible for the US government to continue its actions without causing overwhelming popular outcry. Those who blamed the press for the downfall of US efforts in Vietnam argued that media outlets that covered protests or that showed graphic images of the fighting were unpatriotic.³⁰ This argument has been used repeatedly by those who wish to curtail the freedom of the press in wartime, and was arguably an effective muzzle on the press in the months preceding the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The free flow of accurate information that had so long bolstered the power of America's citizens to hold their government accountable began to taper off with the ascendancy of Ronald Reagan to the White House in the 1980s. Reagan sought to remove the restrictions that had kept the media from being controlled by just a few corporations,³² and he also ceased to promote the long-standing idea that broadcasters should see their vocation as a public service rather than just a private career. Under his administration, the Fairness Doctrine, which required that stations broadcast opposing viewpoints of controversial subjects, was eliminated, which may have aided the proliferation of strident, one-sided political talk radio.³³

Today, broadcast stations are frequently seen merely as sources of revenue, rather than as a public service, even though the Communications Act of 1934 called for the airwaves to be used to serve the 'public interest, convenience, and necessity.'

At the same time that profit has become the chief concern of broadcast journalism, media outlets have become more conglomerated. Clear Channel, a single large radio conglomerate, owns 1200 of the most powerful FM and AM radio stations in America's most important cities.³⁴ One station in particular, in New Haven, Connecticut – a news and information AM station – no longer has even a single local on-air person. All news is recorded hundreds of miles away in Syracuse, New York, and all the talk programs they run are nationally syndicated. What was once a local station connected to the community by nine staff members, now has no local staff, and no real connection to the community.³⁵

What happened in New Haven has also been happening on the national level. The 'big three' network news operations, ABC, CBS, and NBC have spent the last three decades closing down news bureaus around the nation and the world. It was because NBC was the only major broadcast network that still had a bureau in Berlin in 1989 that it had a scoop on one of the most important stories of the 20th century, the fall of the Berlin Wall.³⁶

In August of 2008, *The New York Times* reported that CBS, the home of the most celebrated news division in broadcasting, had considered outsourcing some of its news gathering operations to CNN.³⁷

The trends of reducing, centralizing, and favoring profit over public service have brought broadcast media to a crossroads. The combined influence of these trends and the crisis they represent for American journalism was exemplified in the behavior of the news media in the months prior to the Iraq war in 2003.

As was stated by a Knight Ridder editor, the poor performance of the media in the months preceding the Iraq war came as much from the forced reduction of staff and budgets at national media organizations than from those organizations' fear of standing up to the Bush administration, or of being branded as unpatriotic in a time of war.²

Some have argued that the news media in the run-up to the Iraq war, rather than playing the role of ‘censor of government’ as Thomas Jefferson envisioned, instead played the role of cheerleader for the policies of the government. Bill Moyers expressed this view on his PBS special *Buying the War*:

The story of how high officials misled the country has been told. But they couldn’t have done it on their own; they needed a compliant press, to pass on their propaganda as news and cheer them on ... our press largely surrendered its independence and skepticism to join with our government in marching to war.²

Officials in the Bush administration took advantage of the weakened state of broadcast news to help advance their false claims that the government of Saddam Hussein had a direct role in perpetrating the 9/11 attacks. The White House chose to instruct their spokespeople in the national press to mention repeatedly 9/11 and Iraq in quick succession, encouraging the viewer to make a connection between the two. A content-starved national broadcast media repeated what Bush officials and their surrogates said so often that 70% of the American population came to believe that Saddam Hussein’s government played a direct role in the 9/11 attacks.

Any news station that refused to repeat without criticism or analysis the White House’s arguments for war was subjected to pressure from the so-called ‘patriotism police.’ These were essentially in-house censors at the networks whose primary job was to make accusations of insufficient patriotism against any spokesperson or program that was, or could be perceived as, opposed to the Bush administration’s pro-Iraq war policies. Even advertisers, who had the power to withhold crucial revenue, were sometimes employed as members of the ‘patriotism police.’²

The climate of suppression and censorship was not limited to television news. When 100,000 anti-war demonstrators protested in Washington in October of 2002, *The Washington Post* relegated the story from its front page to the cover of its metro section. Howard Kurtz, a media reporter for the *Washington Post*, says that, from August 2002 to March 2003, his newspaper ran 140 front-page stories making the Bush administration’s case for war.²

When Democrats and others in national and local government did publicly oppose the Administration, their opposition was either denounced or ignored by the mainstream press. Senator Ted Kennedy, who spoke out repeatedly against the war, was given just 36 words of coverage in *The Washington Post* in the months preceding the 2003 invasion.²

When Phil Donahue, then of MSNBC, chose to invite anti-war guests on his talk show, he was told by the network that he was required to have two pro-war guests for every one anti-war guest. Just 22 days before the 2003 invasion, an internal NBC memo was circulated that read ‘Donahue presents a difficult public face for NBC in a time of war. At the same time our competitors are waving the flag at every opportunity.’² Donahue’s show was eventually cancelled.

Before the invasion, only the Knight Ridder national newspaper chain questioned the Bush administration's imminent decision to go to war. Despite the singularity of their stance, Knight Ridder's national influence was minimal, since their stories were not reprinted in New York or Washington, DC. John Walcott, then Washington bureau chief of Knight Ridder, reflected on the role of media in the period before the war:

You know, we're sending young men and women, and nowadays not so young men and women, to risk their lives. And everyone wants to be behind them. The question for journalism is, are we really behind them when we fail to do our job? Is that really the kind of support that they deserve? Or are we really, in the long run, serving them better by asking these hard questions about what we've asked them to do?²

There are no simple answers to Walcott's questions; there is no book to be consulted that tells journalists what to do in the face of every dilemma. Before the 2003 invasion, Walcott's questions were especially difficult to answer for American journalists, trapped between their fear of being seen as unpatriotic and their ever more limited resources and funding.

Until the shape of the post-internet American media landscape becomes clear, it is impossible to predict whether newspapers will survive, and, as the war in Iraq demonstrates, the stakes are too high to leave such survival to chance.

Any model that provides for the survival of print media and its functions must address a daunting list of requirements, among them the reopening of foreign bureaus, the discovery of a replacement for classified ad revenue, and the reversal of consolidation. Perhaps something can be learned from Canada, Europe, and Asia, where newspapers continue to flourish,³⁹ and where many national news organizations are run on a non-profit model. The United States can no longer afford the assumption that a for-profit news media will preserve the free flow of information that is so vital to the health of American democracy.

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