

Chapter 4

The Future of News Creation and Distribution: Opportunities and Challenges

The impacts of the changing media landscape on news are pulling in two opposite directions and analysis often weighs to one extreme or the other. One extreme is that online and other new forms of more decentralised news will finally liberate readers from partisan news monopolies which have tended to become more and more concentrated and to dominate the production and access to news. The other extreme is that the demise of the traditional news media is before us (partially caused by the rise of the Internet) and with it an important foundation for democratic societies is at risk.

This chapter summarises some of the most important arguments of the debate.¹

Opportunities in the changing news environment

Some observers note that news production and distribution have never been more dynamic and independent than today. In this view, the Internet enables a greater and more modern access to a more varied source of news. Eventually the nature and speed of the technology and increased participation help to uncover the truth in a much more efficient way than in previous environments. Innovative forms of journalism with novel bridges to readers and great potential are emerging which make obsolete old-fashioned paper-based supports. The end of newspapers would not mean the end of news gathering and diffusion. In fact, in this view, the current online news ecosystem ends a period in which news monopolies controlled the news.

The Internet as major source of information and diversity

The Internet offers the ability to access information sources, including in countries with lesser media freedom or with lesser access to a well-funded, impartial press. Previously the selection and filtering of news was done by a small group of media institutions. Now users can identify and select their own information from a much richer base. Moreover, the barriers to publishing news, information and opinions have collapsed thanks to a more participative web. This offers unseen new opportunities for reporting and accessing the news. Global Voices, for instance, is a large community of bloggers around the world who produce translations and reports from blogs and citizen media everywhere, with emphasis on voices that are not ordinarily heard in international mainstream media.² In that light, public opinion will be shaped by many different voices, with different emphasis and points of view, rather than a small elite group of journalists.

Furthermore, the Internet and related technologies offer greater access to information for journalists and citizens making it more difficult to cover up corruption or other secrets.³ Information and data are collected, analysed and published in a much easier fashion today. Technology and the participation of more people in the news gathering and distribution process make it much easier to investigate certain leads and to uncover the truth. While the Internet also leads to a deluge of information, false news and rumours, it is argued that Internet users self-organise with filtering and reliability mechanisms and acquire the necessary skills to identify correct information and discredit false rumours (*c.f.* OECD, 2007a).

The question is how the different actors in the eco-system contribute to citizen engagement and to democracy generally as each plays an important role in this regard. While there may not be many empirical studies of the impact of the Internet on the analytical skills of younger generations, including the consumption of news, this could be an interesting area for future research.

New sources of entrepreneurial and non-market news organisations

Next to citizen journalists, the Internet has led to a rise of web publishers and entrepreneurial journalists with for profit and not for profit ventures which might more than compensate for the reduction of traditional news outlets. This might in fact lead to an increase rather than a decrease of coverage, given the sheer number of citizen journalists and bloggers involved. Political or local news reporting might also continue and expand as a number of traditional and non-traditional news providers provide hyper-local news. Moreover, today parliamentary debates or other sources of more local news are broadcast or transcribed on line, offering a rich source of information and possibility to comment by bloggers and news organisations. Finally, new non-profit ventures and corresponding foundations for a new type of (sometimes investigative) journalism are emerging.

The appeal of new multiple sources of information

Proponents of this view argue that the credibility and quality of the traditional news media were actually at stake long before the rise of the Internet. The high concentration of media ownership (and government control of the media in some countries), the ever-increasing importance of advertisers, the proximity between journalists and the persons they cover, the increasing influence of public relations (PR) agencies, further cuts on the quality and diversity of editorial content, and other challenges raised below have reduced their credibility, further decreasing trust and interest of readers as demonstrated by survey data. Critics have observed that the press and journalists have – independently from the rise of the Internet – increasingly been too embedded into the circles they write about, lacking the necessary distance to maintain impartiality and often becoming a voice piece for vested interests (Schechter and Manning 2008; Davies, 2009).⁴ Novel news sources are thus a good check and balance of the traditional media.

Challenges in the changing news environment

Some observers however deplore that the “golden age” of newspapers and journalism, when quality and reliability were arguably higher, is now sadly gone. Arguably, the growing financial pressures and the emergence of “free news” put this golden age increasingly at stake. According to this view, the “economic foundations of modern journalism are crumbling” and there are few alternative models in sight which would guarantee satisfactory news coverage. According to some analysts, there is no longer a functioning business model for journalism.⁵ Its accuracy, the quality, and the diversity of news are at risk, and the economic downturn has intensified this trend.

It is argued that novel forms of news creation and distribution and especially Internet-based offerings do not (yet) constitute a viable alternative to more traditional ones. This is because no online business model has been elaborated which would sustain expensive news coverage. The Internet may be a good platform for a *cacophony of voices* but the latter leaves the reader in doubt about the accuracy and the interpretation of the information. The online news ecosystem offers a profusion of opinion, but there is little reporting, and little is subject to any rigorous fact-checking or editorial scrutiny.⁶ In this view, Internet intermediaries and most other online news players just relay information from traditional news organisations, *i.e.* online news contributors and citizen journalists often copy or comment on original news material without gathering independent news themselves or adding a lot of value. Arguments are also being made that small online news creators which do original reporting will never have the financial clout and the wherewithal to push back against large corporations or politicians in the case of investigative reporting.⁷ These smaller institutions will also never have the financial resources to spend large amounts of money on investigative reports or the coverage of war zones.

The list of challenges posed to the contemporary news system is long and often an amalgam of rather distinct items which are often not a direct consequence of novel forms of news distribution alone.

- *Growing resource and time pressure leading to sparser and lower-quality coverage (“churnalism”)*: In practical terms, the growing lack of resources and the necessity to update news around the clock in a 24-hour newsroom have resulted in the reduction of bureaus, layoffs and a consequent reduction of in-house editorial content and potentially quality. Editors recognise the trade-offs between the speed, depth and interactivity of the web and what those benefits are costing in terms of accuracy and journalistic standards (World Editor’s Forum, 2009).

Fewer and potentially also more inexperienced journalists are responsible for an ever-increasing amount of work. In integrated newsrooms, the work includes new activities such as writing for the Internet webpage, video shooting and editing for which some of the journalists lack the critical skills and/or time. Often the number of copy-editors and fact-checkers responsible for verifying the accuracy of language and content has been reduced, although there are evident linkages between the accuracy of both content and language and the number of copy editors at work (Meyer, 2004).

On the Internet, the accuracy and quality of news might be worse. While this also applies to traditional newspapers, Email, Twitter, social networks and the Internet in general can also have the detrimental effect of potentially speeding up the spread of rumours or wrong information.

- *Loss of local news:* Local and regional news providers are particularly at risk. In particular for the United States, studies point to a significantly reduced coverage of local politics: *i.e.* coverage of courthouse, coverage of local communities and politics (council meetings, school board meetings).⁸ This coverage however is critical to the transparency and functioning of the political system. Also, in the case of layoffs or other opportunities, it is often the more experienced “veteran” journalists who leave first. This leads to a loss of local knowledge and relationships with trusted sources that those reporters had built up, which enabled them to break important stories.⁹
- *Greater homogeneity of news:* It is argued that time and financial pressure have led to a greater reliance on outside news sources (mostly the wire services but also arguably partial press release material, news agency feeds from affiliated overseas newspapers, blogging and non-journalistic sources, including readers) rather than the publisher’s own editorial content.¹⁰ Despite a greater number of channels to access news, a homogenisation of news might be the result. News publishers might increasingly simply take on the function of relaying unverified third party information without adding value (the danger of becoming ‘digital windsocks’, see Currah, 2009). Questions on whether the increased availability of news will also translate into increased news gathering or whether new intermediaries restrict their activities only to aggregation and reversioning are increasingly pertinent.
- *Excessive commenting:* It is argued that to differentiate themselves today, offline and online news journalists have an increased tendency to comment and opionate rather than report the news. The rise of personalised blogs, columns with the photograph of a journalist and other such developments foster this trend of “star commentators” (Currah,

2009). Readers might expect more guidance and comments from journalists to make sense of the deluge of information they are exposed to. But there is a risk of diffusing opinions rather than facts which would allow the public to make up their mind. This concern is in slight contradiction with complaints about the fact that news organisations are increasingly just relaying unverified news without analysis or commentary.

- *Tendency towards cheaper and softer news with entertainment value and appeal to advertisers:* The search for greater profits and the dependence on high readership figures and consequent advertising revenues might not only change the quality of given news content but the nature of news itself. In this scenario of market-driven journalism (see Boczkowski, 2005 for this term), the success of a story as a product is judged by the advertising revenues and hence the views and clicks it generates. The question today is whether a story will end up being in the “most e-mailed section”, whether people would blog about it or comment on it and in general how viral this news item will become. Algorithms and the logic of search engines are increasingly dictating which stories come out prominently and which stories are read. In fact, there have even been reports that journalists might increasingly be paid by performance (click streams, readership, etc.).

This form of prioritising news stories might lead to detrimental results. There is a general scepticism among editors-in-chief about the sustainability of investigative reporting, as long and expensive pieces become more and more difficult for newspapers to fund (World Editor’s Forum, 2009). Long investigative articles on government corruption or the resurgence of malaria in Africa would be much less likely to produce attractive ad revenues (see for instance Carr, 2008). Even if it attracts a lot of readers, it might not cover a subject that advertisers want to be associated with. In general, articles on serious and complex subjects, from politics to wars to international affairs, will fail to generate attractive ad revenues.¹¹ Consequently, the online news ecosystem might be more prone to sensational news, infotainment/entertainment news, rather than reporting based on investigation. The end of hard and the rise of soft news are foreshadowed (World Editor’s Forum, 2009). In this context some crucial news angles, like science news, may be hard to sustain.¹²

Both offline and online, news organisations are more prone to being influenced by advertisers or to be tempted to do disguised advertising (product placement and advertiser sponsorship). There are an increasing number of complaints against newspapers, for instance, that praise certain commercial offers in the editorial part of stories. As news organisations also increasingly diversify into other business activities on

line and off line (the sale of concert tickets, travel, online classifieds for rental or property, etc.) or enter into partnerships with other offline or online offerings, their reliance on non-news revenue sources might conflict with editorial standards. They might be tempted to promote these offers in editorial parts of the news (*e.g.* promoting travel to a particular destination, promoting the purchase of apartments in a particular city). In particular in the case of free dailies, it has become difficult to distinguish editorial content from promotions.

A parallel trend is the increase in public relations agencies or media consultants ('spin doctors') increasingly staffed by former journalists who try to control the media agenda and the content in a pro-active way. Access to sources such as business executives or politicians is becoming more difficult. Overworked journalists in search of finishing another story before the deadline might be tempted to work from a press release which has been diffused by professional media experts, often containing one-sided views (Davies, 2009; Fogel and Patino, 2005).

- *Increased fragmentation:* The Internet fragments audiences to an even greater extent than other media. Increasingly there is different news for different groups but less of a shared common element. Agenda setting and public dialogue arguably become more difficult. Moreover, there is a risk that citizens will not be informed any longer on a relevant breadth of issues. Online news consumers might only opt to consult a few articles per day on a given topic (motor sports), whereas through a physical newspaper the reader might have been more exposed to a bundle of daily news and topics (*c.f.* to Chapter 3 which explained that this might in fact not be true).
- *High-quality news increasingly restricted to an elite?* In this general context of faltering quality of the news, a few news outlets might opt for the production of high-quality news which might however be restricted to a small number of persons that can afford to pay for it. Following existing trends of very expensive specialised news providers, there might be a risk that citizens will be split into groups of "information haves" and "information have-nots" (referred to as "*information à deux vitesses*" in Poulet, 2009).

As usual the truth is likely to lie somewhere in the middle. In fact, given the very dynamic state of affairs with respect to new technologies, new business models, and new actors on the scene, the exact impacts and outcomes are hard to predict. In general, it is important not to infer that the Internet or novel online news actors are the cause of all challenges faced by the traditional news system.

The past has also shown that established media often resist much better to new technology platforms than one would expect, and that often very complementary relationships can emerge. Nonetheless, it will be of critical importance to monitor what is happening to newsgathering and content creation over the next months and years.

Notes

1. There are many publications, blogs and other contributions on the topic of online news and the impact on journalism and the public at large. Some comprehensive publications are Salwen *et al.* (2005) and Allan (2006), for instance (see also extensive reference list in this study). The following paragraphs are however based on a broader reading of the literature and more recent contributions.
2. <http://globalvoicesonline.org/about/>.
3. See “Press freedom and the Internet”, in: *The Economist* (17 October 2009) showing how the Internet and bloggers in particular make censored material available when traditional media are bound by law to refrain from publishing or reporting information.
4. Schechter and Manning (2008).
5. “There is no new revenue model for journalism”, Robert Niles (12 January 2010), www.ojr.org/ojr/people/robert/201001/1812/. Others believe that there is only a future for “specialised publications”, “Rosenstiel, A Journalism Optimist — But It May Be a Long Wait”, <http://sustainablejournalism.org/weblog/post/1762/>.
6. www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/papers/discussion_papers/d47_davis.pdf.
7. “Rosenstiel, A Journalism Optimist — But It May Be a Long Wait”, <http://sustainablejournalism.org/weblog/post/1762/>.
8. In a 2008 Pew study based on a large survey of news executives, two-thirds said their papers had reduced space for foreign coverage in the previous three years. See also Starr (2009).
9. Starr (2009).
10. www.presscouncil.org.au/pcsite/activities/guides/gpr284.html.
11. Carr (2008).
12. “Science and the Media – Securing the Future”, Science and the Media Expert Group to the UK government, January 2010, <http://interactive.bis.gov.uk/scienceandsociety/site/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Science-and-the-Media-Securing-the-Future.pdf>.

References

- Allan, S. (2006), *Online News: Journalism and the Internet*, Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Boczkowski, P. (2005), “Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers” (Inside Technology), The MIT Press, 1 March.
- Carr, N. (2008), “The Great Unbundling: Newspapers & the Net”, Britannica Blog’s “Newspapers & the Net Forum”, 7 April, www.britannica.com/blogs/2008/04/the-great-unbundling-newspapers-the-net/.
- Currah, A. (2009), “What is Happening to Our News”, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/What_s_Happening_to_Our_News.pdf.
- Davies, N. (2009), *Flat Earth News*, Vintage Books.
- Fogel, J.-F. and B. Patino (2005), *Une presse sans Gutenberg*, Grasset & Fasquelle.
- Meyer, P. (2006), *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age*, 1st edition, University of Missouri.
- OECD (2007a), *Participative Web and User-Created Content: Web 2.0, Wikis and Social Networking*, OECD, Paris.
- Poulet, B. (2009), *La fin des journaux et l’avenir de l’information*, Éditions Gallimard.
- Salwen, M.B., B. Garrison and P.D. Driscoll (eds.) (2005), *Online News and the Public*, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Schechter, D. and R. Manning (2008), *Plunder: Investigating Our Economic Calamity and the Subprime Scandal*, Cosimo Books.
- Starr, P. (2009), “Goodbye to the Age of Newspapers (Hello to a New Era of Corruption)”, *The New Republic*, 4 March, pp. 28-35, www.princeton.edu/~starr/articles/articles09/Starr_Newspapers_3-4-09.pdf.
- World Editor’s Forum (WEF) (2008 and 2009), *Trends in Newsrooms 2008 and 2009*, Paris.



From:
News in the Internet Age
New Trends in News Publishing

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264088702-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2010), “The Future of News Creation and Distribution: Opportunities and Challenges”, in *News in the Internet Age: New Trends in News Publishing*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264088702-7-en>

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

You can copy, download or print OECD content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from OECD publications, databases and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgment of OECD as source and copyright owner is given. All requests for public or commercial use and translation rights should be submitted to rights@oecd.org. Requests for permission to photocopy portions of this material for public or commercial use shall be addressed directly to the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) at info@copyright.com or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at contact@cfcopies.com.