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The Future of Journalism

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Eastern Kentucky University

The Future of Journalism

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Faculty Mentor

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Department of Communication

Living in a country as advanced as the United States has its advantages and disadvantages. Communication around the world has changed due to the convenience of the Internet and the rise in popularity of cellphones. Members of American society no longer have to look to books, daily newspapers, magazines, or talk to people to get the information they want. All they need to do is sit down at their computer, or get out their phones and all the questions they have can be answered in seconds. But what about information concerning local happenings? Curious citizens can look to their local newspaper for answers, but what happens when that newspaper closes down and their online product disappears because there is no money being made? This situation is a reality in many small towns in America. Newspaper offices are closing at a rapid rate because the cost of the print product is overwhelming in a society where newspaper advertisement is no longer needed. The old business model for having a successful print newspaper is no longer relevant. This model is one that is outdated and doesn't consider the technological advances that make advertising (the most substantial source of profit for newspapers) free if you have any sort of social media or a Craigslist account.

Although print newspapers are in trouble, many argue that online newspapers can easily replace them and the threat to local journalism disappears. However, that is not the case because there is no current business model in place to support local online newspapers. The industry is aware that relying on advertising isn't going to work anymore and have tried a replacement, paywalls. This system is designed to monetize online information by preventing visitors from accessing content without

having a paid subscription. These paywalls are being used by several online news sources, but don't provide enough revenue in small towns to pay for quality journalism, which is where a problem arises. If no money is being made, how can a newspaper survive? And if that newspaper goes away, what does that mean for citizens?

This thesis explores the fate of journalism as it relates to newspapers on the local level and what would happen if they disappeared altogether. During the research process evidence was found supporting the theory that without newspapers there is a forfeit of basic democratic rights, like unwavering free speech. What is and is not said can be easier influenced in big media outlets because of corporate influence and ownership. Local newspapers also provide outlets for opinion and serve as government watchdogs. As the news hub gets bigger (i.e., TV stations, big newspapers, radio) there is less time to cover every little detail or seemingly small happenings, because the idea of breaking news becomes more important. It is proven that the quality of news and journalism goes down substantially as the quantity goes up.

The questions being addressed in this thesis, both to those interviewed and for guiding research, are: Is there a place for several news mediums in the future, or will paper die out completely?; Are newspapers an essential part of a democratic society?; What are communities actually losing when they lose their local newspapers? Do you think communities are willing to fight to keep their newspapers open?; Why do you think some newspapers fail and others succeed?; What makes technology a more appealing way to get news (TV, apps, Facebook, online

newspapers)?; What can other media outlets offer that print cannot? And vice versa?; Do you think bigger media outlets need local newspapers (keystone media)?; and Does social media and citizen journalists help or hurt the idea of quality journalism?

Most sources agreed that for now several news mediums can exist in harmony, and print newspapers will not die out in the near future. They predict that until a better business model for online newspapers is developed, print newspapers will be okay. However, Abigail Whitehouse, the editor-in-chief of the Interior Journal in Stanford, KY, said that the print product will never die in small towns. “People have been saying for years that paper is dying, print is dying. They’ve actually been claiming that it’s already dead, and it’s not. A company just bought all four of our papers, so that tells you they’re making money off of their newspapers and they’re buying more of them” (Whitehouse 2016). Larry Rowell, editor of The Casey County News in Liberty, KY, had a similar outlook. However, he worries that engaging younger generations will be problematic because they are partial to technology. He said that exposing elementary aged children to newspapers and what they do is a good place to start (Rowell 2016). Other sources had similar and contrasting ideas about the decline of print journalism. Gene Gable, author of “The Kids Are Alright: They Just Don’t Read,” says this can be attributed to the current generation not having a desire to read anything and other generations being entranced by the Internet. He shares data from the Pew Center that shows most kids get their news by watching TV, a habit that has likely developed based on what their parents do (Gable 2007). Gable concludes, if adult generations continue to abandon print at their current rates and new generations don’t pick up the slack, and if the

green movement increases in importance with each year, in only a decade or two print media could become so unpopular and inefficient that it assumes its place as nostalgia.

All sources agreed that newspapers are an essential aspect of a successful democratic society. They added that for citizens to make informed decisions about electing government officials and any decision concerning their town, they need a news source to present all the information to them in an unbiased way. Newspapers are also important because they keep the government accountable by making sure it abides by open records laws and use the taxpayer's money in a responsible way.

Robert McChesney had a similar outlook, however, he argued that today's journalism needs to change in order to satisfy this democratic need for unbiased, nonpartisan, factually accurate and uninfluenced news (McChesney 2012).

McChesney explains what he thinks are the shortcomings of journalists and news organizations in the past 100 years, and focuses heavily on present day journalism lacking quality and quantity, due to a heavy reliance on information from people in power. Reggie Beehner, senior lecturer at Eastern Kentucky University, touches on similar ideas, referring to these people influencing the news about themselves. "As we all know, if you allow the people making the news to write the news, to distribute their own news, you don't get the real news. You get the positive spin that they want you to see" (Beehner 2016). John Nelson, retired editor of The Advocate-Messenger in Danville, KY, added that, "anytime you diminish the resources that can be used, and that are being used to be a watchdog of government at any level, then you've invited that threat to democracy, because you don't have an informed electorate, but

the electorate has to want to be informed and they have to want their information to be accurate” (Nelson 2016).

All sources agreed that a world without newspapers would become very problematic. Newspapers serve as a chronological record keeping system for towns by publishing a timely log of town happenings, with items such as marriages, births, obituaries, etc. Elizabeth Hansen, retired chair of the Department of Communications at Eastern Kentucky University, and Nelson argued that without this record, the community would easily lose their identity. They added that newspapers help the community have a conversation itself, meaning that information from different parts of the community is compiled into one place, which exposes readers to parts of their community they aren't normally involved with. Beehner had a different argument. He said that if local news disappears then its relevance is diminished because the less people are exposed to it, the less important it seems (Beehner 2016). Several sources agreed that communities would fight if their newspaper's existence were threatened. The main argument was that citizens would fight because they won't settle for not knowing what's going on around them. Nelson made the point that in a supply and demand society, the people will have to demand good journalism for it to stick around. However, they have to care about having reliable information from trained professionals, if not then the quality will continue to go down as resources are diminished (Nelson 2016). Beehner had a completely different argument, but not opposing. He said it's not enough for people to want to know what's happening, they have to fight for their newspapers with their dollars. If there are no funds to pay journalists to go out in the town and get information, and there are no funds to

produce the finished product, then it wouldn't matter if the people wanted it (Beehner 2016).

Kristy Hess, Martin Johnson and The Conference Papers from the Western Political Science Association also establish several theories concerning the importance of local newspapers. One theory addressed is: local newspapers connect people to one another both consciously and unconsciously, going back to what Hansen and Nelson argued. Without local newspapers there is fear that small towns and cities will miss out on a powerful voice that is vital to a functioning democracy (Hess 2014). Other scholars have theorized based on actual situations where local newspapers have shut down, and the results of that. The New Orleans Times-Picayune ended daily print circulation in 2012, citizens worried that the decline of information would negatively affect the ability of others to keep up with the news (Johnson 2014). The article also showed that the effects are contingent upon physical location. The greater the distance from New Orleans, the more pronounced concerns were about the effect of the loss of this daily information source on others in smaller communities. Johnson questions whether the third-person effect comes into play or not in this instance. The main argument in the conference papers for needing newspapers is that without them there is no accurate, unbiased watchdog for government officials; especially, concerning the public's level of civil engagement. The author concludes, "the composition of local media environments is an important factor in the civic and democratic functioning of communities." Without newspapers, citizens will be uninformed about matters of their communities and will not experience democracy to its' fullest ("What Happens When Newspapers Fail?")

2007).

Taking a step back and looking at the big picture, sources seemed to agree that not all newspapers are the same, and with that being said some fail and some succeed for different reasons. The consensus held by sources was that whenever a newspaper stops understanding the community it is covering, and specifically their needs and wants, that's when it can open itself to failure. No community is willing to support a newspaper that isn't covering things they want to read about. Some sources recommended they focus on staying local and adapt to changing technology, instead of being fearful that it will outdo them. Whitehouse recommended that newspapers use social media and technological advances as tools to help strengthen their product and open themselves up to a wider readership. She reasoned that newspapers shouldn't dwell on the fact that this very thing is hurting them, but use it to their advantage and brace themselves for the change ahead (Whitehouse 2016). Beehner added that the level of interest has to be there as well, which ties back to understanding the community. He made the point that overall generalists, like newspapers, are struggling because people want to read things they are interested in specifically and not so much what they need to be interested in. This is why, Beehner argued, that magazines are thriving. People are subscribing to what they want and not what they necessarily need (Beehner 2016). Two other factors to consider are the newspaper's ability to generate revenue and its ownership. These factors are not as much in the control of the newspaper itself. If a newspaper is owned by a company, rather than privately, it opens up the possibility that the revenue it makes will be used inappropriately. Hansen said for a newspaper to be successful, the ownership

has to provide it with enough money for improvements to be made and not be so concerned with the money it is actually making. Beehner added to this idea by arguing that the only way for newspapers to be successful is to get the for-profit element out and focus on it being a public utility, making enough money for it to exist.

The biggest threat to the daily newspaper is the younger generations knowledge and comfort level with technology. Sources agreed that the immediacy one gets with technology is enough to threaten newspapers. The instant availability of stories and breaking news has made news followers less likely to wait for the print product to come out, and more likely to turn the TV on, or visit their favorite news websites. However, Rowell and Nelson added that although technology has its benefits, newspapers have a more detailed story. There is also a sense of trust built into local newspapers, and a better quality product. On the other hand, Beehner argued that the print product is just inefficient and that's what makes technology so great; it saves a lot of money and is more interactive for audience. Several news sites provide a comments section, surveys, and polls that make them feel connected to the story and they get to see other people's opinions too (Beehner 2016). Whitehouse added that people are visual, and they look to feel like they are a part of the news, which they can do with technology and paper, but newspapers are permanent.

In society today, it is increasingly important for various news outlets to work together because they need each other to be successful. Local newspapers serve as a keystone media for larger media hubs, like broadcast and radio news. Keystone media is described as media that are primary providers of a specific and important

kind of information and enable other media's coverage (Nielsen 2015). Several sources argued that these news stations need local newspapers as their "boots on the ground." Their budget doesn't allow them to have reporters all over the state covering the seemingly small day-to-day events. Rowell said he sees big media outlets getting news from local papers all the time. He added that they often call his office for sources and tidbits of information rather than driving there and doing the reporting themselves (Rowell 2016). If a local newspaper stops printing, the effects are likely to be felt less by individuals and more by broadcast media outlets. Without the detailed coverage of local communities by newspapers, these new stations would have a harder time monitoring events around the area and would have to decide when to allocate funds to cover those events (Nielsen 69). Much of the news that people receive contains no actual reporting, only bits and pieces from other articles, usually found in newspapers (Nielsen 82).

For many years, professionals in the industry worried that with the rise of cellphone usage and social media that anyone could think they were a journalist. Although this was a concern, it never really came to fruition. Sources agreed that while citizen journalists and social media can be helpful, the quality of the work is severely lacking. Hansen argued that the credibility a journalist has makes them vastly more reliable and able to cover important business in a way that is of importance to the people. She added that she's "not sure what they're doing is journalism. That doesn't mean that there aren't people who are capable of doing it and do provide good information. A lot of stuff I see is one shot, not enough facts, more questions left unanswered than answered, and you are not going to get from

citizen journalists in depth reporting” (Hansen 2016).

Rowell is more understanding with the potential social media has. He said that outlets like Facebook are really good for getting story ideas and leads. Beehner added that having information from citizens is good for creating connective tissue, and the fact that citizens have no conflicts of interest can help them be more informative because they are personally connected to the topic. Newspapers cannot do this because they are supposed to be an unbiased party. On the other hand, sources said social media and citizen journalists can cause problems if there is no gatekeeper, or filtering of their untrained opinions. Nelson felt very strongly that sometimes the public isn't always able to discern between what is true and untrue, because they seek information from sources that aren't always reliable. Nielsen said that professional outlets like the “real people” aspect of using citizen journalists (Nielsen 80), because capturing authentic local voices can help other citizens connect to the story (Nielsen 90). However, he added that citizen journalists provide authentic content rather than actually rewriting the rules of news production (Nielsen 91).

In conclusion, newspapers are changing but they don't seem to be going anywhere in the near future. The business model is slowly developing to include a more digital word, one where traditional newspapers can exist in harmony with technology. Will the paper product eventually die out? Probably, but what it does for a community will never die. Journalism has hit some bumps in the road, but the future seems bright and progressive.

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