

Loren Ghiglione

Introduction: the future of news

ABC News vows to cut its news staff by three hundred to four hundred, about 25 percent. More than one-quarter of the public now gets news from cell phones. Bankruptcies, buyouts, and bolting advertisers send one message: The sky, filled with pink slips for reporters, is falling on mainstream news media.

Three magazines displayed next to each other at a bookstore blame different culprits for the mainstream news media's plight. A *New Yorker* Nostradamus describes an entertain-or-die media world of nonstop news on the Web and high-decibel argument on cable TV.¹ An *Atlantic* column points to the shift in readership from lengthy newspaper articles to Internet articles that "get to the point."² An *Utne Reader* article cites plummeting international coverage by U.S. media, down by about 40 percent in 2008.³

The authors of all three magazine pieces, whatever their differences, probably agree with the assumption that drives this issue of *Dædalus* about the future of news: A democracy depends on a citizenry informed by the free flow of serious news and an independent journalism that continuous-

ly casts a skeptical eye on the powerful and provides original, reliable reporting.

This issue's first article – by Herbert J. Gans, the Robert S. Lynd Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Columbia University – calls for rethinking the theory of the press as a bulwark of democracy. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, and Jeffrey A. Gottfried, senior researcher at the Center, follow with an article that credits news media with traditionally educating citizens about national issues. But the article questions whether, based on coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign, the media "still sift fact from fabrication."

Those who see informed citizens as key to a democracy worry, often apocalyptically, about the advertising-supported U.S. media that traditionally have provided news and credible journalism. Print newspapers are closing, commercial radio news is disappearing, and television news operations are slashing staff to survive. What business models will provide the income for news organizations to do the ambitious, expensive journalism that covers wars abroad and investigates corruption at home?

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Is there a role for foundation grants and government subsidies? (Advocates say government help is nothing new, citing bargain postal rates and other federal practices and policies.) If, as Joseph Pulitzer maintained, “Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together,” should we be establishing nonprofit or endowed newspapers, whether on paper or online? In his article for this issue, Robert H. Giles, Curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University, explores new economic models for U.S. journalism. Jill Abramson, Managing Editor of *The New York Times*, looks at the preservation of quality journalism from the inside of a prestigious news organization that is embracing online as well as print products and is exploring payment by online readers who want to receive all *Times* content.

Three articles focus on key aspects of accountability journalism that historically have defined U.S. news media at their best. Brant Houston, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation Chair in Investigative and Enterprise Reporting at the University of Illinois, examines the potential for investigative journalism in the rise of nonprofit newsrooms; the expanding use of computers, Web software, social media tools, and data analysis; and the growth of reporting networks that rely on amateurs and collaboration.

Donald Kennedy, former Editor-in-Chief of *Science* and President Emeritus of Stanford University, worries aloud about coverage of science and technology. He explains that “more so than at any other time within memory,” policy decisions in Washington have “deep science and technology content.” And Ethan Zuckerman, senior researcher at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, describes the

challenge of building interest in international news when interactive media permit people to focus on only news that already excites them. He recalls with a sense of hope what happened in Iran when almost a half-million users of Twitter commented on the first two weeks of protests following the disputed 2009 presidential election in that country. Users became active producers, not merely passive consumers, of news.

The revolution occurring in the news media provides an opportunity for four authors to reconsider the practice of journalism, regardless of what technologies and platforms are used by the news providers and aggregators of the future. Mitchell Stephens, Professor of Journalism at New York University, calls on journalism to aim higher than telling what just happened – to provide “a wise take,” based on expertise, judgment, and insight, on what happened. Jane B. Singer, Associate Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa, addresses what the structural changes in the journalism of today and tomorrow mean for the ethics of journalism.

Michael Schudson, Professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, suggests journalism increasingly take advantage of databases (“databases ‘r’ us”) and nonpartisan academic research, nonprofit advocacy groups, and other expert “political observatories” that monitor governmental activity to enhance the reporting capacity of streamlined news organizations. Jack Fuller, former President of Tribune Publishing Company, recommends that journalism call on the lessons of neuroscience. Driven by deep reasons, for example, emotional pre-

sentations of information are being used more often and working better with audiences; serious journalists need to come to grips with this reality to win the battle for attention.

The final three authors submit that the pace of change, like the pace of news, is likely to accelerate for the media and journalism. Paul Sagan, President and Chief Executive Officer of Akamai Technologies, and Tom Leighton, Chief Scientist at Akamai and a Professor of Applied Mathematics at MIT, anticipate the transformative impact on news and society of real-time, interactive, TV-quality video. Susan King, Vice President and Director of the Journalism Initiative at Carnegie Corporation of New York, discusses innovation in the education of the next generation of journalists, a multimedia generation as attuned to Facebook as to traditional news media. And I examine potential futures for news suggested by speculative fiction.

Absent any silver-bullet scenario, the future of news is likely to be a messy mélange of multimedia experiments. The successful business models for those experiments may not yet be on the horizon. The salaries for journalists, especially in the freelance online world, may rival the not-so-living wages of actors and poets. The range of narrative and non-narrative tools – maps, graphics, charts, photos, videos – may grow. And *Dædalus* readers and other people who used to be called journalism’s audience may be asked to partner and participate with professional journalists to provide the judgment, knowledge, context, interactivity, and depth that characterize the quality journalism essential to a democracy. But emerging from the chaos of change will be a wonderfully exciting, if nerve-racking and brain-bending, future for news.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ken Auletta, “Annals of Communications: Non-stop News,” *The New Yorker*, January 25, 2010, 38–47.
- ² Michael Kinsley, “Cut This Story!” *The Atlantic*, January/February 2010, 35.
- ³ Deborah Campbell, “The Most Trusted Name in News?” *Utne Reader*, January–February 2010, 64–69.