Newspapers: Is There Life After Death?

Excerpt of Lecture by John Darnton
March 3, 2009

Everyone understands that there is a crisis in American newspapers but not everyone realizes there's a crisis in American journalism. The crisis is masked because, right now, we're living through a time of journalistic riches—we have the best of two worlds, the old world of newspapers and the new world of the Internet. But that's not a situation that's going to last. What will emerge at the end of the day? How will the news, the basic information we require for decisions large and small, be different?

As we all know, the ethos of the Web is that information wants to be free. The fact that publishers succumbed to this siren call—giving away for noth-

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ing what they also try to sell—must rank as one of the most boneheaded business models ever devised. The hope, of course, was that as readers mig-

rated to the Web, the advertisers would, too; so that, like a Flying Walenda

spinning from the trapeze into the arms of the catcher, the newspapers would sail over the chasm of plunging profits. But this projection ignored

the fact that ads bring in so much less on the Internet—only ten cents on every dollar compared to print. The catcher wasn't there, nor was the safety net.

From Los Angeles to Chicago to Philadelphia, newspapers are going bust. Others, like the Rocky Mountain News and the Seattle Post Intelli-
gence, are closing or converting to online publi-
cations only. Everywhere newspapers are down-
sizing, closing bureaus and laying off reporters. Out of 52,000 fulltime professional journalists, about 5,000—or 10 percent—lost their jobs last year, according to the Poynter Institute.

Meanwhile, other newspapers are holding on, hoping to reach the "promised land"—that point at which the decline in print ads will be made up for by the rise in online ads. But there are strong indications that only a few chosen newspapers may make it. More and more traffic is gravitat-
ting to the sites of so-called "brand newspapers," like the New York Times or the Washington Post. The sites of most others—especially metro and regional newspapers—are losing revenue and some are even losing visitors. This is happening because the Internet flat-
tens the landscape—in its offering of choices, it reduces the influence of geography, except in the very local sphere.

What is happening over the coming years may many American cities may well lose their daily newspapers. What will happen to news when the mass circulation dailies die out? Who will keep an eye on the board of elections, the Mayor, the city alderman? Who will monitor the awarding of contracts, report on the public schools and keep check on the power of the prosecutor's office? Anyone who has ever covered a state legislature would shudder at the thought of what it might do with no watchdog on hand.

In the absence of newspapers, local news Web sites will crop up—they've already begun in Minneapolis, San Diego and New Haven—but unless and until the Web comes up with a business model that makes local coverage profitable, they won't have sufficient resources to do the kind of enterprise reporting a free society needs.

How will the news of the future be different because of the delivery sys-
tem that conveys it? In today's world of so-called competing narratives, epitomized and realized by the Internet, can the spirit of the objective news story, providing context and background, survive? Or is it destined to perish along with the body that gave birth to it?

Already, in less than 10 years, the Internet has given us a new narrative structure—the blog. Unlike the typical news story, the blog begins in the here and now, with a post, assuming you already know the necessary back-
ground. It is personal, sequential and additive. It almost always tends to be

ground. It is personal, sequential and additive. It almost always tends to be subjective and opinionated.

This interconnectivity is what fires up Internet types, who exult over do-

ing away with what they call gatekeepers—meaning professional reporters and editors—and who see the Web as a forum for participatory democracy that would have warmed the hearts of our founding fathers.

Increasingly popular sites, including one on Wikipedia, allow "citizen

journalists"—anyone who witnesses an event or hears of it—to post a news bulletin, which is then followed up and expanded by others until it mush-
rooms into a comprehensive account. Such an approach worked well in cap-
turing the devastation caused by the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004.

The difference between the mainstream media and the new media boils down to speed versus accuracy. Newspapers believe nothing is more impor-
tant than getting the facts right. The Internet prizes speed. If a Wikipedia en-
try contains false information, that's no big deal; it will be corrected at some point. Good information drives out bad information over the long run—that is the theory—even though bits of bad information keep seeping into the system.

I believe the tolerance for inaccuracy on the Internet derives from a sense that the material before our eyes, consisting of nothing more than trans-

scribed electronic impulses, is in a sense insubstantial. On a psychological level it appears transient and ephemeral, unlike a printed paper, which exists in object form. That is why a photo of President Truman holding up the Chicago Tribune with the headline "Dewey Defeats Truman" still evokes schadenfreude 60 years later.

What is gained and what is lost when print gives way to the Internet? Gained is a variety of views across a wide spectrum and a sense of civic participation. Lost are standards of reli-

ability and accountability, along with the news judgment of professionals.

The hard truth is that newspapers produce a type of quality news that, so far, has not found a place on the Internet. Consider the scandals that newspapers uncovered during the Bush Admin-

istration: the "extraordinary rendition" of terror-

ism suspects; the existence of CIA prisons in Po-

land and Romania; the torture memos of John

Yoo; the mayhem caused by private security contractors in Iraq; the electronic surveillance of Americans' phone calls and emails without court order; the granting of contracts to Halliburton; the interrogation techniques at Abu Grabi and Guantanamo; the massacre of Iraqi civilians at Haditha; and the horrendous conditions at Walter Reed.

These types of stories are essential for a well-informed citizenry, but they are the most expensive to produce. They require large staffs and geographic reach. In Iraq there were about 1,000 Western reporters when Saddam Huse-

sen fell. Today, at any given time, there are about 50. The New York Times has six correspondents assigned there, along with a rotating group of photogra-

phers, Pentagon correspondents who travel in with the troops, and 60 Iraqis, many of them stringers across the country. The cost is about $3 million a year. You won't find Google or Wikipedia or Yahoo there.

It's fashionable to say news is a conversation. You know what? News is not a conversation. A conversation is a free form: you and I can have a conversation, News is a report of a cur-

rent event. It's largely one-way; that is, it moves from the news gatherer to

the news consumer. That doesn't mean it can't be "interactive," that it can't provoke a response, or that it can't "crowd sourced"—in the sense of in-

corporating testimony of eye-witnesses or experts. All of that enriches the story, sometimes to a considerable degree. But the basic stock has to come from somewhere. And so far that somewhere has been a full-time, experi-

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