

Technological Advancements threaten the Future of Newspapers

Introduction

A decade ago, the amount of digital and online publishing driven by profit and consumerism was relatively small. Today, over 80% of all hard copy publications have online and digital versions. Ten years from now, that percentage may rise to 100. All traditional publishing activities will be supplemented by digital versions, which will be promoted more favourably. Flash forward into the next century and one can say that if stakeholders in traditional publishing do not rise to save the industry from extinction, hardcopy newspapers will disappear into the dustbins of history. Further innovations in technology will silence the voice of hardcopy newspapers completely.

Williams (2003) informed us that “at the start of the twenty-first century the issue of the media and globalization is at the forefront of the debates in the field of media studies” (p.11). The print media faces challenges of survival as online and digital services are touted to take its place in the next century. The influx of digital and online services such as the internet, MP3 players, cell phones with internet access, blogs, online versions of newspapers, etc., has led news consumers to rely more increasingly on obtaining information from these online and digital sources.

Media executives who attended the 2005 world association of newspapers meeting in Madrid were advised that newspapers have no future without online and digital services (“Internet holds future”, 2005). The conference was titled “Beyond the printed word.”

In this paper, references to digital and online services refer to the new forms of media centered around the internet and/or accessed through personal gadgets like PDA’s, iPOD’s, MP3’s, cell phones, etc, which can be used to access news. Subjects excluded from the category of new media in this paper also include electronic mass media, represented by television, radio, satellite, and cable.

New media v. old media

“New media,” as a label, is approximately a decade old, but the prediction of its sweeping influence

predates it. Williams (2003) states, “since the early 1980s there has been an unparalleled growth of global media. New media technologies... are compressing time and space... the world is shrinking.” (p.213).

Marshall McLuhan also lends his voice, arguably the most vocal and widely recognized, to this prediction, proposing that the global village was a reconstruction of the communal world of the ancient village torn asunder by the print media (Williams). Nicholas Negroponte, one of the advocates of the brave new digital world, sums up the potential for change:

Early in the next millennium your right or left cufflinks or earrings may communicate with each other by low-orbiting satellites and have more computer power than your present PC. Your telephone won't ring indiscriminately; it will receive and perhaps respond to your incoming calls like a well-trained English butler. Mass media will be re-defined by systems for transmitting and receiving personalized information and entertainment (Williams, p.227).

For the purposes of this paper, old media, traceable to the late 1400's, is represented by hardcopy newspapers. Newspapers have the unique capacity of transmitting enormous amounts of information over long distances and are very responsive to cultural changes. Newspapers look to the future. They have over the centuries afforded consumers longevity, durability, historical evidence, and opportunity for record keeping and referencing. Newspapers have however been fraught with challenges; “one of the biggest challenges that print faces is a lack of accountability and transparency for claimed circulation” (Abplanalp, 2005, p.14).

Concentration of media ownership

Concentration of media ownership is one of the factors driving the exigency to replace hardcopy newspapers with digital versions. Concentration of media ownership has been a major influence in determining the five W's and one H of publishing for several decades. “Herman and Machesney (1997: Chapter 5) argue the convergence of the media, computer and telecommunications markets and the de-

regulation and privatization of the media industries around the world are encouraging the further concentration of ownership... The merger between Time Warner and America Online (AOL) in 2000 indicates that in a market-driven system, control of new technology will be dominated by large media conglomerates, only now they will be larger than before” (Williams, 2003, *p.93*).

Also, the quest for profit by media tycoons may have shifted to new media. They see new media as potentially large profit centers, especially among the younger target demographic groups. The tycoons do not really care if history is destroyed or if integrity is preserved once their bottom-line is sealed. Williams (2003), quoting Herman and McChesney, advises us that “the future of new media is, according to political economists, ‘a subject to be determined by politics, not technology’ (*p.93*).

Documented research now reveals what industry watchers have hitherto known about new media’s growing competition with the old. eMarketer stated that “while total media spending will rise a modest 5% in 2005, internet spending will catapult 34%” (as cited in Oser, 2005, *p.70*).

The battle for newspapers to stay afloat is also being lost on the advertising grounds. Advertising is the backbone of the publishing industry. Advanced media operations can hardly survive without advertising revenue. If advertisements meant for old media are directed to the new, then media owners’ insatiable appetite for profit will shift resources, personnel, and attention to the new media. Media Asia (2005) has warned “As for the future, I hope print advertising can rebound, because budgets are being allocated to other media and competition for budget is tough” (*p.11*).

Bugeja (2005) erases doubts about whose interest is served as online and digital services overshadow traditional newspaper publishing. He observed that “lines blur in the new media world. The only line that doesn’t is the bottom one: profit” (*p.31*).

Factors influencing the upward curve in new media

Participatory journalism is a leading factor in why new media is steadily overtaking newspapers in news delivery and consumption. Participatory journalism is barely a year old, yet it is embraced by

professional journalists, media moguls, and industry experts alike. “2005 was the year that much of the mainstream media began embracing participatory journalism.” (Marshall, 2005, *p.14*). Asian and European media are the leading markets for consumption of this new phenomenon which seem like a re-invention of journalism. Marshall (2005) advises further that “the crown jewel of participatory journalism is South Korea’s OhmyNews.com. The online news organization, which boasts more than 700,000 daily readers, has 54 staff reporters and editors, but at least 70 percent of its content comes from 39,000 citizen reporters. It’s new international edition has 300 citizen reporters...These participatory journalism sites offer intense local coverage that big newspapers and broadcast stations don’t always provide” (*p.14*).

Advocates of citizen journalism are quick to point out that “participatory journalism builds trust. This is a way for us to say we don’t know everything,” (Safran, as cited in Marshall, 2005, *p.15*). This raises the question of how much trust can a reader build on reports that are produced by neophytes? Maher lends his voice to this concern. He posits that news reported by citizen journalists, “...without going through any editorial process that validates the information, it isn’t true journalism,” (as cited in Marshall, 2005, *p.16*).

Blogging is another phenomenon affecting the survival of hardcopy newspapers. Brady (2005) in examining blogging, says “the rise of easy-to-use software has put a printing press in the hand of every citizen. No longer can anyone be denied a seat at the table, and those of us in the mainstream press deny that at our own peril” (*p.66*). In 2005, blogging’s growth led news reporters and publications to source information from blogs and include same in their publications. News events can be accessed in the same instant that they occur. “The digital generation that grew up using the web and playing video games expects its media to be interactive and is turning away from traditional ways of getting the news” (Marshall, 2005, *p.15*). Reading a newspaper doesn’t seem to hold value for this society anymore. The worth a reader gets from reading a newspaper, knowing the information was researched and proofread by trained professionals has been traded for instant gratification. Brady (2005) sums up why this change may be irreversible, “the natural advantages of each medium have blurred in cyberspace” (*p.66*).

Economic, socio-political, and cultural factors

Political economy asserts the production of media products... is structurally constrained by economic and political factors, especially the private ownership of media industries (Williams, 2003).

Murdock and Golding believe “the mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities” (as cited in Williams, 2005, *p.56*). Media owners are striving to answer the call to uphold the tenets of journalism and preserve heritage in hardcopy newspaper publication. The attempts to resist the changes that are coming as hardcopy newspapers bow to their online and digital versions may not be favourable for the print media industry. McGuire speaks to this when he proposes that “it’s time newspaper corporation CEOs and publishers come to grips with history – the history they are writing. Those executives must start imagining that if newspapers are indeed in the death throes, it is they who will be judged. The media history books could well show them watching their industry die for a few percentage points of profit” (as cited in Bugeja, 2005, *p.33*).

The socio-political factors are overt. Weber believes “the web has the advantage of allowing people to distribute news without needing to buy printing presses or build television studios, thus requiring less revenue to be profitable” (as cited in Marshall, 2005, *p.15*). Gordon thinks “if you believe in a democratic society and freedom of the press, I don’t see how you can look at citizen journalism and say it’s a bad thing. It’s the most democratic system of publishing ever” (as cited in Marshall, 2005, *p.16*).

McLuhan and Fiore say “by breaking down the barriers of time and space between people and nations, some argue the media are creating one global family where differences are submerged in favour of what we share, what we have in common... Electronic communications are producing an environment in which people are ‘involved with, and responsible for, each other’” (as cited in Williams, 2003, *p.214*).

Accessibility

The issue of accessibility is a primary concern. If most of the world’s population can’t access hardcopy newspapers (arguably inexpensive) because they are illiterate or impoverished, how will they

access digital and online services? Varian (2005) estimates that over 90% of information currently produced is created in a digital format, and there's a possibility this percentage will increase substantially in the future. Much existing content currently available only in physical formats will soon be digitized.

Community

Localized identity and community may suffer with new media. Skilled reporters are absent in most developed countries' local communities. The majority of the news available online through blogging services and participatory journalism is gathered by neophytes whose long-term interest may be self-serving. Bugeja (2005) advises that "advances in news technology are meant to keep reporters indoors, enhancing productivity often at the expense of authenticity" (p.31).

Williams (2003) exposes the biggest obstacle of new media to our communities. "The spread of global media as well as their increasing centrality in most people's lives is seen as a problem for local communities... The debate about the impact of global media revolves around the question of identity – cultural, national and individual. Everybody needs a sense of who they are, a sense of belonging... The global media pose a threat to the nation, promising to erode those imaginary boundaries that distinguish one group of people from another" (pp.214-215). News consumers' interest in new media opens them to the risk of loss of local community identity through exposure to dominant cultures.

Objectivity and Reliability

A prevailing and binding tenet of journalism is the reflection of objectivity in news reports. Publications relying on information gathered through blogging or participatory journalism risk a lack of objectivity. These publications may expose their readers to unconfirmed reports, unverified claims, and amateur writers reporting fabrications. One can argue that this happens with trained professionals too; and the media has had its fair share of scandals resulting from this, but it is apt to note that the culprits can be made accountable because they are in mainstream media and can be identified. It is difficult to identify someone who files a report on a blog, in a cybercafé, under a pseudonym, with no link to the personality. Though Carter reminds us that "the public is not an outsider, the public is the point of the enterprise." (as

cited in Bugeja, 2005, *p.31*), it is still necessary to verify the information reported by bloggers and citizen journalists before posting such information on credible newspaper websites. McGuire supports Carter, asking editors to focus on readers rather than on profits, and calling the corporate status quo ‘an ethics crisis’ (Bugeja, *p.31*).

It is important to note however that values of great journalism can exist side by side with the profit demands of the marketplace, but what has become the norm is the “...trend in American journalism to repackage and present information, rather than gather it” (Bugeja, 2005, *p.31*).

Control of internet

The issue of the control of the internet recently took world centre stage at a United Nations (U.N.) summit, but the outcome of the debate didn’t alleviate industry watchers’ concern. Delegates to the 2005 U. N. world summit on information society were advised that the United States of America will retain control over the internet. Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), a U.S.-based non-profit organization answerable to the U.S. Commerce Department, is in charge of the computer systems that control internet addressing and information traffic (Edwards, 2005). Negotiators at the summit agreed to set up a forum to explore ways to narrow the technology gap between rich and poor countries but that forum will have no power to regulate the internet or wrest control of the domain-name system from the United States (Sullivan and Wendlandt, 2005).

Conclusion

Could Hipp have been accurate when he said “digital revenue is serious business... online business is a growth business, while newspapers are not” (as cited in “Internet holds future”, 2005)? Could that statement be a reflection of the drive that lifted the printed word off tablets and stones (which were reserved for elites in the 15th century) and placed it on newsprints (which became widely accepted and made information more widely available)?

Online and digital news dissemination is truly catching on and replacing hardcopy newspapers. If a disaster should befall the technological field, such as a pull of ICANN’s plug or another dotcom bust, the

history of generations of people and nations may be completely lost. McLuhan and Fiore's claim that electronic communications are producing an environment in which people are 'involved with, and responsible for, each other' (as cited in Williams, 2003, p.214) is arguable. This claim could be true but people may not necessarily want to be *that* involved with or responsible for each other. They could however be forced to change as new media is thrust on their computer screens or other digital devices.

The author can be reached at jumokegiwa@gmail.com

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