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Improving Newspapers' Economic Prospects by Augmenting Their Contributions To Democracy

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Prof. Robert M. Entman



These dire circumstances led many scholars and news executives to urge new business models to free newspapers from Wall Street's demands for continued growth in profit. Among them are non-profit; low-profit limited-liability; quasi-public; charitable; or foundation-supported (see Hamilton 2009). This essay argues that even if the newspaper industry successfully transitions to business models that don't demand ever-growing profits, it will—and should—still pursue a mass audience. Building on a synthesis of scholarly findings, this article suggests ways of doing political journalism that respond to changing audience interests and ever-growing alternatives to traditional daily newspapers—while remaining true to the higher ideals of watchdog journalism.

"Newspaper companies are digging their own graves."

One positive sign is the evidence suggesting that a healthy market for quality journalism remains, and that the total news audience when the internet is included was not shrinking in the early 2000s (Logan and Sutter, 2004; Belt and Just 2007; Prior 2007). Yet US newspapers may contribute to reducing market demand for democracy-enhancing 'hard' news by their reluctance to jettison conventional market research to take risks and innovate based on social science. Arguably, then, production of high-quality daily newspapers suffers from owners' and executives' failure to take account of ideas that might help traditional news brands retain credibility and appeal more to audiences, especially younger adults. If the peril is as dire as many believe, if the risks of staying the course are manifest, then perhaps changing course actually becomes the more risk-averse path.

EXTRA! EXTRA! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

As Hamilton (2004) demonstrates, relying on private enterprise to supply an optimum level of informative, citizenship-enhancing news is problematic. In many cases, the inattentive citizenry never has the chance to learn enough to arouse sufficient curiosity, anxiety or enthusiasm to create strong market demand for more probing, independent, informative news. The loss not only accrues to the media in the form of less consumer support for aggressive journalism, but to society at large.

Consider the issue of climate change: The benefits of an informed public on this matter would raise eventual social

welfare throughout the world. Yet the mass circulation news media in the US fail to offer a coherent climate crisis narrative of the sort required for scientific understanding and urgency to diffuse through the public. This is evident from analyses of media content and from surveys showing drops in public understanding and concern even as scientific comprehension and apprehension grow. To enjoy the welfare benefits of an informed citizenry requires that elites perceive a concerned public and media narratives can influence leaders' perceptions and in particular, lower the perceived political risks of making difficult climate policy choices. To increase the potential both for wider public understanding and for emboldening elites to make difficult policy choices, journalistic practices would have to change to resemble the ways scientists themselves build and communicate scientific narratives (aka theories).

Therefore, the media need to do something 'extra': treat global warming as breaking, crisis, 'stop-the-presses' news. Failing this, the public has scant ability to read (or find out) all about the policy exigencies of climate change—a situation that reduces politicians' incentives to act creatively and decisively while promoting a lack of interest in news consumption. After all, experience shows that crisis narratives typically lead to major increases in public attention to news coverage (Parker and Deane 1997).

Most frames should be created equal

One of the most energetic areas in political communication research revolves around understanding the impact of frames on political knowledge, interest and opinions. Most scholars would concur that framing does help to set public agendas, and often primes citizens to weigh some criteria more heavily than others in assessing policies and politicians, and in voting (e.g. Price and Tewksbury 1997; Borrelli and Lockerbie 2008). For our purposes, however, the more important general finding is that frame competition serves both to engage and enlighten the audience. Chong and Druckman's (2007 a, b, c) research suggests that individuals are less vulnerable to manipulation when they receive competing frames. Frame competition also helps to hold government accountable by preventing any one side from dominating public and elite perceptions.

When one framing of an issue pervades traditional mass media and their websites, democratic accountability suffers. Such cases of single-frame dominance, or news slant, arise from the interactions of facts and events with the strategies of media spin managers, with journalistic practices and limitations, and with public opinion. New facts, changed elite skill levels, strategies, power, popularity and other factors can transform framing from one-sided to something approaching balanced competition.

The traditional journalistic practice of 'objectivity' bears a complicated relationship to news slant. Slanted news can sometimes perform the functions that professional creed often assigns to objectivity. That is, objectivity practices largely entail removing personal political preferences from news coverage and attempting to give contending sides equivalent treatment. However, scholars have shown that the practices often yields misleading, manipulative news (Bennett 2009), as for example in the case of falsely equating

scientists who frame global warming as a real problem with interest group spokespersons depicting climate change as merely a speculative 'theory' (Carvalho 2007).

In practice, 'objectivity' seems often to yield a kind of stenographic passivity on the part of journalists that allows the side with the greatest manipulative skill and power over outcomes to dominate framing. The dominant slant on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was determined more by the administration's superior skill and power (including intimidation of news organizations—Bennett 2009) than by journalistic assessment of legitimate experts' readings of the facts. Plenty of specialists inside government and out disputed the intelligence on Iraq. More attention to them might have produced more balanced framing throughout the media, which might have allowed citizens to more autonomously assess the situation—while potentially emboldening skeptical politicians to more forcefully question the rush to war premised on faulty intelligence.

In any case, facts generally do not line up entirely on one side, and democracy thus benefits from framing contests. If journalists employed a more self-conscious understanding of the cognitive psychology of message construction and information processing, and in particular saw themselves as striving to construct balanced frames more than merely covering a given day's news, they might be able to offer audiences more consistent frame contests and fewer instances of unwarranted one-sided framing (i.e., slanted news).

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By following this new practice, news organizations could more effectively defend themselves against the bias charges that reduce the credibility and commercial value of their brands of traditional 'objective,' professionally vetted news. They would acknowledge that news is not always balanced despite their best effort. Incidentally, public officials themselves could benefit from more consistently balanced news framing in the long term, as they would be less vulnerable to misleading one-sided framing of complicated issues—the sort of framing that discourages politicians from telling the truth and serving their own ideals.

Only connect: The Need for Narrative

Research also confirms what might be called 'the need for narrative.' That is, just as journalistic lore holds, people like good stories with interesting characters and suspense about outcomes. However, in practice, news products exhibit an entirely non-ideological, non-partisan 'fragmentation bias': individual news reports tend to be driven by the day's events,

unconnected to relevant prior events and larger societal trends (Bennett 2009). This bias in news content and in decision-making by reporters and editors undermines the narrative qualities of news coverage. By doing so, the fragmentation bias undermines the commercial value of news.

Narrative means the opposite of fragmentation, it means 'connecting the dots,' placing events in long-term thematic contexts (Iyengar 1991) rather than treating them as disjointed episodes. Providing reminders of exactly who these people in the news are, their past records and their loyalties, could engage readers' interest while building suspense about what's at stake and who wins or loses in the conflicts driving the narratives. Thus, rather than approaching the narrative through what Cappella and Jamieson (1997) call the 'game schema,' which usually means focusing mostly on political maneuvers, plans and predictions, news treatments would engage people by highlighting the concrete stakes for them, their values and interests and identities, in the outcomes.

An organizational innovation might help in accomplishing the narrative mission: News organizations might appoint continuity editors. Their charge would be connecting the dots. Fictional movies have long employed staff to ensure against confusing audiences about the on-screen world. Filmmakers have people checking that Harrison Ford does not suddenly appear clean-shaven five seconds into a scene that he started with a two-day growth.

However, continuity editors would not work to ensure that the dots of the dominant frame be maintained as such, although there is some danger that in practice pressures within the newsroom might encourage this. To minimize that risk, the new editorial function would need to be institutionally insulated from newsroom hierarchies as thoroughly as possible. The charge of continuity editors would be detecting narrative gaps and explicitly noting contradictions, as well as promoting texts that feature competition between well-developed frames, not maintaining a seamless flow of narrative from the most powerful or skillful politicians.

This practice could also increase accountability of public officials. Arguably one of the best features of Jon Stewart's 'Daily Show' is its assembling of a politician's soundbites over time to chart the progress of his or her narrative, often detecting contradictions and distortions, as well as discouraging both journalistic and audience amnesia. As the popularity of the 'Daily Show' suggests, this form of narrating the news possesses entertainment value, which generates audience interest—and profit. The continuity editors could help mainstream newspapers adapt this practice.

Beyond uncovering hypocrisy or deception, continuity editing could reward leaders who show progress, fulfill promises, offer reasonable rather than cynicism-producing explanations for delays in achieving announced policy objectives and the like. Thus this institutional function need not be seen as inherently hostile to public officials; on the contrary it would benefit those who tell the truth and fulfill their promises, something that cynical journalistic reporting often fails to do.

Journalism is not as journalism does: The roles of emotion and play

The market would seem to be driving news media toward an understanding that news consumption and political learning need not be entirely devoid of play and enjoyment. Cao (2005), for instance, shows that viewing political comedy shows stimulates learning, especially among younger people. Baym (2007) argues that the overtly comedic constructions of representation in Stephen Colbert's 'Better Know a District' features, where he conducts absurdist interviews of Congress members, actually serve quite serious informational functions. It is at least within the realm of possibility that mainstream newspapers could consider more playful news features.

Perhaps the current area of most active research relevant to this proposition is that involving the ways political information relayed by the media, news genres as well as advertising, can engage emotion. Consuming news cannot be merely a cognitive exercise. Emotional stimulation should not be regarded as the enemy of rational thought; emotion is not only acceptable, it is unavoidable and often beneficial for political reasoning (Brader 2006; Huddy Feldman and Cassese 2007). This means reporters and editors must pay careful attention to the precise words and visual images deployed in news coverage. These quite possibly spark emotional associations that are not obvious either to reporters and editors or audiences, but are no less influential for that (Westen 2007).

Furthermore, entertainment and other online alternatives to news consumption may be exacerbating the divide between the information haves and have-nots (Prior 2007), there may be ways for traditional news organizations to turn this trend to some advantage. Internet and citizen generated news from blogs, YouTube, and social sites, enrich the informative and watchdog functions of traditional news organizations and if properly handled bring new audiences to traditional formats and trusted news organization brands.

"Entertainment and other online alternatives to news consumption may be exacerbating the divide between the information haves and have-nots."

Keep it simple, not stupid

Everyone uses heuristic shortcuts to cope with information overload—audience members, political elites, and journalists alike. These simplifying aids to rationality are necessary to any hope of "taming the information tide" (Graber, 1999) but they can also be abused. Employment of heuristics by journalists, in the absence of critical self-reflection (see Niblock 2007), can bleed over into reinforcing of audiences' stereotypes. And indeed, much research over the past two decades reveals that news media unintentionally reinforce racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Mendelberg 2008).

One example of what not to do comes from much reporting on Hurricane Katrina, which stereotyped blacks even as it

also stimulated both empathy and anger among many white audience members (see Iyengar and Hahn 2007; Rojecki 2008). This was a matter of sheer ignorance and sloppiness—and perhaps some unconscious racial profiling as well—on the part of journalists and editors who reported stereotype-confirming rumors (e.g. of rampant violence including child rape at the Superdome) as fact.

Research on race relations and policies closely linked in the public mind to race (e.g., crime (Mendelberg 2001) and welfare (Gilens 1999)) reveals how small decisions about which words and images to use can have outsized political impacts, especially when habitually repeated over the years. As the country becomes increasingly diverse, media have economic incentives, not just ethical ones, for sensitivity to these subtle dysfunctions.

Market pressures create opportunities, not just problems

James Hamilton's research (2004) documents the difficulties of relying on commercial markets to produce optimal levels of information for democratic citizenship. Zaller (2004) has also shown that softer news can generate larger audiences than hard, on least on television. On the other hand, Jerit (2007) suggests more substantive coverage can increase interest: "extensive media coverage can motivate a much broader audience to pay attention to current affairs." This means news organizations that devote space and time to issues might be able to unleash a virtuous circle whereby interest in and coverage of serious political issues reinforce each other.

But the real news here arises from the challenge and promise of new communication technologies, in particular the internet and the growing mobility and dropping cost of access to global multimedia networks that link individuals, groups, and news organizations, among others (Castells 2009). Robinson (2007) describes how journalism is becoming a more collaborative enterprise via online supplements to which audiences contribute and through which they interact with each other and with the journalists who report and edit stories.

This deep involvement of audiences with each other and with journalists contains both limitations and promise. On the one hand, the sort of endlessly ramifying online, hyperlinked, multimedia reporting and discussion described by the journalists whom Robinson interviewed can only engage a limited number of citizens. It is difficult to envision most typical Americans having the inclination, cognitive resources, or time to take full advantage of the extraordinary new learning opportunities offered by the synergies of traditional news organizations with the World Wide Web (see Hindman 2008). Worldwide and local networks of specialized issue publics, those most interested in, say, anti-globalization activism, health care or local schools, have new mechanisms enabling their learning, organizing, and perhaps exercise of power (Bimber 2003). But it seems unlikely these options will engage the masses of citizens, who, as Prior (2007) suggests, are—as most people always have been—more interested in pure entertainment and diversion, in playing games or downloading episodes of hit TV shows or following

the Red Sox, than in seizing new online opportunities for civic involvement. On the other hand, the promise in the new technologies should not be denied either. Those specialized issue publics could be quite attractive to advertisers, so one can envision newspaper websites becoming revenue generators that will replace earnings lost as overall circulation declines.

"People always have been more interested in pure entertainment and diversion than in seizing new online opportunities for civic involvement."

For now, we must recognize the importance, inevitability and perhaps desirability of traditional news organizations—especially on the local and state levels where the market's failure to support optimum knowledge production seems particularly acute—assimilating and harnessing the interactive, multimedia capabilities of online news. Given the limited contributions of most broadcast and cable stations to high-quality news, this means newspapers are the ones that need to engage emotion, stimulate interest, dialogue and deliberation, and generate more informed citizens, particularly when it comes to younger people who naturally make up an ever-growing proportion of the potential market for news. The economics are still up for grabs, still dependent on how newspapers respond to the challenges and opportunities.

Conclusion

Newspaper journalism faces unprecedented challenges, all of which make a compelling case for creative innovation to stave off destruction of traditional print dailies. Beyond this, standard market research and customary journalistic fixes have demonstrated little efficacy at maintaining audiences (and stock prices) for most newspaper firms. It would appear journalism has little to lose by acting on the happy coincidence between the democratizing potential of newspapers and their interests in economic survival. ■

¹ Entman, R.M. (2010). Improving Newspapers' Economic Prospects by Augmenting Their Contributions to Democracy. The International Journal of Press/Politics, 15 (1), pp. 104-125. See the full article or contact the B.I.L. for a reference list.