

# 2

# The Future of Newspapers

*Shelley Thompson*

“The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

Thomas Jefferson (1757)

“Every time a newspaper dies, even a bad one, the country moves a little closer to authoritarianism; when a great one goes, like the New York Herald Tribune, history itself is denied a devoted witness.”

Richard Kluger, former journalist  
and Pulitzer prize winning author

Reporters for *The Rocky Mountain News* arrived at work on the morning of 26 February 2009 not knowing that Rich Boehne, the chief executive officer of Scripps (the newspaper’s owner), would be announcing at noon that the nearly 150-year-old newspaper would be publishing its final edition the next day (Vaughan, 2009, Ryckman, 2009). Investigative reporter Laura Frank later recalled that when she learned of the newspaper’s closure, she had been working on a news story about “gas drillers and welders and people losing their jobs”. As it turned out, the story would never be published. The closure of *The Rocky Mountain News* left Denver, Colorado, a city of more than 600,000 residents, with only one newspaper. Its closure was quickly highlighted by media commentators as being part of a global trend where declining circulations - and thereby advertising revenues - were knocking one newspaper after the next into bankruptcy.<sup>1</sup>

What was happening in the United States, many feared, would soon spread to the UK. Here more than 100 local and regional newspaper titles have been closed outright, temporarily suspended publication, or been consolidated with other newspapers (Curran, 2010, Greenslade, 2011). The newspaper industry's ongoing struggle with declining readerships proved to be an important feature of the discussions prompted by the Leveson Inquiry into the phone hacking scandal, which reported in November 2012.<sup>2</sup> There it was observed that the trend of newspaper closures and staff redundancies, evidently at its height in 2007-8 due to the economic recession, raised significant questions about the very potential for newspapers to survive. Critics wondered aloud whether the days of the newspaper were numbered.

Even more confident projections of the newspaper's future conceded that it may not be too long before newspapers ceased to appear in their paper and ink editions. According to The Center for the Digital Future (2012), for example, print newspapers in the US have just five years left. Citing declining sales figures and an increasing pattern of newspaper readers going online for their news, the Center believes that few newspapers will continue to exist in their printed form. Only newspapers with a global reach like *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, on one end of the spectrum, and local newspapers that publish weekly or twice weekly, on the other end, may prove viable in this format. A more upbeat assessment is offered by Phillip Meyer (2009), who gives newspapers until 2043 or 2044, a calculation based on declining readership patterns in the US since the 1960s. In the second edition of his book, *The Vanishing Newspaper*, he cautions that he is not predicting the end of print newspapers so much as observing a trend that may well continue.

Although some may be ready to write newspapers' obituaries, disagreeing only on how long it will take, others are not so sure. Piet Bakker (2011) reminds us that newspapers and their websites remain important and relevant today because they are the only media that primarily focus on news and journalism. Here a contrast is drawn with television, with its emphasis on devoting significant time to entertainment programming. Bakker also points out that globally newspapers remain a key source of news for citizens, with at least a quarter of the adult population readable to be economically viable (Calhoun,

1992, Curran, 1991, Fraser, 1992, McNair, 2000). Beginning in the next section, we turn to consider newspapers' transition onto digital platforms in the late 1990s and early 2000s so as to provide a broader context to our enquiry. As we will see, it is useful to understand what newspapers went through at the time in order to understand where the industry is today, and where it may be heading tomorrow.

### Going online

Online journalism, as advocates rightly suggest, has the opportunity to connect the public to news organisations in ways that foster democratic debate and discussion. Cottle (2006) points out that it has the potential to open traditional media to a wider variety of views and voices, which by definition would help to democratise news reporting. At the same time, new technologies have enabled citizens to begin publishing on their own and, in so doing, contribute to newsmaking outside of mainstream sources (Allan, 2006, Greer and Mensing, 2006, Matheson, 2004).

For newspapers, going online has posed a series of challenges associated with providing local content on a global stage. Newspapers, traditionally, have been defined by geography, but they are not constrained by the same borders when they move on to the internet (Thurman, 2007). As such, they face more audiences spread across time and space, which can present problems for journalists to meet the diverse needs of these audiences who may be in other parts of the world. For example, during the September 11, 2001 attacks, ordinary citizens sought out alternative perspectives in international news markets, including trusted UK news sources like *The Guardian* (Zelizer and Allan, 2002). The perspectives offered by news sites in foreign countries were more critical of the Bush administration's response to the attacks than US news organisations had been. Some were heartened to see such criticisms, while others complained such sites were anti-American in their orientation. Newspapers were becoming increasingly aware that their news provision was being read – and critiqued – by distant readers who would never see that day's print edition. This changing sense of their audience posed challenges for covering major events.

Before delving into these challenges in more detail, it is im-

portant to set out some historical context on the publication of newspapers on the web. Newspapers have had websites since the 1980s (Shedden, 2011), although the frequency and sophistication with which they have published online has steadily increased over the time since (Greer and Mensing, 2006). Early online newspapers offered little in the way of original content, often replicating only some of what appeared in the print edition and with few images, no real multi-media content. Since 1997, US newspapers publishing online offered an increasing amount of multi-media content and a greater volume of content overall (Greer and Mensing, 2006). The same can be said in the UK as the first online newspaper, the *Electronic Telegraph* (now called [Telegraph.co.uk](http://Telegraph.co.uk)), was launched on 15 Nov. 1994. That first online edition was printed on a 'grey background and with tiny thumbnail pictures' and was not a 24-hour operation (Richmond, 2009), which would be strange in today's converged, 24-hour news environment where newspapers routinely use multimedia storytelling to report the news. Almost from the outset, it was apparent that the internet would expand opportunities for people to express their opinions beyond letters to the editor and vox pops, offering new opportunities for interactivity (Cottle, 2006, Allan, 2006). Today's online newspapers offer readers a chance to immediately comment on a variety of news and editorial pieces and share the news with friends, family and colleagues through social media, which would have been unfathomable just a decade or so ago.

Additionally, publishing online allows newspapers to break news in similar ways as their rivals in 24/7 broadcast news, which newspapers would not be able to do otherwise. Their online presence enables them to avoid the constraints placed on space that their printed editions face. For example, the opportunity to provide original source material online, including scanned copies of documents and reports or linking to sources cited in articles, represent major advances. In this way, greater transparency can be achieved (Allan, 2006, Matheson, 2004), thereby inviting audience members to decide for themselves whether to trust the information provided. It is important for the public to consider newspapers to be credible sources of information – otherwise their role in the public sphere will be threatened. Still, even when news content can be produced in a different way on the web, some research comparing news-

papers' print and online editions have found that there is little difference between the two as newspapers reprint their offline editions on their news websites (Matheson, 2004, Pavlik, 2001, Scott, 2005, Hoffman, 2006). The idea of reproducing print content online with little or no change is known as 'shovelware', a term originally used in the 1980s to describe when software manufacturers would copy a game or some other content onto CD-ROM (and later the internet) without changing it in any way to suit the new medium .

Although newspapers can provide links to source material on other websites, newspapers tend not to provide them as often as they could do. Hoffman (2006) describes links to other sources, contact details about events, and other such content as 'mobilising information' because it enables citizens to participate in the democratic process. The content itself does not motivate the citizens so much as provide them with the opportunity to engage with their communities by providing information about ways to participate (a public hearing, for example, or public protest), names and other relevant details for individuals and groups, or tactical advice about how to get involved. Newspaper websites facilitate such social networks, in other words. That said, however, Hoffman's research also found that they did not provide more 'mobilising information' than the print editions. While things may have changed in the years since, there is little doubt newspapers are continuing to experiment with ways to enhance their relationships with their readers.

Hyperlinking to other materials and sources (organisations and individuals) is one example of interactivity that we take for granted today. Not long ago, the opportunity for readers to engage in e-mail conversations with journalists was the height of interactivity (Schultz, 2000). However, today's standards for interactivity go well beyond this level. What counts as interactivity is changing all of the time, so the challenge for online newspapers is to determine how to remain up-to-date with technology and how to use it to provide the journalistic resources audiences need for democratic engagement. Enhanced forms of audience participation helps to provide the newspaper with a deeper understanding of their own readers, which then feeds back into the news decision-making process (Robinson, 2007, Allan, 2006). It gives journalists additional information about what news interests audiences – both in terms of what they read and what they

comment on. However, to merely provide news of interest to the audience – rather than news in the public interest – would pose a challenge to journalistic integrity and professionalism. Emily Bell (2006), former editor of *Guardian Unlimited*, remembered that during her tenure the online article that was most read was about the reality-TV programme Big Brother. This meant it was important for journalists to resist the temptation to focus exclusively on those stories which happen to attract huge numbers of ‘hits’ on the website. She argued strongly that journalists have a responsibility to inform as much as entertain the audience, which raises important implications for thinking about their professional responsibilities.

Returning to the broader historical context, newspapers in the early days of online publishing had to consider whether they were ‘scooping themselves’ if they posted a breaking news story online before it ran in the print edition. In 1997, the *Dallas Morning News* broke a story online regarding the trial of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy James McVeigh (Allan, 2006). The newspaper was criticised for the story, which alleged a jailhouse confession by McVeigh to his attorney, when the attorney, Stephen Jones, said the confession was a hoax (and later a defense attempt to get a witness to talk). Shortly after, Jones accused the newspaper of stealing defense documents and attempted to prevent publication of the story, although the latter was moot because publishing online is immediate (Rieder, 1997). The decision to publish online had been intensely debated – in choosing to run the story in the online edition before the printed edition, the newspaper was effectively ‘scooping itself’.

In these early days of online news reporting, the newspaper’s print edition was the primary focus of the staff’s attention, not least because it drew almost all of the targeted readership. Also, journalists at the time (and many critics of online today still agree) were wary of an internet perceived to be filled with unverified information. Today, of course, newspapers regularly choose to post their content online straightaway. In 2011, *The Guardian* and its Sunday counterpart *The Observer* announced a ‘digital first’ policy, whereby they would prioritise the online edition over and above the print one (Sabbagh, 2011). This policy effectively codifies a practice that many newspapers appear to be adopting these days. This helps to ensure they remain competitive in a 24/7 news environment, although carries with

it the risks that they may succumb to the excitement of speculation and rumour, and end up publishing before all of the facts have been nailed down (Lewis et al., 2005, Thussu, 2003).

Looking more deeply at the issue of geography, newspapers have traditionally catered to audiences defined within specific time-space limits, as noted above. Online editions of newspapers are not constrained by the same borders, which has posed challenges from the outset of the move to the internet. In the late 1990s, research indicated that about a third of visitors to newspaper websites were from outside the print market (Chyi, 2011). Today, some British newspapers find more than half of their readers coming from outside the UK. As such, newspapers need to consider whether or not to address these readers (and potential advertisers) directly, and if so, how best to do it. *The Guardian*, for example, draws approximately 56 per cent of its readership from outside the UK, including a significant portion of readers from the U.S. For this reason, it has opened a Washington, D.C. newsroom to focus on coverage of politics of particular interest to this segment of its audience (Chyi, 2011). The same can be said for community newspapers' websites, which see visits from individuals that were once living within the geographic area of the newspaper but have since moved away, may be seasonal or part-time residents, or business owners/employees with an interest in the community (Gilligan, 2011). This enables newspapers to maintain a relationship with readers who once were loyal to the print edition, but is equally challenging in understanding how best to serve their needs. Given that journalists take their cues for what news to cover based on their understanding of their audience, these considerations are significant.

Turning to citizen journalism and user-generated content – i.e., contributions such as eyewitness accounts, blog posts, digital photographs or video, or even simply comments on news stories – newspapers can find themselves struggling to be as inclusive as possible. Technology has enabled a proliferation of amateur news-making, whether or not the individuals involved would consider themselves to be journalists (Thurman, 2008, Matheson, 2004). Over the years alternative news sites have pushed stories into the mainstream news, including President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky (Allan 2006) and Prince Harry's service in Afghanistan, which made headlines in 2008. Both stories were broken by The Drudge Report ahead of news reporting in traditional media,

raising questions about who qualified to be counted as a journalist. However, scholars have found that few citizen reporters working on blogs – those not associated with news agencies – receive much public attention over a sustained period (Haas, 2005, Nip, 2006). Additionally, many of the ‘elite’ bloggers are actually professional journalists, which invites debate about the boundaries between professional objectivity and personal subjectivity.

Although bloggers tend to look to traditional media such as newspapers for topics, some have the potential to set the news agenda themselves. Others point to their influence in changing the style of news reporting, not least with short, sharp articles that are easier to read. Some newspapers are using blogs as sources to supplement their factual content with a greater range of viewpoints or opinions (Messner and Garrison, 2011). Here it newspapers need to negotiate their relationship with bloggers, whether they are fellow journalists or simply sources in a more traditional sense. The latter is useful in certain circumstances, but if overused can leave the reader with insufficient information in order to make an informed opinion. As a result, many newspapers endeavour to provide the blogger’s name in order to increase transparency in the reporting, once again an important consideration where credibility is concerned.

Publishing news online has opened significant opportunities for newspapers over the years. As we have seen above, it has levelled the playing field when it comes to the 24/7 news environment, allowing newspapers to break news alongside or ahead of broadcasters. It has enabled newspapers to open discussion sections and provide readers with the chance to comment on the news in a way that extends beyond ‘vox pops’ and ‘letters to the editor.’ However, as we have observed, it poses its own challenges and continues to do so. One of the most difficult revolves around the thorny issue of how to make sufficient money for online news to cover its costs.

In search of a successful economic model

Since the 1850s, most newspapers have relied on advertising revenue for the economic viability of their operation. And circulation – the overall reach of the newspaper in terms of the number of paying customers it attracts – is a key element to determining how much newspapers can charge for advertising space (Thompson, 1989). In an online environment, advertising



revenue has proven to be a vexed issue, namely because there is no straightforward way to ‘monetize’ the traffic to websites. This challenge is compounded by the fact that the majority of newspapers available on line do not charge a fee to users interested in reading their content. Instead, online newspapers try to justify this free access on the basis that the sheer volume of readers drawn to the site will enable them to levy a charge, in turn, on advertisers hoping to attract the public’s attention with their messages (Parrott, 2010).

Newspapers providing an online edition tended to think, in the early days, that they were opening up new streams of revenue, and understandably so. However, it soon became apparent to some of them that the online editions were causing a corresponding decline in their print edition’s readership, which undercut their own advertising revenue (Parrott, 2010). This decline was especially apparent in classified advertising as early as 2001. Around that time, websites like [Craigslist.com](http://Craigslist.com), which allows individuals to advertise items for sale, became increasingly fierce competition for classified advertising in newspapers. This is not to deny that online advertising has brought in significant revenues for newspapers, however, a trend which appears to be steadily improving. Newspapers in the US received about \$3 billion in online advertising in 2007, up from \$1 billion in 2003 (Newspaper Association of America, 2012). In the case of the UK, newspapers are similarly seeing a rise in digital advertising, but not enough to replace the advertising revenue that could be charged by the print editions (Oliver, 2012). For example, Associated Newspapers reported a combined £19 million in digital advertising revenues for the fiscal year ending October 2011 for *MailOnline* (the online counterpart to the Daily Mail), [metro.co.uk](http://metro.co.uk), and [thisismoney.co.uk](http://thisismoney.co.uk), where *MailOnline* saw 12.8 million views in December 2011 alone. Compare that with the £82 million revenue for the free sheet *Metro*, which has a daily circulation of 1.38 million (Oliver, 2012). Still, the current economic recession continues to pose serious problems, making it difficult to project into the future with certainty.

Over the years newspapers have considered a variety of online business models, ranging from providing all content free of charge, at one end of the spectrum, to securing all content behind paywalls, on the other end. While those newspapers which have been successful with paywalls tend to be niche publica-

tions – serving the interests of a specific audience group, such as business people – most commentators seem to think that content cannot continue to be provided for free for much longer. Estok (2011) points out that unless newspapers find a sustainable way to make money from their websites, they will continue to cut staff, the amount of their provision, and other expenses so as to reduce their costs – and in so doing ultimately sacrifice the quality of their content. Although he was speaking about the Canadian newspaper industry, the same logic of rationalization arguably holds true around the world.

Amongst those newspapers electing to charge for their online content, a number of strategies are being tested. The Times of London provides no access to content without paying for it, even though some commentators speculate it is at a risk of losing 90 per cent of its audience and related advertising revenue (Filloux, 2011). Others have adopted a mixed-model, with some content available for free, but with most items placed behind a paywall requiring a subscription fee to pass, or a small payment per article. Additionally, sites like the *Financial Times* and *The New York Times* have opted for a metered paywall where a set number of items are available for free each month, after which readers must pay. Even in the absence of a general strategy, however, the number of newspapers attempting to charge for news appears to be growing. *The Independent* announced that it would start charging readers outside the U.K. to access content, for example. *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* has introduced plans to launch a metered paywall, following the example of *The New York Times* (Coddington, 2011). And one of the largest newspaper companies in the U.S., Gannett, announced in 2012 it would launch digital subscriptions for 80 of the company's news sites, except for its flagship paper *USA Today* (Ellis, 2012).

Meanwhile a variety of content aggregator sites, such as Google News and Flipboard, continue to aggregate newspaper content and display it via tablet devices and smartphones. These services bring together a host of news articles from across the web in a way that is as convenient as it is free for the reader. Quite how newspapers will build loyal audiences for their content if it is being repackaged in ways beyond their control is an open question (Thurman, 2011). The notion of personalized news, and its implications for the future of journalism, is an underexplored area of the academic literature today. This is especially true as increasing-

ly individuals, young people especially, are interacting with news almost exclusively as it comes to them through social networks (both on and offline) (Preston, 2013) and services like Flipboard include an individual's Facebook 'news' feed as part of their news digest. Academics and news organisations (the journalists and the organization owners) will watch with anticipation to see how changing technology influences the ways in which citizens engage with news so that news organisations can continue to serve (sell) news to these individuals.

### Looking ahead

Readers interested in the news - and the advertisers intent on attracting their attention - are increasingly turning to the internet, which has made for a challenging time for the newspaper industries in the UK and US. The picture has seemed so grim at times that both industry and academic commentators in these countries have made predictions about the end of newspapers altogether. Still, as Bakker (2011) points out, newspapers are 'not dead yet,' and nor should they be discounted for the important role they play in society. Bakker's point stems in part from China, India and some other developing nations seeing their newspaper industries flourish, with a host of new titles appearing in the last several years and perhaps more to come (World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, 2012). These signs of hope for the global newspaper industry should not overshadow the very real difficulties elsewhere, particularly in Western countries.

Hence the urgency with which the UK and US newspaper industries continue to explore new ways to charge for (and pay for) professional journalism in a digital age. Given that alternative news sites will likely continue to complicate their efforts in this regard, now is the time to rethink what counts as newspaper journalism. Perhaps the traditional emphasis on the print format, for example, misses an important point. Whether or not readers get ink on their fingers is less important than whether they have the opportunity to read high-quality newspaper reporting. As *New York Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. has said, 'Newspapers cannot be defined by the second word - paper. They've got to be defined by the first word - news' (cited in Gates, 2002).

## Notes

1. In the US, other newspapers serving large metropolitan areas have also closed or ceased print operations, such as The Honolulu Advertiser in Hawaii and the Tucson Citizen in Arizona. In 2008, The Christian Science Monitor, a national newspaper, ceased print operations, opting for an on-line-only format. And more recently, the Times-Picayune in New Orleans, which received two Pulitzer Prizes for its reporting of Hurricane Katrina, announced it would cease daily publication in autumn 2012, reducing to a three-times weekly newspaper (Carr and Haughney, 2012).
2. The scandal erupted in 2011 when it was discovered that for years News International employees commissioned a private investigator to illegally tap into the phones/voice mails of celebrities, politicians, and crime victims. Public outcry at the revelation resulted in the closure of the News of the World, the resignation of senior police officers, the arrest of several journalists, and the opening of a government inquiry that considered the “culture, practice and ethics of the press” (Leveson Inquiry, 2012). Some commentators anticipated that one potential outcome of the Inquiry would be regulation that would limit non-EU ownership of newspapers, restrict the proportion of national newspaper ownership by a single business, and strengthen cross-media ownership rules, but this proved not to be the case.

## Challenging Questions

- Considering the advent of citizen journalism and online news, debate the newspapers’ future relevance in society.
- How has digital journalism changed journalism, paying particular attention to the effect it has on newspapers?
- Thomas Jefferson (1787) said he would prefer newspapers without government over a government without newspapers. Do you agree with that statement? Why?
- Newspaper journalism is a special kind of journalism. To what extent do you agree?

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