

Media and social solidarity: Vienna Part I

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Ah, Vienna

I flew to Vienna just as the [UK Govt was publishing its spending data](#) for the first time. And as I waited in fog-bound Heathrow I started reading [Alan Rusbridger's landmark essay](#) on how the business model change in journalism is changing its democratic role. I was on my way to the heart of old middle Europe for a transatlantic debate on Social Solidarity, Democracy and the Media at the [Institut Fur Die Wissenschaften vom Menschen](#).

This was a newspaper-dominated event so inevitably the Continentals were relatively smug while the Americans came with tales of woe about how their once-profitable private newspapers that make up most of US journalism are now in crisis.

But the real debate was not whether newspapers were going to survive or not. The real question was do we need that kind of journalism to sustain democracy?

Of course, many Europeans don't even think the traditional model of newspaper journalism is threatened. Many continental newspaper markets are bolstered firstly by government subsidy, but also by cultural and social factors that mean on the Continent, at least, crisis is a word only used with any emotion in France. And there the government has intervened directly to give the newspapers there a break with free copies for all young people.

But the more forward-thinking, such as [Piet Bakker from Utrecht](#), realised that even if their decline was only marginal now, it is part of the same global trend towards distributed information and open source information that will challenge the usual monopolistic models of news media.

The technological and social trends that are impacting on American or British news media will still be a factor across the world – even if they play out in different ways and at varying paces. So it is worth attending to these trends and to seek to turn the changes into positive opportunities.

US institutions like Columbia University Journalism School are now fully engaged in trying to find solutions. [Nick Lemann](#) sees the task essentially as preserving a set of fairly elite institutions, or rather their functions – partly because they are worthwhile in their own right, but also because there's little evidence that the 5th estate has the same capacity – yet.

Len Downie said US newspapers were now embracing online realities, and were returning, if not to profit, to ending losses. But the price was much reduced routine coverage of state or national or local politics. He hoped that working with non-profits like Pro-Publica could help bridge that civic gap, but he also warned that the non-profits are about to hit a sustainability barrier as foundation funding runs out or needs renewing.

[More later.](#)

[These blogs were all in effect written live so I welcome any corrections – they do not pretend to be anything like a full record of the debates which were long and complex]

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