News bust; news boom

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News and journalism are in a boom period of innovation and expansion. If that comes as a surprise, it is because the mainstream news media for years has been reporting gloomily on its own demise. But that gloomy story is a narrow business story, where the mainstream news industry is conflated with the much wider news, information and communication culture. Yes, business models are in flux, jobs are vanishing and the news industry as we have known it is in late-stage critical condition. But as anyone with an internet connection knows, news is thriving. Profits may be down but information is up. The amount of news material produced each day, access to that material, varieties in form and content, participation in the making and disseminating of it – it’s all booming.

In the last year, I have assembled a homepage that delivers eclectic journalism from various mainstream and independent sources to my desktop in realtime. I read mainstream and independent blogs of opinion and analysis. I read local and national reporting from the United States but also local and national and international reporting from around the world. My personalized RSS feeds and email lists point me to additional news sources that I only wish I had time to follow. As a consumer of news I, like many people I know, have never been more satisfied with the options, never more engaged in the material being reported and the process through which it is being reported, and I have never been more interested in the question of how all of that might change tomorrow and the next day.

We presently enjoy a mix of big-budget, shoestring-budget and free reporting. The fear is that big-budget reporting will disappear. But the market for consistently delivered well-edited beat reporting remains. People still read the New York Times; they’re just not willing to pay for it the way they used to do. Fact is, in 2008 spending on internet advertising will, for the first time, surpass combined spending on television, radio and film advertising (Richard and King, 2008) and, despite the financial crisis, analysts forecast double-digit percentage increases in online advertising over the next five years (Glaser, 2007; IAB, 2008; Ramsey, 2008). That revenue will support a well-branded
leaner class of what we might call traditional journalists. The members of that new leaner class, in turn, will adjust to becoming merely one set of contributors to the collection of news material aggregated by users and filtering software to make a new kind of ‘paper of record’. The evolution of journalism will depend partly on how traditional journalists learn how best to add value to the new news environment. It is not merely a matter of adopting new technologies. There must also be a willingness to shift mentalities, to adapt the traditional values and practices of journalism so that they match the best part of the wider contemporary news culture.

There is a long list of developments taking place that point to an increase in the ability of journalism to serve the public interest. At the top of that list is expanded public participation in the field. The remarkable increase in access to news information over the past decade has been matched by the equally remarkable increase in the number of people producing journalistic material. In 1987, James Carey wrote that ‘the public will reawaken when [it is] … encouraged to join the talk rather than to sit passively before a discussion conducted by journalists and experts’. Cast in the light that sees journalism as fundamental to and an accelerator of democracy, the practice – if not necessarily the profession – of journalism might be seen as heading in the best possible direction.

Greater public participation, for example, is generating more useable so-called hyperlocal news, which is reported increasingly via crowdsourcing and instant messaging by local residents intimately familiar with what they are reporting. UC Berkeley journalism student sites report on Bay Area neighborhood issues. A St Louis broadcaster set up social networking sites so residents falling behind on their housing payments could share vital information. The trend is realtime, participatory, engaging and growing.

Similarly, concerns with fact-checking and fairness that drew warnings surrounded by exclamation points even a year ago are beginning to be answered by the expanded digital network. Less tied to corporations, labor unions and political parties, independent fact-check sites, like Factcheck.org, will be a welcome substitute to editorial boards. Likewise, the growing number of internet users now practiced at fact-checking is vastly surpassing the capabilities of most stripped-down newsroom staffs. At the best news sites, the commitment to accuracy on the part of the staff is matched by the commitment of the readers. Errors are called out and stories are updated all the time.

The rapidly increasing percentage of material online designed to be shared – so-called spreadable or viral media – encourages users to adapt it to their own purposes, to use it to inform on multiple issues of concern. Crowdfunding,
where readers finance specific investigative reporting, distributes the power to set the news agenda. Second-generation social news sites such as NewsTrust and NewsCred aggregate and rate stories based on quality not just popularity. Google is developing search tools that will rank stories based on factors such as number and reliability of source links and the author’s record of publication.

The future of journalism is here. It is characterized by increasingly distributed profits and distributed reporting. It is more opinionated and more fair, more varied in form and content, more local and more national, more global and more personal. It is more horizontal and collaborative and open ended. The future of journalism, like news, is being forged by the boom in innovation and expansion we are living through today.

Notes

1 The term crowdsourcing was coined by Jeff Howe to refer to the trend of social web-enabled mass collaboration. For more see Howe’s blog http://crowdsourcing.typepad.com/.
3 http://stlmortgagecrisis.wordpress.com/
4 Crowdfunding is financial crowdsourcing that raises funds to support, for example, a project, candidate, reporter or story by tapping into a distributed network of supports. See Mark Glaser’s post on crowdsourcing and journalism http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2008/11/can-crowdfunding-help-save-the-journalism-business318.html.

References