

The State of Journalism and Its History

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When I travel I make it a point to look at a city's legacy print journalism operation. I do this first by looking for opportunities to buy newspapers. Second, I look to see if people are carrying newspapers or reading newspapers. Then I look at the newspapers themselves to see how they are providing content and to whom that content is apparently aimed.

In the last year or so I visited Tampa, Toronto, Kansas City, Little Rock, Minneapolis and Washington D.C. in North America, and London and Rome in Europe. What did I find? Well, most of us who know at all about the news business can predict. It's more a question of what I didn't find. I didn't find newspapers. It is becoming fiendishly difficult to buy a newspaper in most cities. The rows of newspaper dispensing machines that used to line big city thoroughfares are gone, mostly, or have become rusting empty hulks. Most shops don't sell newspapers—even convenience stores sometimes don't have them. They aren't readily available at hotels or coffee shops.

It's not surprising, then, that I seldom saw people carrying newspapers or reading newspapers. I attended two conventions of journalism educators, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, AEJMC. And you know what? Almost none of those attendees were carrying around newspapers either! Really. I tried to brandish a newspaper just to show I was a news junkie. When I could find one.

So what were people doing instead of reading newspapers? We know what they were doing. They were glued to their smartphones. Yeah, everyone, from my age to the expected Millennials. Although Millennials were glued more tightly.

Well, I suppose the decline of legacy journalism certainly is obvious to anyone who bothers to take a look around. Do you know how much on average the Millennial generation spends looking at that little rectangular screen? Three thousand minutes a week. That's 50 hours, for those of you who don't want to access your smartphone calculator app.

Legacy journalism's salvation was supposed to be digital, but it hasn't turned out that way. As daily newspaper circulation is about half what it was in 2000, 28.6 million weekly, its advertising income has dropped to \$14.3 billion. Billion sounds like a lot, but in 2000 it was \$65.8 billion, reflecting an almost 80 percent drop. EIGHTY percent. Digital growth offset about a third of that.

So what will become of legacy journalism? Well, let's investigate that. Because it's closely tied to what will become of our discipline, journalism history.

We are mass media historians. We study newspapers. At least a lot of us do. So that means the dramatic changes in the ways the world consumes its news has an intimate connection to what we do as scholars. And that connection seems to be at a crossroads.

The idea of of our discipline at a crossroads, the close connection between what we do and what professional journalists do, well, that's not just my idea. It comes from my colleagues, too, and your colleagues. Our colleagues.

I thought I needed to know more about what we think about our discipline today. It was late August. Bernie Sanders had just announced his concerns with the health of journalism in America. The day before the *New York Times* published an investigation of how Trumpian trolls had set up an organized attack in an effort to discredit professional journalism and individual journalists. The president of the United States almost every day was bashing professional news media as the enemy of the people. Same wording dictators use. How is our discipline responding? How can we respond? I needed some help to sort that all out.

I contacted 17 longtime AJHA members as well as directors of British and French journalism history organizations in hopes of gathering a perspective a lot broader than my own. To save people as much time as I could, I asked the AJHA folks for a five-point list of how our discipline is connected to professional journalism, and how that has changed recently.

Well, nobody gave me a five-point list. How could they? But they did give me a whole lot of insights. And those are what I will share with you today. I did not tell them that I would make their names public, so I had better not do that—but I can send you the list if you ask for it. The ideas here are sometimes mine, but usually sparked by those who helped me to construct this presentation today.

Some of what they had to say was encouraging.

I agree with many of our colleagues in seeing optimism in the scholarship of journalism history. Why?

First, the growth of international journalism history study. AJHA used to be the world's only large standalone group devoted to journalism history, at least that I'm aware of. But in 2000 the Paris-based Society for Media History was established because, as the organizers noted, while journalism history research was becoming more sophisticated and substantial, no university structure or scholarly organization there represented the discipline. "Something must be done!" they cried—and so they did something. Their work to me represents a blossoming of French journalism history study in volume and sophistication. In Britain the Centre for the Study of Journalism and History began a decade ago, but already its members have produced a significant record of scholarship. And we know the work of our own members in international and transnational journalism history. More and more of us are making presentations at international conferences.

On the downside, some of our colleagues who are engaged internationally still report that they are disappointed so few articles in our flagship journal address topics of international interest. I recognize the cost of travel and the limits of research in foreign languages, but we still seem to be focused mostly on ourselves.

On a more general note, though, our colleagues and I are optimistic about the quality of our scholarship. Several noted that our methodology has become more rigorous, our sources stronger, our theories more robust, our topics more diverse. We are still a young discipline, a French colleague observed, but we are at the heart of contemporary historical study. A British colleague said it was high time for us journalism historians to quit being so defensive and more aggressively promote our work. More mainline historians are taking notice, and even the general public is starting to understand and appreciate journalism history as journalism itself has become central to today's political and cultural conversations.

Mass media historians now have more opportunities to attend conferences in many facets of media history. We can reach out to allied disciplines, to become a part of the larger conversation in a variety of historical contexts. We can meet with related colleagues to establish our own credibility—to be more aggressive, as our British colleague argued—and to learn other methods or approaches. We can more easily continue those connections through the internet.

I will be quick to acknowledge a downside to this, though. I harangue my colleagues about it until they dread seeing me come in. Conferences are getting more and more expensive, and university travel money in many cases is falling to pathetic lows. I literally get the same amount for travel that I did when I began at North Dakota State in 1993. Gosh, do conferences still cost what they did in that prehistoric era before the internet? Maybe that's it—universities think we should all be Skyping in and saving a buck. But, hey! We've got a lot to celebrate, everyone! Yes, we do. As I said, based on observations by our colleagues today I can report some encouraging things.

Still, like the state of the legacy media themselves, the state of our discipline isn't all bright sun and bluebonnets. Bluebonnets. That's the state flower of Texas, you know. Yeah, I use Wikipedia too.

Journalism history may be edging closer to the mainstream, and away from our status as a boutique discipline, but we're still, as one of our colleagues put it, "the red-headed stepchild of the field." Hmm. I wasn't sure what that meant, exactly. I don't know a lot about hair. So I checked you-know-what. Because red hair is uncommon, it means a child presumed to be not part of the family, so therefore worthy of beatings and contempt. Sort of like other historians who say, "journalism history? Oh, aren't you just darling." At least they don't beat us. Well, not literally, but I could tell you stories.

I guess that is pretty familiar to journalism historians. The colleagues who shared their concerns with me were pretty clear on this: we are seeing a serious loss of journalism history courses and

requirements in our universities. We can round up the usual suspects for this—a growing emphasis on technology and vocationalism in a discipline that, as one colleague noted, has always been anti-intellectual. One dean recently told a colleague that a required journalism history course would be eliminated. That was because students needed something a little more modern. Yet during a lunch with Pulitzer winner Maureen Dowd, the famed writer said the best *New York Times* reporters were steeped in history and literature. Many of us who teach outside of history departments are aware of the clash between our discipline and dominant social scientists who can't understand our subjects or our methods. The past, worried one of our colleagues, is disappearing from journalism education. We are not forcefully explaining why it is relevant today.

One response to a fear of continuing marginalization of our discipline, emphasized a British colleague, is to quit calling ourselves journalism historians. He explained that we are social and cultural historians, working in a journalism context, and we need to present ourselves that way.

And I need to announce a second response, this one by our own History in the Curriculum Committee. After several years' work the committee has produced a comprehensive evaluation of media history programs in the United States. It is entitled *History in the Curriculum*. We give letter grades to some 200 universities for their media history course offerings and requirements. A lot got an F, about 25 percent, actually. I hope yours wasn't one of them. But lest we be too discouraged, more than that, 30 percent, received an A grade! My own university, North Dakota State, earned a C, for which I was actually relieved. We do not want to punish those places that did not make the grade. We instead hope this report will raise awareness and encourage improvement in journalism history teaching.

Curricular concerns may be at the center of our own employment as mass media historians, but many of us realize that our growth, maybe even our survival, as a relevant discipline depends on our ability to reach beyond our scholarly peers to a larger world. And we're doing that! Certainly one reason for optimism is our sister organization's launch of a podcast series a year ago. This was something I had hoped to set up when I was AJHA 1st vice president, but it never got off the ground. Why? Mostly because, as it turned out, I was totally incompetent technically. It's hard to set up a podcast when you don't know anything about podcasts except that they sound cool. But many of us play roles in both the AEJMC History Division and AJHA. We're long-term allies and friends. Just like the United States and Britain, with the occasional snickers and eye-rolls.

Our members have also more aggressively supported our journal and journalism history on social media, the place to see and be seen virtually nowadays.

But we need to bring media history to the larger public! We say that every year, I think, but it bears nagging. And this year some of our colleagues have certainly done that. We've published in mainstream mass media, subjected ourselves to interviews, appeared on public panels and events. We are helping people to see see context and perspective behind today's sometimes scary headlines about legacy journalism's demise.

We could reach out more. Maybe we need to be more aggressive. The internet has been our friend in that effort. It extends our reach beyond anything we could have imagined a generation ago. The news media find us online. In fact, the two times I was called for an interview by local media in the last year were both based on my presumably perspicacious comments on social media. A time suck it may be, social media, but it's making some of us journalism historians more famous!

There's a problem with that. As one colleague noted, what mass media want from us mostly is a resource for light features on historical events. But what about a deeper historical perspective? We have colleagues who could explain the historical context of today's assaults on editors and journalists, or parallels of McCarthyism, or Nixon's legacy in the age of Trump. But we don't generally get asked, and many of us are modestly not offering.

Why? I know! It's because we historians are introverts. I went into history, actually, because I love working alone in archives and hate working with teams. Collaboration is for social scientists. Quit bugging me. Okay. Maybe not quite true. But we actually do a pretty poor job on our own public relations. Most of us come from an academic history and journalism background, not public relations. Well, a few of us actually are PR people. But we all need to think more about PR to develop our personal scholarly brand. We ought to throw a bomb of rationalism into the screeching din that passes for public discourse nowadays. Don't wait until NPR calls you. Call them. Nobody seeks out the quiet scholar anymore. Why, asked one colleague, can we never trend on Reddit? Wow, way to set a high bar, there, Mike.

We need, noted another colleague, to respond with a united voice—to I guess get over that possible fear of teamwork. Become activists. Talk about new journalism ownership models based on what we know about journalism past. Tell the nation and the world why they *need* the news. Beyond the great men and great deeds! About the courage of the dissident press, the zeal of the radical press, the power of the black press—what we know that the public does not.

Well, that's a ringing endorsement and an exciting assignment. So we should get started! But wait. What if we are missing the big question here? What if the public itself is raising the fabled "so what?" question, not only for our discipline, but for the news media themselves? The concern of some of our colleagues is more general than journalism history. Are news media actually becoming irrelevant to the vast majority of Americans? What if journalism study attracts fewer and fewer students—something more than one colleague has already seen in our universities?

If the news media are becoming irrelevant, then our journalism history as an endeavor also will become irrelevant. Who will be interested in how the press worked if no one is interested in the press?

Well, gee, those are some disturbing thoughts. Reading them I almost wished I hadn't asked colleagues what they thought. Well it's time to search for some statistics. I'm sorry about that, but I will have to present some numbers to you.

I noted above that ad revenue for newspapers dropped nearly 80 percent in the last decade and a half. Where did it go? To the internet, of course. A pile of money there--\$129 billion in ads expected this year. You'd hope those dollars were spread around in a fair and balanced way, but ha-ha. You know that's not true. Where did it go? Guess! It went to Facebook, Google and YouTube, 58 percent. Oh, you didn't know Google owns YouTube? Another 4 percent for Amazon. The rest is thrown to the entire internet to fight over.

We also said that Millennials in particular are glued to their smartphones. Are they reading the news? A study of young people in the United States and Britain tried to determine whether they actually downloaded news apps as a way to access professional news media, to be informed about the news. Did they use news apps? You will be shocked to learn that they did not download news apps very often. Well, maybe you won't be shocked. What is the number one communication app used by Millennials, according to this study? Guess!

1. Instagram.
2. Facebook.
3. Snapchat.
4. WhatsApp.
5. Twitter.

Apple News did come in at Number 11, probably because it's already part of an iPhone. So if they don't go to legacy journalism for news, where do they go? Maybe they go to the digital native news operations like BuzzFeed, Vice, Yahoo and HuffPost? These were supposed to be the bright new future of professional journalism. But all have announced layoffs this year— even BuzzFeed, for goodness' sake, the site of huge initial success based on cat videos and quizzes gone viral. BuzzFeed has yet to make a profit, and investments, not advertising, support the operation. In fact, no news site on the internet is making it with advertising.

So where do people in general get their news? Well, research shows a lot of people still watch television, local news being most popular, at 37 percent. Newspaper-based journalism came in at 16 percent. And 20 percent said social media. Hey. That's not supposed to be a news source.

As one of our colleagues concluded, his biggest fear is that the press today has not figured out a way to best deliver information, what to cover, and how to cover it. That is corroborated by surveys that show the growing metered paywall model for digital journalism probably won't work for most newspapers. Respondents said they just don't want to pay for a product they don't think is particularly trustworthy or relevant. And round after round of newsroom layoffs does nothing to improve that product. In 2000, 71,640 professional journalists were employed in newspaper journalism. Last year it was 37,900.

So when I'm in a gloomy mood—usually that's about 3 in the morning when I can't sleep—I fear that as Americans shift to social media from professional journalism we will fall from a country that cared about their news to one that cares about their echo chambers.

Okay, maybe the future of print journalism, the field many of us study, is not looking as sunny as our fall day here in Dallas. But we are journalism historians. We see the big picture—well, we try to, anyway, on days when we're not wondering what kind of razzle-dazzle will attract majors back to shrinking journalism departments. As we are historians, I think we can comfort ourselves a little by observing that the mass media business has always been dicey, always littered with dead newspapers and unemployed scribblers. Technological change has pounded the profession since, well, since the readers of French Revolution newspapers told their editors, "you're gonna need a bigger press."

And as it seems that serious news consumption is moving from masses to elites, we also know that is back to the future. Who read the early 19th century press, one of our colleagues asked? The elites. Maybe that's all right?

Not sure about that, but considering a way forward for legacy journalism brings me to the elephant in the room: what if today there literally is no profitable model for news?

How would we as journalism historians respond to that scary question?

Maybe more hopefully than those who don't know journalism history. I can point out that some newspapers during the French Revolution did very well indeed, even though they had zero advertising. Why? Because they sold a compelling product that people would pay for. We can call that the Netflix model: people will pay a reasonable amount for a valuable user experience.

Or we can look back to a time when news operations were propped by outside interests. Maybe support by political parties won't come back. But support by foundations might take their place. PBS has competed for decades with the big profit-making networks based on donors. It's worked for a lot of non-profits and universities too. Maybe it can work for journalism. It might even be a good thing, because profit-based news operations have never really quite overcome the taint to their credibility of advertising.

Hans Rosling in his book *Factfulness. 10 Reasons We're Wrong About the World* observed that one of the weaknesses of human nature is the tendency to see a trend as continuing. The straight-line fallacy. We look at that line on a chart or graph. We project the future based on what we see happening. The line is going up or down, and we project that to continue.

But that's often not the case, Rosling said. The lines don't generally continue as we presume they will. They change based on circumstances we usually can't predict. We know the line right now seems to be on a downhill slide for professional journalism, for journalism education and for journalism history. But we can't presume that will continue. We don't know what the future will bring—historians don't predict the future. But we can aggressively continue to assert the

relevance of journalism history to the present, to the curriculum and to the future of the news business itself.

And, as one colleague pointed out, her professor as she began graduate school reminded her of one thing that we journalism historians perhaps need to acknowledge. The pendulum swings.