

False dawns : the pasts of media futures

CANTER, Lily <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5708-2420>>

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Technology's false dawns: the past of media futures

The future of newspapers is once more under scrutiny. Throughout history each step forward in communication technology, whether it be the invention of the telegraph, radio or television, has brought with it fatalistic cries predicting the demise of the printed press. Further reinforcements have joined this tradition in the past two decades with the unprecedented expansion of the internet appearing to signal that the end of paper and ink is nigh. But these pessimistic media soothsayers seem to have rather missed the point. Instead of speculating about whether the printed newspaper will exist in 10, 20 or 50 years time, the more pertinent question is what form will this news medium take? History tells us that newspaper is a versatile form of communication, which has always adapted to changing circumstances and the emergence of competing media. Indeed this 'editorial Darwinism' (Franklin 2008: 307) is the key to its 400-year long survival. All too often scholars and journalists alike separate the printed press from its online counterparts despite the continual convergence of newsrooms and practitioners' roles. In the twenty first century, a newspaper journalist is now a multimedia, digital journalist who writes copy for the paper, the website, the mobile website, social media channels and increasingly for tablet applications as well. This convergent journalism is both journalistic and economic and sees the coming together of different news platforms in terms of both production and ownership. Print media companies have once more adapted to market conditions and now hope to, "find salvation by embracing innovation and integrating digital media" (Paulussen 2011: 59). The newspaper may have had a long and illustrious narrative as a printed product but its future survival may now lie in multiple digital reincarnations.

Same media, different technology

The introduction of digital news content, via newspaper websites, social media platforms, mobile and tablet Apps, has been developed by publishing companies in Britain, and worldwide, during the past decade with billions of pounds being poured into new media technology. This technological drive has arisen in response to a growing consumer appetite for internet usage in the home and on the move. In Britain 80 per cent of households have access to the internet - a total of 21 million households - and a further 51 per cent of internet users use a mobile phone to connect to the internet (ONS 2012). These customers are still consuming the same news medium – the written word – but it is being delivered by a different technology. As American media scholar Henry Jenkins sets out in *Convergence Culture*, “history teaches us that old media never die and they don't even necessarily fade away. What dies are simply the tools we use to access media content” (2008: 13). The delivery technologies, the tools which are used to communicate the information, may become obsolete and get replaced over time, but the media evolve. In the example of news media, the written word is one type of news medium. It exists within a set of social and cultural practices and journalistic norms and routines which have evolved from the printed press. However the delivery technologies used to communicate the written word are numerous and include - although not exclusively - newspapers, magazines, internet enabled computers, mobile phones and tablets. Each of these delivery systems may be more or less popular in time and their audiences may change from elite to mass, and back again, depending on the historical context, but the integral medium of the written word remains the same. It is therefore important to explore the historical context of this particular medium in order to better understand new technology systems and how to incorporate them into our media futures. This chapter focuses on the historic similarities between the evolution of newspapers in Britain and the emergence of digital internet-enabled technologies in the late twentieth century. The primary focal points are news consumption, economy and audience.

A desire for local news

It is without question that the advancement of technology has changed the scale and scope of news accessible on a daily basis to people in western society. In the 21st century news is global, fragmented and mobile. There is more news, “across an unprecedented range of media, than at any time since the birth of the free press in the eighteenth century” (Hargreaves 2005: 1). Yet the existence of almost instantaneous 24-hour worldwide news is less than a generation old. In its modest beginnings news was spread by word of mouth or handwritten letters and was therefore limited by geography and how fast a man could ride a horse. But as transport and communication technology developed so did the spread of news. The seventeenth century printed press allowed newspapers to be distributed across an entire city before the arrival of the steam engine and electric telegraph in the nineteenth century enabled news to be transported across the country and later between continents. By the twentieth century mass audiences could be reached via radio and later television, with news from around the globe. The worldwide web made this news accessible any time of day, anywhere in the world, at the touch of a button. Yet despite its global capacity audiences still consume local and national news in the highest proportions. Geographic relevance remains one of the most important news values (Harcup and O’Neill 2001) to consumers and “there is continuity in life still being predominantly local for most people; readers still want local news and advertising” (Hobbs 2011: 12). Even in the post-digital era local relevance is a common factor in newspaper coverage (Brighton and Foy 2007) due to its heightened relevance to the reader.

For the majority of people the desire for local news is driven by practical and material concerns such as the quality of schools, hospitals, issues of crime, employment and houses

prices (Aldridge 2007). The technology may allow audiences in Bournemouth to read news about elections in Botswana but they are far more likely to want to know if Bournemouth Borough Council is increasing their council tax bill or changing their kerbside recycling collection. The desire for local and highly relevant news dates back to the early days of the eighteenth century provincial newspapers. The first local newspapers began to emerge in 1701 and by 1760 there were 130 newspapers printed outside the capital (Cranfield 1962). Initially these provincial newspapers selected and filtered the best information from the numerous London papers and as consequence the content was predominantly national and foreign news (Cranfield 1962). However by the end of the eighteenth century competition was increasing as provincial newspapers began operating closer to one another, reducing the territory and allowing for more local news and advertisements (Walker 2006). From the 1780s onwards local news was the key to success and many newspapers beat off competitors if their rivals neglected the importance of local news. Over the next 100 years provincial titles increased to 938 by 1877, with each newspaper covering a specific geographic area in terms of its circulation and content. And although circulation figures were low around 10,000, the readership was far higher at 150,000 per newspaper on account of the fact that an average 15 to 25 people read just one copy of a newspaper (Walker 2006). Provincial newspapers continued to flourish well into the 19th century as the arrival of the telegraph enabled them to take on the London press. Local newspaper offices were able to receive national and international news within minutes, publish it locally and then distribute it to the local community far quicker than newspapers carrying the same information could arrive by train from London. This new electronic telegraph era led to the creation of the Press Association in 1868, a co-operative national and international newsgathering service made up of a string of northern newspapers (Walker, 2006). Today the Press Association remains a vital component of regional newspapers and consumption of local news remains similarly healthy. Each week

more than 31 million people in Britain pick up a local newspaper – almost 50 per cent of the population. A further 62 million web users log onto local news websites each month – a figure which has doubled in less than three years. According to the Newspaper Society (2013) there remain 1,100 core newspapers and 1,600 websites in the British local media, a sign that the industry, in statistical terms at least, is most definitely not in decline. If the figures are to be believed local media in Britain are reaching more people than ever before and the consumption of local news is as vibrant as it was in its nineteenth century heyday. History tells us that local news is fundamentally important to our everyday lives even when it competes in a global marketplace but the present day shows us that local news delivery systems are shifting. Research on local British newspaper websites reveals that 50 per cent of readers have swapped their daily newspaper buying habits for daily news viewing online (Canter 2012a) and an increasing number are accessing local news websites via mobile phones and tablets. Circulation figures across regional newspapers reflect the growing online trend with many newspapers attracting a higher daily readership online than offline. For example Newsquest publication the Bournemouth Daily Echo has a daily circulation of 24,000 – a decline of more than six per cent year on year - but a rapidly increasing online presence with 31,000 daily visitors to dailyecho.co.uk – a rise of 22 per cent year on year (Hold the Front Page 2013). In many respects the uptake of online news today mirrors the growth of newspaper consumption in the seventeenth and eighteenth century – albeit at a much steadier rate. As seen with the growth of provincial newspapers when more products come onto the market place, competition increases and demand soars, leading to a fragmentation of audiences.

Despite this strong market presence local newspaper groups are struggling to compete with the growth of the internet and subsequent drop in advertising revenues (Singer et al 2011). A

paradox exists where the consumption of online news is increasing substantially yet publishers are unable to transform this increased demand into profits. As Briggs (2012: 14) reasons, “it's not a readership problem; it's a revenue problem” and the web has in reality helped newspapers to evolve from a print product to a digital product which still meets local news consumption demands. This digital technology also enables local news organisations to tell stories through multiple means, on multiple platforms. A story is no longer stationary text, it can also be told via live blogs, photographic slideshows, animated graphics, audio clips, online videos and hyperlinks. These can be accessed not only on a newspaper website but also via associated social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and Tumblr and through mobile phone and tablet Apps. This transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2008), offers multiple points of entry and a variety of media, thus enabling news organisations to seize upon fragmented audiences. But the content and sentiment is essentially the same. In 2012 the Southern Daily Echo released a special edition iPad App commemorating the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic and the impact it had on the ship's home port of Southampton. Using archives from the newspaper Titanic – The Southampton Story, contained interactive text, videos, photos and maps to “bring to life the human stories behind one of history's most enduring tragedies” (Daily Echo 2012). But the newspaper also took a more traditional approach and printed a supplement containing stories and photos from its archive, telling the dramatic story in an alternative format. Whatever the delivery system, a printed supplement or an electronic App, the core concept remains the same – to tell human interest stories within their historical context.

Economy of scale

The production and subsequent consumption of news may be shifting onto digital, internet enabled devices but the capitalist business model remains the status quo, as it has done for two hundred years. Indeed the political economy of newspapers is leading the adaptation of delivery systems as publishers desperately try to compete within the fragmented, online marketplace. Despite the normative claim of the British press to being the historic watchdog of the state's activities, no such legal, societal obligations exist. Some editors may proclaim the role of the media as a facilitator of the public sphere (Rusbridger 2010) whilst various scholars hold journalism responsible for giving people independent information to enable them to govern themselves (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007). Yet throughout its history journalism has existed as an uneasy relationship between democracy and commercialism – much like the internet. Indeed the evolution of British journalism is arguably indebted to the growth of both democracy and a free market economy. Whilst the histories of journalism and democracy are closely linked (McNair 2008) the local press as it is recognised today peaked in the late nineteenth century in direct correlation to the growth of capitalism and with it advertising (Franklin and Murphy 1991). Although advertising was not a major source of profit in the early years of provincial newspapers as they were funded by sales, political parties and philanthropists (Hobbs 2011) it became increasingly important as production costs rose and the market economy expanded into the nineteenth century. The rise in costs coupled with the reduction in retail prices brought about by tax abolition meant newspapers were sold at a loss and began to rely heavily on advertising for profit. By the early years of the twentieth century provincial newspaper proprietors pursued their newspaper interests “as commercial enterprises rather than as political projects” (Walker 2006: 374) and provincial newspapers were viewed as potentially highly profitable commercial ventures. Furthermore the political agenda was starting to fade in the late nineteenth century in part due to increasing political centralisation which meant local government had less power and

therefore was less newsworthy in terms of political stories to fill local newspapers (Walker 2006). As far back as the turn of the twentieth century local newspapers were turning to more sport, crime and human interest stories in order to compete with the rising popular national tabloid press. This move towards more popular content and the pursuit of commercial interests over public affairs accelerated in the 21st century. Globalisation in the second half of the twentieth century saw small family newspaper businesses swallowed up by multi-national conglomerates via widespread acquisition and mergers. In particular the relaxation of ownership rules in the Broadcasting Act of 1996 and 2003 Communications Act led to an even greater consolidation of the newspaper industry. Consequently local newspapers have been left in the hands of a few major profit driven corporations, some with American parent companies, and the monopolies seen today have emerged.

The free market economy has been crucial to the survival of newspapers and has enabled a once elite product to be rolled out to the masses. And like the provincial newspapers of the industrial revolution, the consumption of online and digital news is currently in an evolving process from the elite to the middle class to the mass market. During the seventeenth century the printing trade was greatly restricted by the 1663 Printing Act which not only acted as a censor but also only licensed printers in London and the two university towns of Cambridge and Oxford. This meant that in the provinces only the rich could afford to subscribe to the London newspapers or hand written newsletters (Cranfield 1962). However once the act lapsed in 1696, the restrictions ceased and the newly found freedom of the press encouraged an abundance of new titles to spring up in London. The market quickly became saturated and printers started to look further afield, setting up printing houses in provinces such as Bristol, Shrewsbury and Norwich in the 1690s. By 1701 local newspapers had begun to arrive, 80 years after the first recorded London newspaper the London Gazette. These country

newspapers were cheaper than London papers as they were printed weekly and there was no postal cost, therefore they appealed to the property owning middle class of shopkeepers, farmers and merchants (Harris 1996). Newspapers were no longer the sole domain of the upper class as the market made them affordable to a wider readership. However the biggest impact on provincial newspapers was arguably the abolition of taxes on knowledge - Advertisement Duty abolished in 1853, Stamp Duty abolished in 1855 and Paper Duty abolished in 1861 - following a campaign for a free market press by the reconstituted Peoples' Charter Union in 1848 (Curran 1978). This dramatic change gave newspapers freedom from state economic control and opened up the market to a mass audience as the price of newspapers dropped. The move from elite to mass readership took almost 200 years, during a period of huge social, political and technological development. And arguably the same is happening today in the online news marketplace, within a much tighter timescale.

The 2001 Living in Britain Report (Walker et al 2001) was the first time the government officially measured household internet access. At this time a third of all households in Britain had dial-up internet access. Professional and managerial households were most likely to have access (68 per cent and 61 per cent respectively) compared with 26 per cent of semi-skilled and 15 per cent of unskilled manual workers. These figures appeared to support the scholarly argument that newspaper websites strengthened the social divide as they were dominated by educated elites (Sparks 2003). But a decade later the online social landscape represents a wider public sphere with spaces opening up for a variety of demographics. Online news websites attract digital natives and migrants and almost half of British adults now access their news online (ONS 2012) revealing a shift from the elite to the middle classes. Furthermore the number of households with internet access has shot up to 80 per cent, with 93 per cent of these using broadband. Internet usage is a daily habit with 33 million adults logging on every day, double the figure recorded in 2006. The speed of this widespread access is further

accelerated by the take up of smart phones, with a third of the population already accessing the internet using a mobile phone every day (ONS 2012). With this ease of internet access consumers are increasingly swapping their daily newspaper buying habits for daily news viewing online (Canter 2012a) and in respect of local newspaper websites there is evidence to suggest that these readers are now broadly representative of the population as a whole. As the technology becomes cheaper and more widely available, like the spread of provincial newspapers in the eighteenth century, news websites seemed destined to become the sphere of the masses.

The public as participant

‘Citizen journalism’, ‘reader participation’ and ‘audience collaboration’ have been the buzz words of the 21st century with scholars (Hermida et al, 2011; Gillmor, 2006) and editors (Maguire, 2011; Rusbridger, 2010) alike heralding a new dawn of active audiences rising up from their passive positions on the sofa to take to the streets armed with their mobile phones and a keen eye for recording action. Every major news event covered by the mainstream media, and increasingly minor ones as well, are accompanied by a barrage of eyewitness accounts, photographs, comments, tweets and YouTube videos from the public, giving their insight from the ground and reaction to the news. Research indicates that comments on mainstream newspaper websites are the most popular form of participatory journalism both in the UK and internationally (Canter 2012b; Örnebring 2008) and it has rapidly risen since the introduction of Web 2.0. But the act of participation in the news is not a contemporary concept as it arguably dates back to the origin of newspapers. Rusbridger (2010) maintains that audience participation is a tradition started by newspapers in Britain which has allowed people to express themselves freely for centuries. Furthermore Web 2.0 is simply expanding

this trend, for the greater good of journalism. And concrete evidence of reader participation in journalism can be seen as early as the eighteenth century, with British newspapers like The Evening General Post leaving space at the end of the third page for reader comments which were then posted onto friends or relatives attached to the paper (Wiles 1965).

The concept of audience inclusion in the news process, whether it be in the recording, production, response or dissemination of news, has been a recurring theme throughout the history of Western newspapers. The alternative participatory movement in Britain that emerged in the 1960s was a direct resistance to the commercialisation of the local press. Whilst mainstream local newspapers were relying on stories from official sources - police, courts, councils, health authorities, MPs, companies and charities, the alternative press such as the Liverpool Free Press and Leeds Other Paper turned to the public including activists, the unemployed and those living on housing estates (Harcup 1998).

Although by the 1990s the alternative local press had been wiped out by the power of the market and domineering mainstream press, its legacy remains today. The established press was forced to take note of ordinary citizens and community groups, and the public began to speak for themselves through fanzines, lobbying groups and ultimately the web (Harcup 1998). Across the Atlantic in the United States a related movement known as public or civic journalism developed during the late 1980s. This grassroots reform movement grew in response to a widening gap between citizens and government with the final straw being the “dismal press coverage” (Glasser and Craft 1998: 205) of the 1988 US presidential campaign which focused on strategy over political substance. The public journalism campaign held as its main premise the assumption that democracy was in decay and the role of the press was to promote and improve public life rather than merely report on it. Like the alternative press movement in Britain public journalism had limited influence but has arguably been revitalised today by the internet and independent news websites such as Indy Media.

Move forward two decades and we find that mainstream media organisations are embracing audience participation online and opening up channels of communications to facilitate previously unheard voices (Canter 2013; Rusbridger 2010). Yet there is a deep scepticism that this push towards participation is being driven by capitalism. A constant friction exists between the social goals of journalists and the commercial pressures to make and maintain profit. This has been heightened in the Web 2.0 era as newspaper profits decline and companies seek ways to cut costs by gaining content from readers for free (Örnebring, 2008). Indeed McChesney and Nichols argue that the current industry crisis was created by “media owners who made the commercial and entertainment values on the market dramatically higher priorities than the civic and democratic values that are essential to good journalism” (2010: 3). Furthermore journalists acknowledge that the drive towards greater audience participation is motivated by economic factors (Canter 2013) to increase profits via the building of brand loyalty and the boosting of website traffic to remain competitive (Vujnovic 2011). Thus online participatory spaces on newspaper websites have become an ambiguous playground where they have the capacity to enable greater democracy whilst simultaneously being driven by economic imperatives - as they have done for the majority of their history.

Conclusion

History tells us that newspapers have evolved and thrived within the liberal free market and in truth it has been the specifics of this political economy which have determined the survival and adaption of this communication medium from a physical to a virtual media product. Journalists have always had to finely balance economic and civic obligations and audience participation has consistently been one method to fulfil both these demands. British

newspapers operate within a commercial model, as they have done for several centuries, and therefore it should be expected that economic goals will drive the practice. Yet as Vujnovic (2011) reasons, although money is needed to underwrite the social goal of journalism, the augmentation of media revenue should not be the goal in itself. But with their exceedingly high profit margins it appears that news publishers have tipped the balance too far in favour of commercial goals. Current profit margins are likely to be unsustainable (Fowler, 2011) which may force such companies to redress the balance between economic and civic obligations.

The survival of newspapers may therefore lie in an alternative business model that goes further back in history to the roots of the family run news organisation. The provincial papers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century were run for a profit but on a far more modest scale than the ever increasing profit margins expected by global news conglomerates today. The independent local newspaper industry in Britain which is based on a variety of business models is faring much better in the current economic climate. These companies have much lower profit margins and lower debt levels, and many are family-owned. They are also developing new methods of online and digital delivery. Former regional newspaper editor Neil Fowler (2011:24) argues that these small business models “could be the foundation for the future” because the current economies of scale model is failing both the market and the public. Furthermore Fowler argues that the big four UK regional press publishers – Johnston Press, Trinity Mirror, Northcliffe Media and Newsquest – should return their hundreds of newspaper titles to local ownership. The same argument is being made in America, where small companies are beginning to find successful online business models. As business commentator Briggs (2012: xv) convincingly argues, the building of the future of news “is more likely to happen in new entrepreneurial ventures than through continuing to try to right the unwieldy old ships of media”. New media technologies, in particular Web 2.0, are not the

guarantors of a new dawn of profitable, participatory journalism, but they provide tools with great democratic potential when placed in the correct hands, under the right economic, social and cultural conditions. And journalists have always strived to tell the truth and provide a mouthpiece for the public whatever the tools of their trade. Furthermore the desire for news remains the same whether it is noisily pressed into a vast metal sheet or silently transmitted onto a touch screen phone.

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