

WHY PRINT JOURNALISM IS ESSENTIAL IN A DIGITAL WORLD: SOLUTIONS FOR ALL PRINT CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

truth

With print runs and traditional markets declining, it might appear to some that print journalism has no place in the digital world. In an era where tweets are regarded as fact, and Facebook likes are equated to quality, there is no time more important for true journalism to rise from the ashes.

Journalism's value as a source of truth and defender of society against corruption and manipulation cannot be overstated. The Fourth Estate is a critical thread in the fabric of our society, and arguably a pillar of democracy.

The question before those in the industry, however, is how print, and journalism in general, can evolve its business model to compete in the era of click-tracking and citizen commentators, and secure its position as the watchdog of the future.

This article is for those in the Newspaper and Prepress sectors and all of us as concerned citizens in the print industry, who are looking for a long-term model to maintain a viable Fourth Estate.

Print in Politics Today

Data is increasingly coming out that so-called "fake" news (the converse of responsible, well-researched journalism) which was promoted on Facebook, and other sites was seen (and arguably swayed) hundreds of thousands of people -- potentially altering the outcome of the 2016 political election -- the impact of which will be felt for the rest of the decade, if not beyond.



Contrast this with 1972, when five men broke into the Democratic National Committee offices at the Watergate Hotel and were arrested, the Washington Post unraveled the whole story behind the crime. The heralded reporting by Washington Post gumshoes Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein connected the burglary to President Richard Nixon. Without the high-quality reporting and the Washington Post's willingness to print the stories, a huge injustice might have been glared over.

Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, has gone on the record to emphasize that Facebook is NOT a journalistic source, and is implementing steps to reduce the instances of false news on the site, but we can see the impact that new ways to source news has had on the overall trust and perception of the Estate itself.

There are many examples of journalism's power to improve social structures, for example the Boston Globe's spotlight efforts revealing the church abuses of the last century.

In the past several years, news organizations and in particular Newspapers, have struggled to find a way forward through new online news models and social surfacing of data. Major firms have been experimenting with various new models for subscription.

In the mean time the economic reality has compromised the ability of journalists to do what they do best in a medium that needs a revival. With their traditional revenue sources eroded by internet competition, Facebook and Craigslist hurting classifieds and Monster, PrintWorkers and Zip Recruiter impacting the job side of classifieds. News organizations must find new revenue sources.

Why Does the Fourth Estate Matter?

The Fourth Estate mentioned in the Constitution of the United States and sometimes referred to, as the Fourth Branch of government is a sacred American institution.

The decline in the newspaper industry's business model and continued consolidation by big media sources have required the news to become sensationalist - which is not news. This forces readers to find better sources of 'news' and puts the Fourth Estate in danger.

What is the price society will pay by not having the Fourth Estate focusing on the major social issues? What is at stake is making improvements on, for example:

- Homelessness
- Drug addiction
- Job Growth
- Infrastructure Investments
- Crime
- Political Freedoms
- Public Transportation
- Accessible Medical Resources
- Education Systems

The list is long and varied within each region or local area as each topic affects local regions differently.

To ensure we have a healthy and vibrant Fourth Estate is to start a discussion on what models might breathe new life into this industry. In order to start a dialog, ideas are needed as a jumping off point.

Journalism or Click Bait?

A recent Pew Research Center survey showed that only 22% of Americans trust their local news organizations. A mere 18% trust national news organizations. These results seem to be the affect of news outlets having to substitute traditional revenue sources through increasing sensationalism, publishing content for money and purchasing content from larger national sources such as the Associated Press instead of writing their own.



A company such as Outbrain, which promotes paid articles, went public in 2015 and raised over \$45 million in funding in the first half of 2016. Outbrain content is marked as sponsored but designed to blend into the website or social media page where it is displayed. This can be confusing to some readers and makes it difficult to know where the content is really coming from.

What Revenue Streams Really Work?

Money talks in our society. As the news model changes we are seeing many potential providers enter the market and give news content away for free.

Doling out free content to users has set off a distribution domino effect. Over time, this has become the new norm for all news constituents, who would be considered the potential subscriber base. As a result, in order to entice the audience to consume non-gratis content, traditional news sources have become more sensational by overhyping normal one-off items as news to attract viewers.

They have also bundled content activities, offering up journalists as “content gun slingers” to create native content (content created as advertising) and promoting them in line or adjacent to “true” news – blurring the lines of what is journalism and what isn’t to the reader.

Many news outlets looked to non-traditional revenue streams as the traditional ones such as newspaper classified ads, advertising and subscription plans are phased out or undergo make overs. Finding a stable revenue model for the newspaper and entire news industry is job number one as the industry struggles to adapt.

Getting to Know the Readers

Studying the fleeting reader base is critical to understanding why digital magazine sites and mobile apps continue to eat away at newspaper readership.

Driving more subscriptions and increasing the base means offering a value to the reader. In order to do this, it is important to consider who the audience is and what is happening where they live. If you have heard the adage, All Politics is Local, we can potentially derive a business model from this lesson.

Meeting your audience’s needs is key to reviving the Fourth Estate. As a result, reporting on local news, movements and community events are part of good journalism.

Why have audiences fled from consuming current events via newspapers? Because apps and websites powered by targeted ad dollars tapped into what they need. We are looking to preserve the critical Fourth Estate and its role in society. By getting in touch with our local audiences and using the power of the press, positive change can be imparted over time.



Print Success Stories in the Digital Age

Smaller regional newspaper organizations have found some success catering to their local community needs. For example, the Falmouth Enterprise has been able to remain a locally run newspaper and maintains a high local journalistic integrity. However, the successful model utilized by the Falmouth Enterprise is being challenged in most communities by the hands of AOL and their local Patch digital newspapers.

The Minnesota Star Tribune, which is read by 1.3 million adults each week, is thriving in a world where many newspapers have gone out of business. The newspaper's managers made sure to impart policies in their organization to produce quality reporting while making money. While the newspaper's staff was cut in half, they work hard to train the 250 employees on board in journalism practices. Also, Minnesota Star Tribune cares about their print edition and the surrounding community reciprocates by consuming the paper.



Additionally, the paper has enacted big and small revenue streams. They have their print only subscribers, print and digital subscribers and have gotten involved in community events. For example, when the U.S. Figure Skating Championships headed to St. Paul, the Tribune set up a photo workshop during a practice with one of its photojournalists. Members of the community actually paid to partake in the workshop. The newspaper made some money and they got great engagement from readers. This kind of outside the box thinking may be a part of the future revenue model for a successful newspaper organization.

Is There a Model to Support the Fourth Estate?

1. A private individual purchasing a news organization just as Jeff Bezos of Amazon bought the Washington Post. The negative side with this solution is that a perceived special interests can influence the reporting and even deter the readers from purchasing the publication. Editorial integrity is critical for these news operations to fulfill their Fourth Estate responsibilities.

2. News organizations staying regionally focused or nationally focused on specific topics with the primary role of serving the needs of their communities or constituencies. So what are the needs of a given population? What issues are interfering with progress? This is for qualified journalists on the ground and embedded in the community to deduce and report on.

3. Subscription models, such as Blendle, that offer a monthly compendium of a host of well-researched journalism. Many consumers already purchase a host of products on a subscription basis, from music to monthly beer or food delivery models. New journalism start-ups are now evolving to allow readers to purchase micro-conversions (one well-researched article at a time), or monthly access to a suite of article options.



4. What about a return to the way things used to be where the Fourth Estate role is preserved? A newspaper and journalism renaissance of sorts. In order to do that, we need to know what would get people to pay \$9 per month or \$100 per year out of their hard earned money for a regional news source?

Readers could be engaged by dictating the issues they want to know more about. For example, once a year, a surveyor readership poll asking what the top six issues in the community were. The poll could also include questions regarding how these issues could be improved upon over the next year. The harsh spotlight of the press can shine on each of those issues driving improvement.

This model gives people the power and an immediate voice in getting issues concerning them addressed. That is worth \$9 dollars a month and \$100 dollars a year. This way the organization remains neutral and the Fourth Estate can do the work our Founding Fathers wanted it to do.

It would also honor whatever way people want their news distributed. Digital, print and mobile apps are all possibilities. Each method is important as long as the community requires it.

Where Do We Go From Here?

For newspapers and news organizations to stay relevant the path is clear – upping subscriptions through reporting on local issues for the community or on specific national or international expertise. With this shift in perspective and strategy hopefully the industry can continue to evolve and regain the neutral and respected position it once held in our society. This role is critical in order for our government and institutions to be productive, honest and held accountable.

Bringing back the prestige, ethics and neutrality to the voice of mainstream media will go a long way towards helping journalism and the newspaper industry survive and perform the critical role it still has.



Every industry is being impacted by change all the time. Harnessing the power of change and channeling it is the only way to be sure to evolve and flourish. We always need to be respectful of the people who are impacted by these changes and help them to benefit. The failure of helping those impacted was readily apparent in the last political season, by looking at Main Street in the small towns all across our country.

We look forward with positivity to the future.

Want to keep the discussion going?

Connect with us on Semper's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Semper-LLC/>

Or

Email us at trend@semperllc.com

