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12-1-2010

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### Recommended Citation

Gunaratne, Shelton, Commentary: Demise of newspapers and the rise of cyberspace, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 20, 2010, 33-36.

Available at:<http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss20/4>

## Commentary

# Demise of newspapers and the rise of cyberspace



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The newspaper, as we know it - the actual broadsheet or tabloid that is delivered at our doorstep or purchased at the news stand - will cease to exist within the next 34 years, assert the scholars who trace the circulation and readership statistics in the United States.

The era of the printed newspaper will end in the United States by 2043. A similar timeline may hold true for all countries with high Internet penetration and declining newspaper sales.

So, we will see the end of the era of the print revolution, which began with Bi Sheng or Gutenberg (depending on how you interpret history). Thus, newspaper journalism will have to pave the way for cyberspace/digital/electronic journalism.

The Western concept of newspapers surfaced in 1605 (when Johann Carolus published the *Avisa Relation oder Zeitung*) in Strassburg-more than 150 years after Gutenberg invented the printing press, and more than 550 years after alchemist Bi Sheng experimented with movable type in China. The term journalism did not come into use until 1833, and it coincided with the emergence of mass circulation newspapers in the United States. Collecting information and certifying its factual accuracy is central to journalism.

Press guru Philip Meyer, in his book *"The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age"* (2004) calculates that the first quarter of 2043 will be the moment when newsprint dies in America as the last exhausted reader tosses aside the last crumpled edition." Extrapolating the recent linear decline in everyday readership, his calculations show a zero point in April 2043. But, Meyer argues, "Newspaper publishers are not so relentlessly stubborn that we can expect them to continue churning out papers until there is only one reader left. The industry would lose critical mass and collapse long before then."

The digital age of the internet or cyberspace has already virtually replaced the age of the printing press. The effects of the internet kicked in after 1990. At the time he

wrote his book, Meyer says, “I underestimated the velocity of the Internet effect. It is now clear that it is as disruptive to today’s newspapers as Gutenberg’s invention of movable type was to the town criers, the journalists of the 15th century.”

The drastic changes engendered by technological advances and the internet have caused anxiety among the practitioners, as well as the educators, in the communication field to engage in debates on the future of the main media-based dimensions of journalism—print, TV, radio, and online.

In the Sunday edition of *The (Fargo) Forum*, editor Mathew von Pinnon, a student of mine in the early 1990s, queried his readers, “Would you pay a little to know more about your city, state, nation or world?” Von Pinnon explained that the newspapers are going through “a cycle of decline and extinction” because “more and more people get their information for free online.” This phenomenon has cut into the operating budgets of newspapers resulting in reporter layoffs and shrinking of local news coverage.

Von Pinnon refers to the recent *Time* cover story titled “How to save your newspaper: A modest proposal,” in which writer Walter Isaacson contends that unless the media start charging a modest fee for accessing online news content [Brother, can you spare a dime?], journalists will get extinct, and with them the information they gather that others need to know.

Meanwhile, journalism teacher Eric Loo says he is concerned with the shape that journalism teaching should take in the context of the rapid changes in technology, falling advertising revenues and reporter layoffs, multi-tasking of reporters, intrusion of marketing people and “techies” in news rooms, and other ills.

Loo, editor of *Asia-Pacific Media Educator*, says he has called for papers for this year’s special issue themed “What are we teaching future journalists when ...”

Practitioner von Pinnon’s and lecturer Loo’s concerns about the future of journalism from their different perspectives should also concern all of us news consumers. It is eminently clear that a change is required in the emphasis placed on the inverted pyramid architecture of the news story, which developed in answer to the exigencies of limited newspaper space and the technical imperfections associated with story transmission by the wire services. Cyberspace has ample room for stories of any length, and wire services face no transmission problems. This frees the journalist to narrate his story more freely as long as he doesn’t forget to include the 5Ws and H: who, what, where, when, why, and how.

The end of the newspaper portends the demotion of the inverted pyramid to fast-breaking spot news and to produce summaries of longer stories for quick perusal by readers in a hurry. Educators will have to train journalists who can write news stories emulating the literary styles of Twain, Hemingway, and other accomplished writers or the broadcasting style of Keith Olbermann, “the droll, nettlesome, whip-smart, self-absorbed, hilarious, peripatetic television savant” of MNBC’s *Countdown* fame.

*Countdown* focuses on five stories of the day, flipping the inverted pyramid upright and counting down to the big story rather than leading with it, says S. Robert Lichter, president of the Center for Media and Public Affairs. Cable and internet news is

democratizing the news agenda, he says, and “the news is becoming more vibrant and less reliable.”

*Countdown*, a fast-moving mix of news, entertainment and opinion, is calibrated to bring in and keep young viewers, who have skipped the newspapers. Its chief “virtues” are entertainment and opinion; both frowned upon by normative press ethics. Objectivity is thrown out the door.

The *Countdown* model of broadcast journalism, derided by the social responsibility exponents, is also the solution proposed by Rupert Murdoch, the boss of News Corporation, the global media behemoth. “I believe too many of us editors and reporters are out of touch with our readers,” Murdoch told the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April 2005.

No wonder that people, and in particular the young, are ditching their newspapers. Today’s teens, twenty- and thirty-somethings, Murdoch pointed out, “don’t want to rely on a god-like figure from above to tell them what’s important, and they certainly don’t want news presented as gospel.” And yet, he went on, “as an industry, many of us have been remarkably, unaccountably, complacent.”

So, Matthew von Pinnon, to prolong the lifespan of your advertising-backed newspaper, do translate the Olbermann broadcast model to writing news features and features. Quantum physics attests that objectivity is an oxymoron—a mythical vestige of the Enlightenment. Entertainment and opinion have been part of the reporting repertoire of ancient cultures worldwide when the enlightened West decided to take the “objective” route and propagate its merits everywhere.

A news outlet doesn’t have to be stodgy to profess social responsibility and promote democracy as long as it operates within the bounds of the three dimensions of Sila (ethical conduct): Right Action, Right Speech, and Right Livelihood. Although a dime-a-story strategy may further repulse the teens away from news on the Web, some junkies may fall for it when the newspaper has ceased to exist.

Eric Loo, to prolong your job as a journalism educator, spend less time teaching the paramount model and news values of the print age, and teach the Olbermann model, as well as other story telling methods that ancient Chinese sages like Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Sunzi used in their classics. In a world-system, which shows a definite economic shift to the East (China and India), de-Westernizing journalism has been long overdue. As a Malaysian native teaching in Australia, you are in a good position to prepare future journalists for the Australian media.

Of course, both practitioners and educators of the cyberspace/digital/electronic age can anticipate the increasing hybridity of journalism, public relations, and advertising; the subservience of mass communication to communication studies as justified by the movement toward the macro concept of transdisciplinarity; and more varieties of journalism consonant with the cultural ethos of non-Western societies. Diversity within unity, the Buddhist-Daoist doctrine, will continue to hold forth in the world’s yin-yang continuum of journalism.

Under these circumstances, reactions against the commoditization of news might lead to the emergence of a non-commercialized news sector supported by the civil society,

non-profit organizations and concerned governments. Their aim would be to produce news as a social good devoid of the capitalist desire for profit accumulation.

*This article was originally published in LankaWeb (<http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items09/250209-1.html>) on Feb.25, 2009. Reproduced with permission from Shelton Gunaratne and LankaWeb.*

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