

Five things you need to know to save serious journalism

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There has been a spate of grim news about the news media in recent months, with layoffs and newsroom closures from coast to coast. It's clear Canadian journalism is in a perilous state. Less clear is what can be done about it.

I've spent much of the last year talking to people both inside and outside journalism about the threats to its future and how they might be addressed, courtesy of a fellowship from the Public Policy Forum. While those conversations did not reveal a magic solution to journalism's woes, they exposed a few salient facts often glossed over or ignored in the search for solutions.

Serious journalism has no future in Canada unless the following are not just noted but understood:

1. It's not just journalism

What do Canadian journalists have in common with the dabbawallas (lunchbox delivery men) of Mumbai? In both cases the industry they work in has been upended by information technology, changing not just how product is delivered, but who pockets the most money in the end. Similar restructuring has taken place in the music, accommodation, taxi and even porn video industries. Banking is next. Journalists might chafe at the suggestion that theirs is just one among many industries to be drastically rearranged by the internet and a growing array of digital tools. The point is that powerful, global forces that transcend national borders are at work. Any solution to journalism's problems in Canada has to take this into account.

2. Direct subsidies won't work

Canadians tend to look to their governments for help when an industry is in trouble. Bombardier is a case in point. The call for government subsidies to journalism is part of this trend. The Nordic model is cited. Yet the global forces noted above are driving down newspaper readership in print and online in the Nordic countries despite government support. There may well be solutions that involve government. Given how many people use social media to get their news, educating Canadians about their digital privacy would be a good start. Any serious discussion about the government's role should also include a debate about the future of CBC and Radio Canada.

3. Journalists are no longer the gatekeepers of information

No one needs journalists any more to get their message out. Anyone with access to the internet or social media can talk directly to their intended audience. Similarly, journalists are not the only way governments, businesses and other groups can take the pulse of Canadians. There are plenty of digital tools for that. This has changed irrevocably the status and role of journalists. Yes, they are needed more than ever to shed light in dark corners and to analyze events, answering the crucial question: What does this mean to Canadians? But they are sharing space they once thought was their own with an ever-expanding number of voices that they have to both acknowledge and in some cases involve in their work. This likely means fewer journalism jobs.

4. The tech giants are both an opportunity and a threat

In the last year all of the major tech firms have launched new ways of distributing news to their users. Twitter, Facebook, Google, Snapchat, Instagram and others want content their users can easily read, view or listen to while remaining inside their app (as opposed to being redirected to the site where the item was created). Newspapers, radio and television firms want new audiences for their work. It would seem to be a marriage made in heaven. But there are drawbacks for the news media firms. They risk losing control of how their work is distributed, an erosion of their brand and the loss of additional ad revenues created by users who come to their sites and click on other stories, videos and podcasts. Partnering with tech giants could be their salvation or the beginning of the end.

5. The audience has changed

It's widely known that the audience for journalism has moved online and increasingly onto smartphones. This changes how people want their journalism -- it must be easy to digest on a small screen -- and when they want to look at the news -- whenever they feel like and often in short bursts throughout the day. These are structural issues that while difficult for traditional media firms to cope with are not impossible. But one change that is not widely appreciated and more difficult to deal with is the desire to be involved in the creation of journalism in ways that were unimaginable before the advent of the internet. Audiences want a relationship. For journalists and media outlets used to thinking in terms of delivering a product, this requires a total rethinking of their role.

In an age where information floods in from every direction there is still a need for journalism that makes sense of it all. But any viable solution to the industry's current woes has to take into account the changes wrought by information technology on journalists and their intended audience. This should be the starting point of any serious discussion about the future of journalism in Canada.

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