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Why We Need Public Interest Journalism

There is absolutely nothing wrong with profit. The issue for today’s news media organisations is the purpose to which profit is put. If it is siphoned off as dividends to investors it is lost to journalism. If it is employed to make the media organisation self-sustaining, journalism can be the beneficiary. In an age of marginal viability, the former no longer makes much sense and the latter is a necessity.

It is necessary because, as the late C. Edwin Baker noted, a country is democratic only to the extent that its media, as well as elections, are structurally egalitarian and politically salient. And democratically significant journalism is under threat.

Baker’s summation of the importance of the media, contained in the opening pages of Media Concentration and Democracy, was penned shortly before the 2007 Global Financial Crisis. If media ownership at that point struggled to be “structurally egalitarian”, the economic maelstrom into which the world was subsequently propelled appeared to be the final straw. The future of commercial news media ownership – egalitarian or otherwise – was being called into question by plummeting revenue and mountainous debt.

It was not, however, the final straw. In the following years, news corporations tottered on. However, the integrity and even morality of the media was tested to the limit in phone hacking and sex scandals in the United Kingdom, financial collapses in North America and “big business” interference in Australia. In South Africa the integrity of government became the issue as repressive laws were placed in the way of news media attempting to be “politically salient”.

The end may not be nigh but news media, in the English-speaking world at least, are headed for a cathartic moment. It may result in what economist Joseph Schumpeter called “creative destruction” – the need to replace old products and services with new ones – that will reform and renew the way the public receives information. Or it may fail to do so in a way that meets Baker’s prerequisite for a democracy and leave, instead, a democratic deficit.

G. Ellis, Trust Ownership and the Future of News
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His definition is no less resonant now than it was in 2007: ownership and governance remain central to the survival of democratically significant news media, that is, media willing to provide information that citizens need to know, and able to distribute it to sufficient numbers of citizens to make the information broadly relevant.

It is time to ask whether the form of corporate ownership that both sustained and benefitted from news operations in the second half of the 20th century will do justice to this democratically significant journalism in the 21st century. Entertainment-driven media and specialist financial newspapers will continue to find friends on Wall Street and in the City of London but increasingly the former are diverging from traditional views of journalism and, in particular, its civic purposes. Serious mainstream journalism can no longer rely on the financial support that was forthcoming in the halcyon days when news-based print and (to a lesser extent) broadcasting had monopolies on advertising space or time and when rivers of gold flowed into dividend accounts.

In the days when media companies delivered double-digit annual profit growth it would have been heresy to suggest that “the news” was not a business. Purists determined to preserve the separation of church and state might suggest that the business was advertising but, in fact, that would not exist but for the news content that sat alongside. Now the advertising is migrating to digital platforms where that symbiotic relationship with news is no longer deemed necessary. It is a step too far to suggest the corporate world has no business in serious journalism but it is important to consider whether alternative forms of ownership and, certainly, governance are needed to counter a growing civic deficit in the traditional business model. Large questions hang over the future of that business model and of the structure of the industry.

It would be easy, but not altogether appropriate, to let technological determinism dictate both the form of this book and the nature of the news industry in future. Certainly, many scholars have an understandable focus on the massive impact that digital platforms have had on traditional mainstream media, but a longer view will recognise that the distribution of news has been a process that began evolving before Phidippides was dispatched to inform Athens of victory over the Persians at Marathon. And while invention has precipitated changes in the method and scale of delivery, it has not fundamentally altered the purposes of news dissemination. There is something enduring about what society makes of information.

Journalism and, in many respects, media enterprises have been formalised for at least 150 years. Today there is broad acceptance of the institutional nature of the press, both as an element of the political landscape and in its internal structures and practices. Therefore the subject is examined here in its institutional context. While opinions differ on the relationship between journalists and the political establishment (see, for example,