



The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution that Will Begin the World Again. By Robert McChesney and John Nichols. Philadelphia: Nation Books, 2010, 334 pp. ISBN 978156856052.

Through 2008–09, as the North American economy wallowed and the media industry went from moan to gasp, reporting and commentary on the business of news made for some riveting reading. Scholar Robert McChesney and political journalist John Nichols have sifted through most of it this discourse to give us an invaluable snapshot of an industry in nervous collapse. On one hand, there was a tidal surge of bad news: mass layoffs (according to the authors almost 6,000 journalists in 2008); newspaper closings (*The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *the Rocky Mountain News*); bankruptcies or near-bankruptcies (*The Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Canwest*, the giant Tribune company); plunging ad sales and dissipating classifieds. Along with that came an equally ferocious torrent of commentary, which ranged from the gloating of the blogosphere to mourning for a dying profession and hand-wringing about how the dual blows of Web technology and recession had created a “perfect storm” (an expression that badly needs a stake driven through its heart) that had sunk the industry.

In the first chapter of *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution that Will Begin the World Again*, the authors take stock of all this noise and conclude that, the crisis “has for the most part, been presented as a matter of mechanics and ledgers rather than one of turmoil of journalists and danger for democracy” (p. 19). This is the culmination of years of “tension between commercialism and the public good” (p. xi) that has led to a “debauched and deteriorating journalism” (p. x). The somewhat overheated prose notwithstanding, the authors’ outlook is not pessimistic. Their diagnosis of the situation is that journalism is healthy and finding ways to survive on the Web. They do, however, never completely reconcile their disdain for the “debauched” newspaper industry with the fact that more people than ever are reading papers—for free, online.

Meanwhile, the business is in a bad way. But McChesney and Nichols argue that anyone who believes big media will pass away, and their properties revert to local control, is dreaming. (The recent carving of Postmedia Network from the cadaver of Canwest seems to bear them out.) Similarly, believers in the power of the Internet to transform the public conversation are idealists who fail to take into account such real-world considerations as the power of big media to colonize cyberspace, the tendency of the blogosphere to create echo chambers, and the fact that journalism can’t be practised as a profession unless journalists get a living wage. The authors argue that the big media conglomerates are terminally ill and, if we want to save journalism, we need government to start paying the bills. Anticipating the predictable derisive howling from the right, they document more than two centuries of government aid that has helped support a free press in the United States and around the world, from mail subsidies to tax breaks, to joint operating agreements, to state-supported public broadcasting.

The book makes a strong case for the viability of government and non-profit organizations to replace big media companies as patrons of journalism. They outline the history of newspapers before they claimed to be objective, independent of political support and financed by advertising, and point to state-supported publications in Scandinavia, and the foundations that run the *St. Petersburg Times* in Florida and *The Guardian* in London. McChesney and Nichols also perform a service by passing a baloney detector over the standard, media-company line that the “business model” was “broken” by unforeseen economic forces and unbeatable technological competition. They point out that little has changed since the 1980s and ’90s, when scholars and industry observers began cataloging the damage done to the press by big media: at its source, a cycle of acquisition-fueled debt loads, share-holder pressure and management short-sightedness that has never subsided: debt rises; shareholders demand dividends; managers trim staff to adjust the bottom line; quality deteriorates; readers turn away. The authors point out that

When the Internet came along as a significant force, newspapers were already heading south. And they were doing so by downsizing journalism. People, especially young people, were not irrational when they elected to stop (or never start) reading newspapers. The Internet only accelerated the process and gave it an inexorable logic. (p. 37)

Meanwhile, by deciding to not to charge for content and not to leverage classified advertising, media executives gave away the store, without having any idea of what was going to replace the lost revenue.

The authors offer “four related ways to rethink journalism”:

- a “public good”
- something supported by society because the market cannot
- part of our social infrastructure
- an integral part of the public sphere.

And, anticipating a spaying and de-clawing of privately funded journalism, they lay out a plan for an orderly conversion from the corporate newspaper to the “post-corporate digital newspaper.” Their prescription is a modern-day equivalent of the New Deal-era Works Progress Administration, in which government would subsidize journalism by taxing such items as the broadcast spectrum, advertising, smart phones and tablets, and consumer electronics. One way to keep government at arms length, they suggest, is to allocate the proceeds to a “citizenship news voucher” of \$200 for each U.S. citizen, which she or he could donate to any non-profit news agency.

In that, the authors place a lot of faith in the American appetite for responsible journalism. One can easily imagine the campaigning that would go on for the citizenship news vouchers, and it seems fairly obvious that one way to attract those vouchers would be to tell citizens what they wanted to hear. Thus, we may see a rise in well funded, public news organizations dedicated to cutting taxes, lifting government controls on business, controlling immigration, tracking celebrities, declaring war on crime and disproving global warming. In the end, it’s hard to see how the vouchers could be prevented from becoming a financial godsend for forces that aim to manipulate the public conversation for personal gain.

Also, as McChesney and Nichols point out, the current discourse involves looking at journalism either as a business or as a public service and, unfortunately, usually neglect craft or artistry. Several times, McChesney and Nichols talk of “quality journalism,” but shy away from describing it. They complain that the modern “‘product’ that was rolling off the press was a thin, lifeless shadow of the newspapers of old” (p. 9), but they don’t try to create a set of criteria for or a come up with a definition of quality journalism. Nor do they explain exactly what was so special about those “newspapers of old.”

They also fail to entertain the notion that the newspaper may not be quite as sick as the technological determinists might have us believe. That involves considerable blindness to history: theatre and print adapted to radio and film; theatre, print, film and radio adapted to television. All coexist in the world today. Newspapers, as well as magazines, are works of popular culture with their own set of esthetic values, which are likely to be recognized in one form or another for a long time to come.

In the end, the authors have provided a useful survey of the state of the business as it was in 2009 (and may soon be again), have blown up much of the mythology about the historical permanence and independence of the corporate media, and have dared to engage with the problems and offer some solutions worth at least thinking about—even if they may involve creating a Lippmannian nightmare of uninformed citizenry choosing the media it wants, or deserves.

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