Angst and Confusion about the Survival of Journalism

Concerns about the survival of journalism elicit widely differently concerns depending upon who you read or listen to. They tend to share one thing in common, however: Most make little distinction between journalism as an information practice and the businesses and institutions of journalism. The consequence of this approach is that arguments tend to be based in business developments involving contemporary news structures, operations, and employment.

There are cries that democracy is endangered if any newspaper closes and that power cannot be effectively challenged if any broadcaster — much less a public service broadcaster — reduces journalistic employment. Everywhere despairing self interest is conveyed. Journalists lament the passing of journalism because their employment is declining. Publishers complain that revenue is declining and hurting their enterprises. Critics complain that news is being shortened and popularized. And everyone blames digital developments without even considering the general declines in audiences and the shifts in advertising expenditures that have been occurring over the four decades.

When I began studying the economics and business of news forty years ago, few scholars, journalists, and even publishers were interested in the topic and most casually dismissed it. It has been astonishing to watch how rapidly they decided in recent years that the underlying support for, economic factors in, and decisions of news organizations matter.

Partly because many are approaching contemporary developments with self interest, but also because they ignore much of the economic evidence developed in past decades and focus primarily on news organizations, they come to the conclusion that journalism itself is at risk and suggest all manner of state and private intervention. It does not seem to matter that many of the suggestions have not proven to be effective in the long-term when they were implemented in the past and many suggestions do not sufficiently account for the changes created by the digital and mobile environments.

There also seems to be an enduring belief that the primary business models of new organizations in the twentieth century are the only models that can support journalism in the future.

This is not to criticize concern about journalism and news enterprises, but to underscore our need to critically evaluate what is happening and to seek realistic solutions that will preserve journalism. If some existing news enterprises disappear along the way, so be it. It is not their existence, but the functions they have served that are important.

This issue of Nordicom-Information wrestles with issues of how news organizations and journalism can survive in the contemporary environment. It reviews developments in the Nordic news business in the past decade, explores how financing has changed, and reveals...
how the news organizations and journalism are being affected. It does more than just look backward with a debatable view that the past was necessarily the better for journalism. It explores the implication of new forms and financing and the state of media business knowledge and research in the region.

The conditions in which news enterprises find themselves today have arisen because protections previously created for newspapers by production costs and distribution distance and time have been eroded and because the policy protections previously afforded news broadcasters have been withdrawn. Many more sources of news and information have emerged during the past 40 years and limited competition has been replaced by heated rivalry for audience attention. Today’s environment is not just because digital media is changing the news business, but a longer term evolution has given us radio news channels, television news, 24 hour cable/satellite news, and news distributed by digital, mobile, and social media.

We must recognize that audiences now choose to get news and information differently than in the past when we consider the future of journalism. They obtain news and information from many more sources, in different formats, on different platforms, at times convenient to them, about things they most need and want to know, and without the news bundle traditionally offered. There are distinct advantages to many of these changes that are improvements on the past, but we do have to recognize that these also create challenges to journalism that will need to be addressed to ensure a continual supply of excellent journalism.

We also need to recognize that those who practice journalism and journalism are changing. Many more people are regularly providing and commenting on news as bloggers and citizen journalists than ever before. Journalists are increasingly less defined by having studied journalism at university or being employed by a legacy news enterprise. Indeed, the historic figures of Nordic journalism – including Olof von Dalin, Ander Bording, and Antti Litzelius – have much more in common with today’s bloggers and citizen journalists than members of Nordic journalist unions.

There are commonalities among those who practice journalism beyond merely news and information provision. Journalists have fundamental commitments to accuracy and fairness, to holding power to account, and to representing broader interests of society. While practicing journalism within news enterprises has benefits, it is not the only way to act on those commitments and to provide news information to the public and serve the interests of society.

The extent to which the practice of journalism is changing and a testament to its importance is seen in the fact that half of journalists killed worldwide today are bloggers and citizen journalists rather than journalists associated with recognized news organizations. It is their practice of journalism that has made them so dangerous to undemocratic regimes and organized crime groups.

We are thus faced with a very different environment for journalism than existed in the past century, but journalism has adapted many times in the past three centuries and continues to exist because it is useful for society. The angst and confusion over the survival of journalism today is understandable, but our contemplation of the situation and the future needs to be measured and informed, based on critical assessment of the developments and arguments, and the prospects for the future.