

MAJOR TRENDS in the U.S. NEWS MEDIA

The State of the News Media 2006: An Annual Report on American Journalism Project for Excellence in Journalism

In their third annual report, issued this spring, the Washington-based Project for Excellence in Journalism identified these six trends. For more details, visit their excellent Web site, stateofthenewsmedia.org.

*** The new paradox of journalism is more outlets covering fewer stories.**

As the number of news providers proliferates, the audience for each one shrinks and the number of journalists in each organization is reduced. We tend to see more accounts of the same handful of stories each day. When big stories break, they are often covered by general-assignment reporters working with a limited list of sources and a tight time-frame. Such concentration of personnel around a few stories has aided the efforts of newsmakers to control what the public knows.

*** The species of newspaper that may be most threatened is the big-city metro paper.**

In 2005, big-city metros – rather than large national papers or small dailies -- suffered the biggest circulation drops and imposed the largest staff cutbacks. Those big papers are trying to cover far-flung suburbs and national and regional news at the same time. They are being supplanted by niche publications serving smaller communities and targeted audiences. Yet big metros are the news organizations most likely to have the resources and aspirations to act as watchdogs over state, regional and urban institutions; to identify trends; and to define the larger public square.

*** At many old-media companies, the battle between idealists and accountants is over.**

The idealists have lost. The troubles of 2005, especially in print, dealt a further blow to the fight for journalism in the public interest. As a corporate spokesman for Knight Ridder pointed out, there simply is no identifiable, strong correlation between quality journalism and newspaper sales. From here on, at many companies, the fight on behalf of the public interest will come from the rank and file of the newsroom, with the news executive as mediator with the boardroom. At many new-media companies, it is not clear if advocates for the public interest are present at all.

*** Traditional media do appear to be moving toward technological innovation — finally.**

Traditional news outfits, in practice if not in rhetoric, have previously treated the Internet as a platform to repurpose old material. The pattern is beginning to change; much of the revenue growth in these companies now comes from online (and from niche products such as youth newspapers). But big questions remain unanswered. One is whether younger audiences care anything about traditional news brands. And even if these legacy media do move online seriously, can they change their culture, or will they continue to favor traditional platforms?

*** Aggregators, the new challengers to old media, are also playing with limited time.**

When it comes to news, what companies such as Google and Yahoo are aggregating and selling is the work of others — the very same old media they are taking revenue from. The more they succeed, the faster they erode the product they are selling, unless the economic model is radically changed. Can the new rivals become more than technology companies? And if they do, will they have more than rhetorical allegiance to the values of public-interest journalism?

*** The central economic question in journalism continues to be how long it will take online journalism to become a major economic engine, and if it will ever be as big as print or TV.**

If online revenues at newspapers continue to grow at the current rate — an improbable 33% a year — they will not reach levels equivalent with print until 2017 (assuming print grows just 3% a year). Realistically, it will be years before the Internet rivals old media economics, if it ever does. Look for producers of old media to begin challenging Internet providers and Internet aggregators to begin compensating them for content, the model that exists in cable television.

Those trends are in addition to others the PEJ identified in earlier years. Among them:

- * That the traditional model of journalism — the press as verifier — is giving way to other models that are faster, looser and cheaper.
- * To adapt, journalism must move in the direction of making its work more transparent and more expert and widening the scope of its searchlight.
- * Those who would manipulate the press and the public are gaining leverage over the journalists who cover them.
- * Convergence is more inevitable and less threatening the more one looks at audience data.
- * The notion that people are gravitating to a partisan press model, or red news and blue news, is exaggerated.