

The Scouting Report: Future of the News Industry

The difficulties experienced by traditional media outlets – especially newspapers – have been highly publicized and well-documented. The Internet and the emergence of social media have changed the way people around the world access information. For many, Walter Cronkite's death was the end of an era -- and an opportunity to reflect on the changing nature of the media. Will newspapers and traditional media outlets be able to adapt to the new media scene?

In this week's edition of the Scouting Report, Ron Nessen, former White House Press Secretary and NBC reporter, now journalist in residence at the Brookings Institution, took your questions about the future of the news industry. Fred Barbash, senior editor at *Politico*, moderated the discussion.

The transcript of this web chat follows.

12:30 Fred Barbash-Moderator: Taking your questions today is a most familiar name: Ron Nessen, former White House Press Secretary and NBC reporter, now Journalist in Residence at the Brookings Institution.

Welcome Ron and welcome readers.

12:31 Ron Nessen: Thanks Fred. I'm looking forward to answering the questions.

12:31 [Comment From Julie Yang] What will the current shift from print to online media mean for the newspaper industry's international correspondents?

12:32 Ron Nessen: Well, it's already having a big impact on international correspondents. Many news organizations have cut back on the number of correspondents they have stationed overseas...and some news organizations have cut out their foreign bureaus entirely.

12:32 [Comment From Erin] Do you think we're really headed toward a world without newspapers?

12:34 Ron Nessen: I'm not sure we'll be totally without newspapers. But you've already got some major cities in the US with just one daily newspaper. People, young people especially, are getting their news increasingly from other sources. This reduces advertising revenue, which in turn forces the newspaper to cut its payroll.

12:35 [Comment From Fred] With all the new technology, and 24/7 cable news, what do you think has been lost and what has been gained in the public's ability to consume whatever passes for news today? That is, do you think we're better informed, or just more informed?

12:38 Ron Nessen: I think news consumers...especially young people...have short attention spans. And so they turn to the internet. But I just don't think you can get much information from a 140-character tweet. As for cable TV, the all news channels have become ideologically oriented. Their idea of covering the news is to get someone from the left and someone from the right in front of a camera and tell them to yell at each other!

12:38 [Comment From Alex] Isn't there really a kind of positive side to the transformation of the news industry? You no longer have to own the printing press to communicate news, allowing for many more perspectives, more voices and greater access.

12:41 Ron Nessen: That's true. But when "everyone's a journalist" there are no editors. You can write anything you want to and hit a button and it goes out to millions of people. My background is in journalism. I had great mentors. One was an editor who kept asking me, "How do you know...How do you know?" He made me prove that I had reliable sources for everything in my stories. When anybody can write anything they want, you get a lot of misinformation.

12:42 [Comment From David] Are any newspapers hiring? Maybe for new media - type jobs?

12:43 Ron Nessen: I get calls almost every week from journalist friends who have been laid off. Sometime they are transformed to a newspaper's blog...at much less money.

12:43 [Comment From Paul] What has been the biggest threat to newspapers?

12:45 Ron Nessen: The biggest threat is that they have not developed a business plan that allows them to switch from selling newspaper subscriptions and advertising in a print edition to doing the same thing for an on-line edition of the newspaper. Some have tried charging for access to the on-line edition, but people are used to getting everything for free on the internet.

12:46 [Comment From Toshi] What do you think about Mr. Dan Rather's proposal to call upon President Obama to form a Presidential commission to address and discuss the state of America's news media?

12:47 Ron Nessen: I didn't know Dan had made that proposal. But I think it's a good idea to set up a congressional commission on the future state of the news media.

12:48 [Comment From Karl Knapstein] Do you think people will pay for on line information?

12:48 Ron Nessen: I do not believe people will pay for on-line information. The culture of the internet is that everything ought to be free.

12:50 [Comment From Avraam Jack Dectis] Given the failure of the current revenue models, are alternative revenue models being considered?

12:52 Ron Nessen: Frankly, I don't see a viable revenue model for newspapers right now. I did hear an interesting idea recently. It was to have newspapers operate as non-profit organizations supported by non-profit foundations and donors.

12:53 [Comment From Les] I read about a study that found that people who watch the Daily Show tend to be very knowledgeable about current events. Is it so bad that young people are getting their news from these non-traditional sources?

12:55 Ron Nessen: I'm probably old-fashioned on this issue. I worry about the blurring of the line between news and entertainment. Jon Stewart is a COMEDIAN not a newscaster. Steven Colbert is a COMEDIAN not a newscaster.

12:55 [Comment From Angelia] I've done some writing for the web and have enrolled in American University's interactive journalism grad program. How do print journalists feel about these new type of journalists (such as myself) encroaching on their territory? Do you feel that there is a sense of competition (healthy, unhealthy, fearful) between online journalists and print journalists?

12:57 Reader Poll: Where do you get most of your news from?

Mainstream media web site (44%)
Blogs, social media, other news sites (0%)
Newspapers, TV, radio (56%)

12:58 Ron Nessen: Well, my experience is that journalists I know who still have their newspaper jobs find themselves spending a large part of their day blogging on the newspaper's website. And some others who have lost their newspaper jobs have found work -- at a much lower salary -- working in interactive journalism.

12:59 [Comment From Les] What about beefing up PBS and NPR and making them America's version of the BBC? Any thoughts on that?

1:01 Ron Nessen: In a way I think they already ARE America's version of the BBC. They both receive government money and they both do a very good job covering the news. But I don't think people being laid off by radio and TV stations or the networks are going to find work in public broadcasting. As a producer once told me: "There are people with network voices and there are people with public broadcast voices."

1:02 [Comment From Bill] Do you think people like Rush Limbaugh are comedians and not newscasters too?

1:04 Ron Nessen: I guess some people would consider Rush Limbaugh to be a comedian. I think he brings a very conservative point of view to his commentaries and makes no secret of it. He's not a news person. He's a purveyor of opinion.

1:04 [Comment From Jen] If people are basically disinterested in news--except every now and then--isn't it the case that no "model" will succeed, period. And isn't there a lot of evidence that the vast majority of people simply are disinterested?

1:04 Reader Poll: Do you subscribe to a daily newspaper?

Yes (79%)
No (21%)

1:06 Ron Nessen: I have seen reputable polls that suggest that interest in news is age related -- the younger you are, the less interested you are. One poll by the Pew Research Center for People

and the Press found that only one out of five people under the age of 35 read a daily newspaper. Interest in news increases with age, however.

1:06 [Comment From Toshi] What do you think about ideas of helping or supporting news media by the government? Would it undermine independence or credibility of news media?

1:10 Ron Nessen: Well, as I mentioned earlier there have been proposals for foundations and donors to support the news media. I and a lot of other people would worry about government-supported news media...worried that the government would try to slant the news in its favor. In England, of course, the reputable BBC is largely supported by the government.

1:10 [Comment From Henning] You said that people will not pay for online information. But doesn't the WSJ earn money with their internet-section? Could that be a model for others?

1:11 Ron Nessen: You're right, the WSJ is one of the few news organizations that does charge for access to its website. I just don't know how successful it has been.

1:12 [Comment From Jeanne] How will interactive journalism impact editorial decision-making about content -- what to cover or what's news -- in traditional media?

1:16 Ron Nessen: Well, I guess "interactive journalism" means different things to different people. For me, who worked at a network, a wire service, and a weekly newspaper, the worrisome thing about interactive journalism is the lack of an editor or a producer to check for accuracy, completeness, balance, etc. As I mentioned earlier, an influential editor I worked for insisted I be able to answer the question "How do you know?" about every sentence in my story.

1:17 [Comment From Suzie] What do you think about today's White House reporters? They seem to be kind of lazy! They just report what they're given by the WH. Was it different back when you were a press secretary?

1:21 Ron Nessen: Good question! Actually they're not lazy. They're very busy. Instead of just covering the daily briefing and then spending the rest of the day preparing their story for the evening newscasts or the morning paper -- as was the case when I was a White House reporter and then the press secretary -- they've got to blog, and if they work for CNN or MSNBC etc. they've got continuous deadlines.

1:22 [Comment From Toshi] When you get a call from a journalist friend who has been laid off, what is your advice for your friend?

1:23 Ron Nessen: My advice is to decide what they'd really LIKE to do, and then seek a job in that field.

1:23 [Comment From Tom Honig] Are we hearing from you that the future of news is **bleak**?

1:26 Ron Nessen: Well, was the future of the buggy whip industry bleak when the automobile came along? Seriously, the way people get their news is changing, especially for young people. You can't turn back history. You can't dis-invent the internet. Journalism...and people seeking to know what's going on in the world...will have to adapt to the new technology.

1:28 [Comment From Angelia] What newspaper websites do you find the most impressive (e.g. informative, has a style/method that should be followed by others, etc) and which do you find the least impressive?

1:29 Ron Nessen: I subscribe to three old-fashion newspapers-on-paper: the Washington Post, the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal. And those are also the three websites I find most informative. Of the three, I'd rank the Washington Post website #1.

1:29 Fred Barbash: I think that's all that we have time for today. Thanks everyone for your great questions, and thanks to Ron for his thoughtful answers.

1:30 Fred Barbash: Be sure to come back for next week's chat - same time, same place. We'll have Douglas Elliott on hand to talk about the 1 year anniversary of the financial crisis.

1:30 Ron Nessen: I enjoyed it very much! Stimulating! I'm glad to hear so much interest in the future of journalism and newspapers.