

The news today: 7 trends in old and new media

By Elaine C. Kamarck and Ashley Gabriele

INTRODUCTION



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Twitter. Tumblr. Facebook. Digg. MySpace. BuzzFeed. It's enough to make a baby boomer's head spin. And enough to make a millennial say, "So?"

Like every major technological revolution, from the printing press to radio and television, the Internet revolution's impact on society has been greeted with pessimism by some and optimism by others. Nowhere is this more true than in journalism and media. For instance, President Obama's 2015 State of the Union had fewer TV viewers than ever. But it was noteworthy for the live commentary it generated on Facebook and Twitter, and for the live online streaming coming from the White House that contained graphs, charts and other data designed to make it easy for viewers to share via social media. So what does that mean?

Are citizens less engaged because fewer watched the speech? Or are they more engaged because they interacted with their fellow citizens in a conversation about the speech (or parts of it)?

As the entire communications landscape morphs into the digital age, it is important to ask – What exactly has changed? And what does it mean? This paper will attempt to answer the first question by using a technique made popular by the new journalism—the "listicle." As for the second question—what does it mean?—when it comes to journalism and its future, the health of the "fourth branch" of government (as it has been called) is critical to the future of democracy. This paper won't try to

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tackle the bigger question, but rather to present a picture of the old and the new so that others can speculate how it might impact the future of democratic governance.

Here's our list of seven things we know to be true of old and new media:

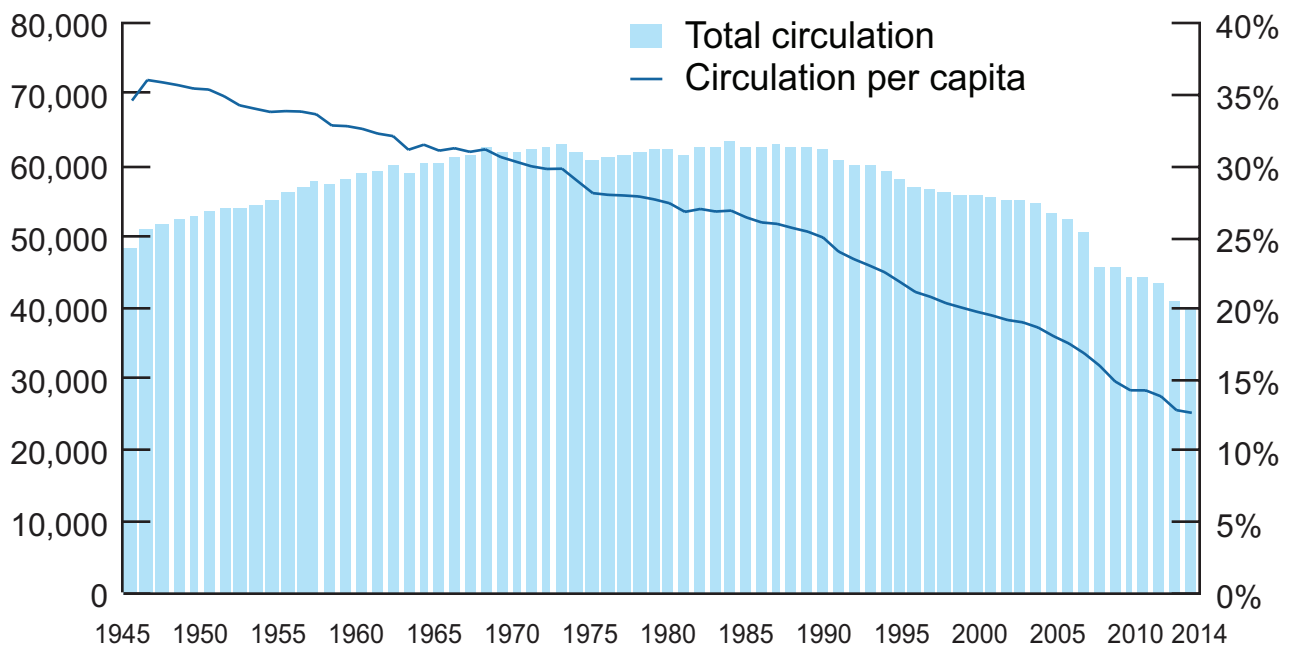
1. Print newspapers are dinosaurs
2. Hard news is in danger
3. Television is still important
4. And so is radio
5. News is now digital
6. Social media allows news (and "news") to go viral
7. For the younger generation, news is delivered through comedy

1. NEWSPAPERS ARE DINOSAURS

The first item on our list comes as no surprise. Newspaper circulation is down. Fewer people today receive a newspaper than in years past, even though the population has grown in the last seventy years. That's why the graph below, using data from the Newspaper Association of America, is so interesting. When adjusting for population growth and recalculating newspaper circulation *per capita*, the full extent of the decline becomes apparent. In the 1940s, somewhere over one third of Americans received a daily newspaper. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, readership was down by about half to less than 15 percent.

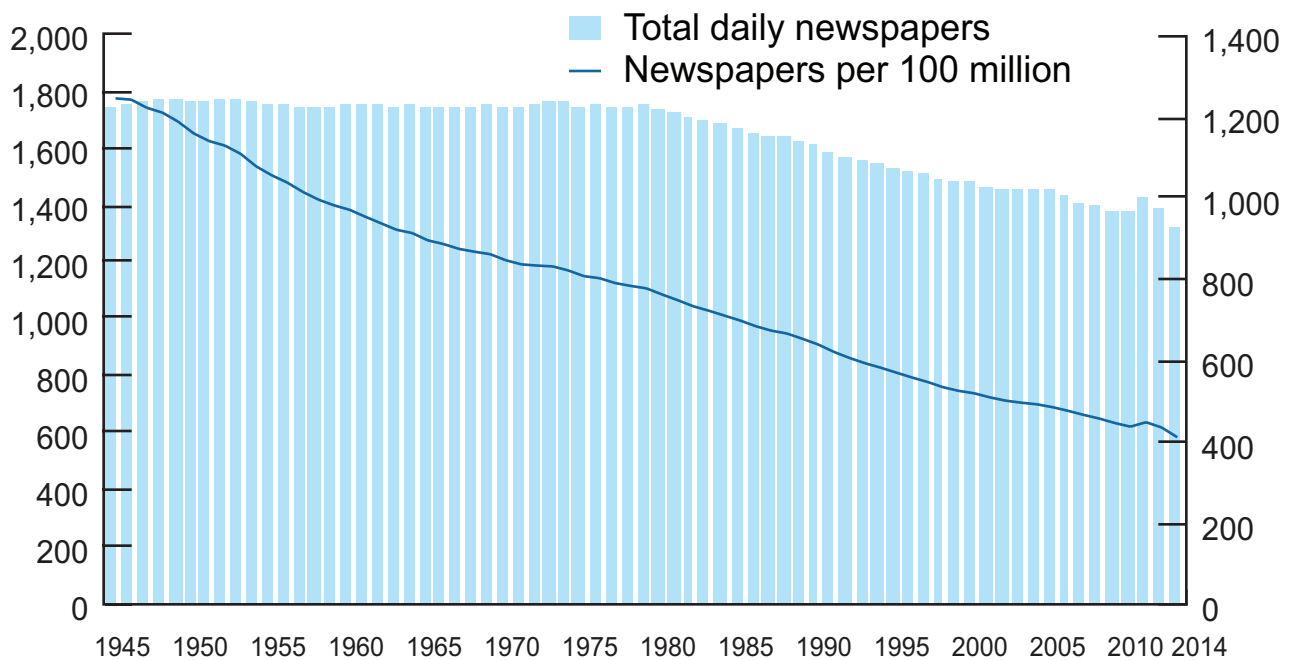
As circulation has plummeted, so has the number of newspapers. There were 1,749 American newspapers in 1945 and by the end of 2014, the number had shrunk to 1,331. Once again, when these numbers are converted to per capita numbers, the trend is even more dramatic. We now have many fewer papers serving a much bigger population.

Daily newspaper circulation 1945-2014



Source: Editor and Publisher International Yearbook

Number of daily newspapers



Source: Editor and Publisher International Yearbook

Of course a decline in newspapers and circulation doesn't necessarily predict a decline in newspaper readership if, in fact, people are simply choosing to read the paper on their computers or on their mobile devices instead of in print. But, according to the latest data from the Pew State of the Media project, this isn't happening nearly as much as some would think. Newspaper reading still happens mostly in print.

And yet, other data collected by Pew finds that for the top newspapers at least, their digital readership substantially tops their circulation numbers. Pew responds as follows: "Why this discrepancy? One clue lies in the time spent. The average visit to *The New York Times*' website and associated apps in January 2015 lasted only 4.6 minutes—and this was the highest of the top 25 digital newspapers. Thus, most online newspaper visitors are "flybys," arriving perhaps through a link on a social networking site or sent in an email. And so, when individuals are asked about this, they may not think of this experience as "reading a newspaper," but simply browsing an article online.¹

Newspaper audience distribution by platform (percentage of readership)

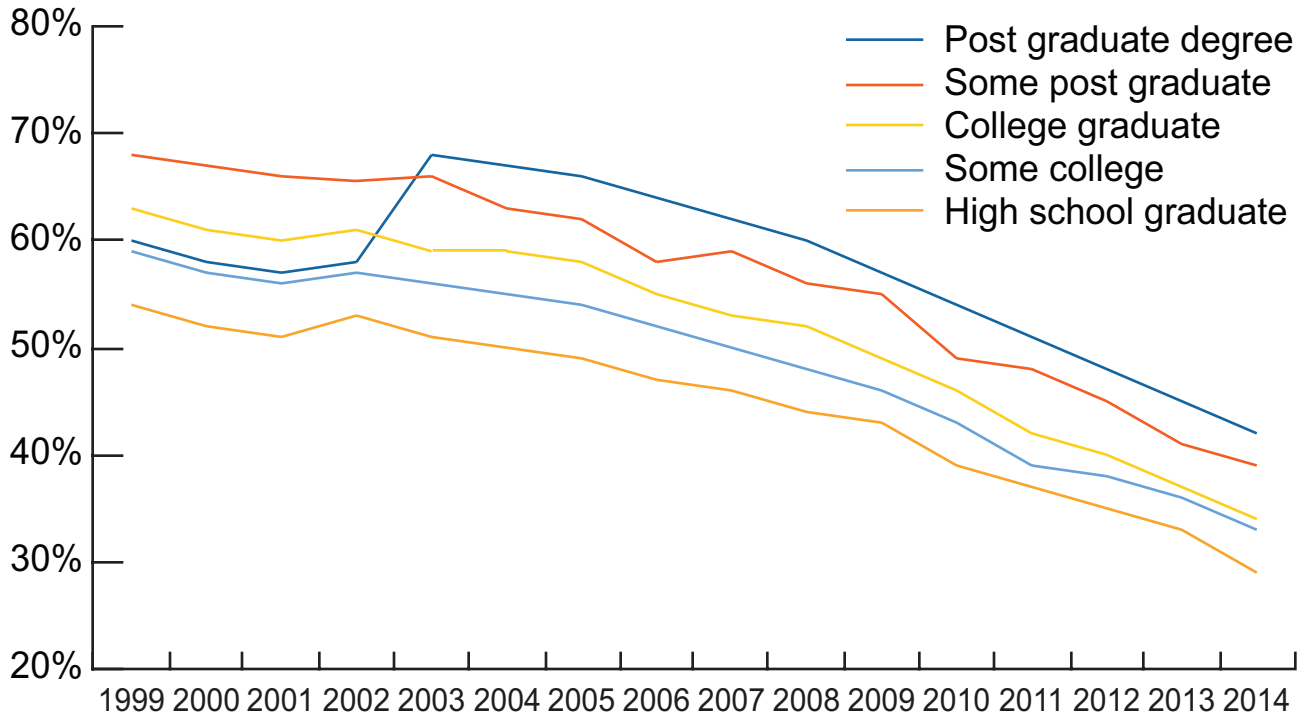
	2013	2014
Print only	55%	56%
Print/desktop	15	11
Print/desktop/mobile	10	11
Desktop only	7	6
Desktop/mobile	5	7
Print/mobile	4	5
Mobile only	3	5

Source: Pew Research Center

¹ Michael Barthel, "Newspapers Fact Sheet." Pew Research Center, April 29, 2015. Accessed at: <http://www.journalism.org/2015/04/29/newspapers-fact-sheet/>

Daily newspaper readership by education level

Percentage nationally who read any daily newspaper yesterday



Source: Pew Research Center

These trends are occurring across the board. Americans today are more educated than they were in the past, but the decline in readership has occurred at every educational level including the most educated, as the above graph, again from Pew, illustrates.

Thus, what all of this means for citizens' ability to participate in their democracy is a topic that needs some more sorting out. Headlines on the topic run from "The Fading Newspaper" to "Maybe the Internet isn't Killing Newspapers after all."² To a certain extent, news has simply migrated from one platform to another. And yet, there is counter evidence suggesting that all Americans consume less news than they once did.

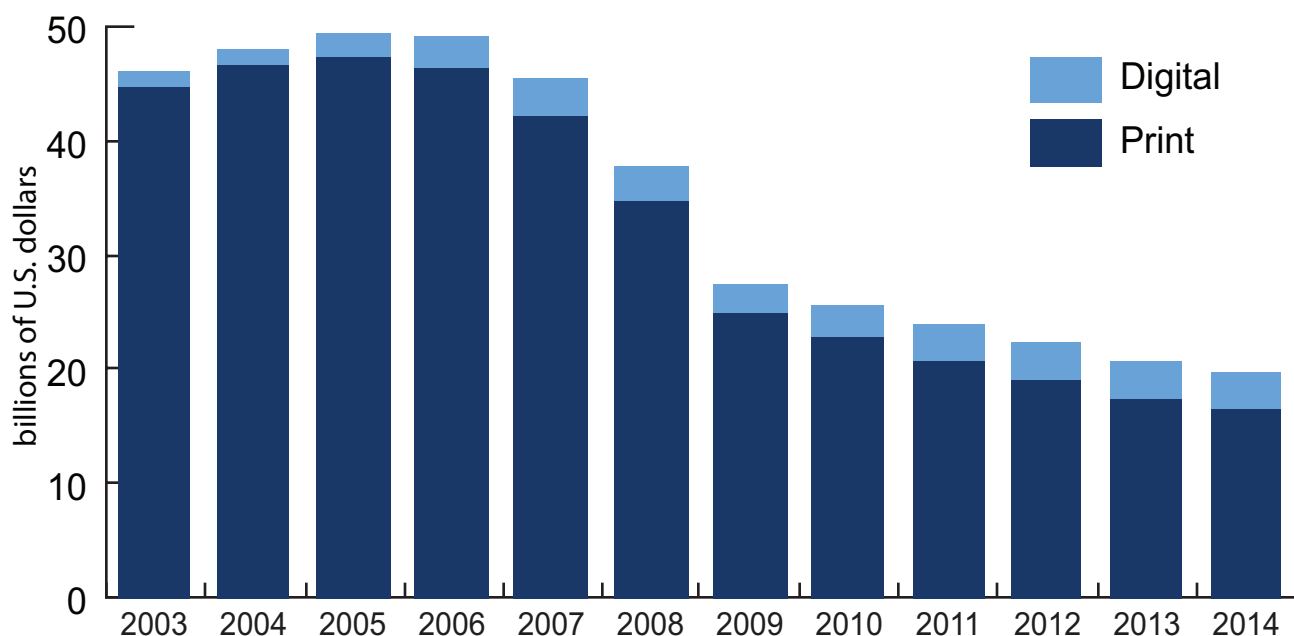
There is more clarity, however, around what this has meant for the business and employment side of the news business—to which we now turn.

2. HARD NEWS IS IN DANGER

While the impact of declines in circulation on citizen engagement and knowledge may still be a topic of debate, there is no debate on the effect on revenue and on newsrooms. First and foremost is the dramatic drop in advertising revenue. As the following chart indicates, revenue from digital consumption of the news hasn't begun to replace lost revenue from the decline in print circulation.

² See: www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2014/jul/11/abcs-national-newspapers and <http://www.chicagomag.com/city-life/October-2014/Maybe-the-Internet-Isnt-Killing-Newspapers-After-All/>

Newspaper ad revenue from digital and print



Source: Pew Research Center

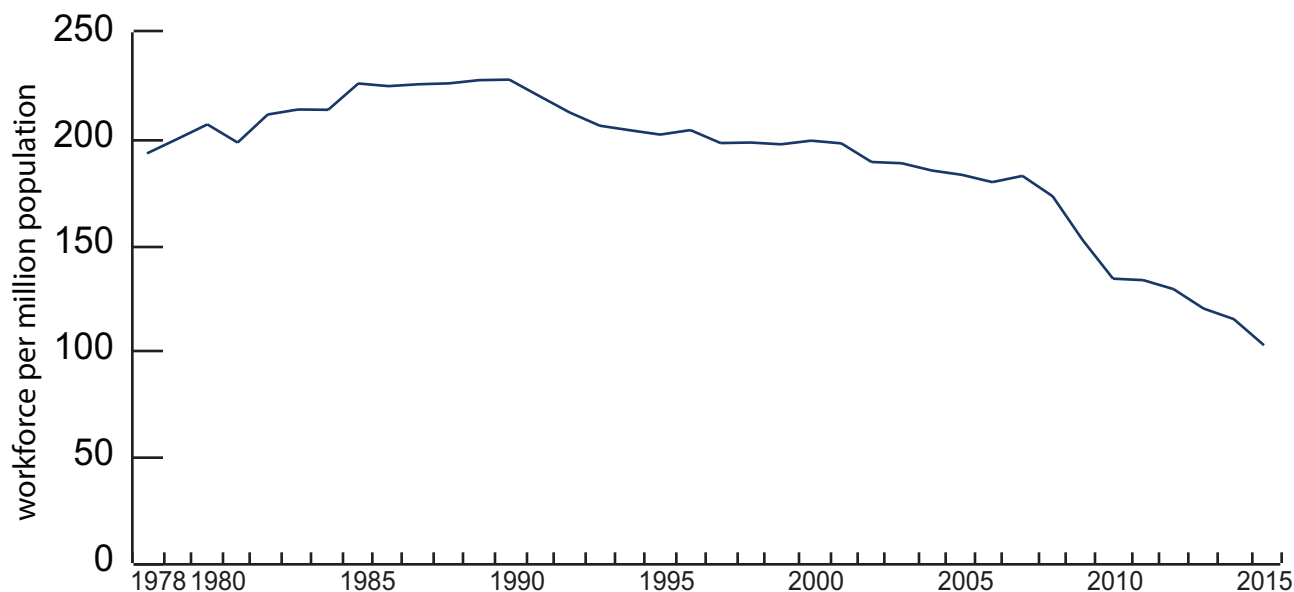
Declines in ad revenue have sparked a debate over whether or not information age media can find a business model that works for them. In addition to meager ad sales, various newspapers have tried to establish “pay walls” in order to get some income from their online viewers. But this has not been universally successful, with some papers trying it for a few weeks, discovering that their readership has dropped and then reversing course.³ At the same time, however, there is evidence that plenty of serious journalism is going on but it is going on *behind* pay walls. As John Heltman points out in an article in *The Washington Monthly*, paywall journalism provides excellent coverage of the government but “the audiences for these publications are lobbyists, corporate executives, Hill staffers, Wall Street traders, think tank researchers, contractors, regulators, advocacy group and trade association policy wonks, and other insiders who have a professional interest in up-to-the-second news on the policy issues and whose institutions can afford subscription prices that run thousands of dollars per year.”⁴

Many journalists who once worked for general audience newspapers now find themselves working in specialty presses due to the fact that the dramatic drop in ad revenues for general readership papers has had its most severe impact in the newsroom. According to the American Society for Newspaper Editors, total newsroom employment in 1978 was 43,000; by 2015, it had dropped to 32,900. These raw numbers are significant in themselves, but they are more dramatic when increases in population are taken into account. The following chart shows how the number of people employed in ferreting out the news has decreased per capita. We now have half the number of people reporting on the news than we did approximately four decades ago.

³ Gillian Reagan and Lauren Hatch, “Five Failed Paywalls and What we can learn from them,” *Business Insider*, April 28, 2010. Accessed at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/failed-paywalls-2010-4>

⁴ John Heltman, “Confessional of a Paywall Journalist,” *Washington Monthly*, November/December 2015. Accessed at: http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/novemberdecember_2015/features/confessions_of_a_paywall_journ058444.php?page=all

Newsroom employment per capita



Source: American Society of Newspaper Editors

These trends have left many people wondering who will collect hard news for the general public. While the Internet world has made it possible for everyone to express their opinion widely—whether they know anything or not—it has also confused readers. In the absence of supposedly neutral intermediaries such as reporters, fact-checkers, and editors, readers are having a hard time judging the credibility of what they read. In 2009, Howard Schneider, former editor of *Newsday* established a “news literacy” program at Stony Brook University on Long Island, New York. The purpose of the program was to educate a generation of young people in how to read and understand news in an era when the “gatekeepers” of traditional media were rapidly disappearing. “Over time,” wrote Schneider and Professor James Klurfeld, “the gatekeepers have been replaced in some cases by algorithms, and the wisdom of the crowd, tallies of ever-mounting ‘likes’ and ‘retweets’ which risk equating popularity with credibility.”⁵ (We’ll revisit social media and viral news later.)

Two big questions arise from these trends. Is the media’s traditional role as a check on government power eroded because fewer people are engaged in collecting hard news? And second, in an era when everyone has the ability to express their opinion and to repeat so-called “facts” (whether or not they are true), how can citizens know what to believe and how to react?

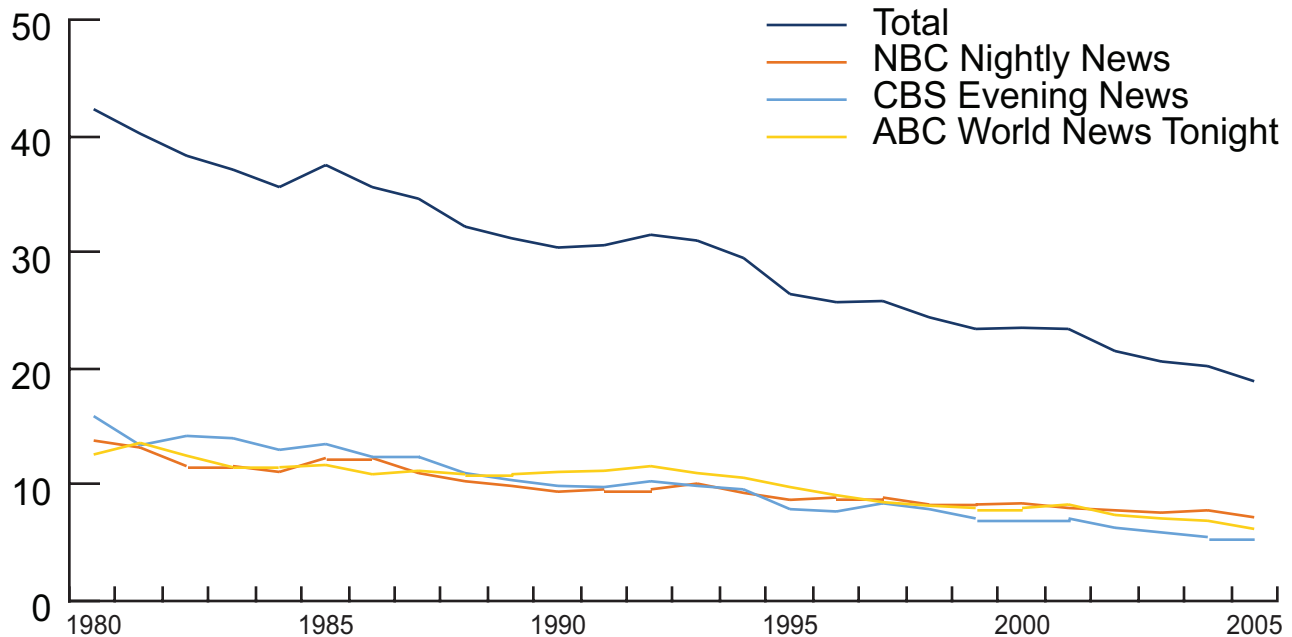
3. TELEVISION IS STILL IMPORTANT

People are still watching television for news, especially local news. In contrast to newspaper circulation, TV news viewership has remained fairly steady over the past few decades, and while ad revenue has fallen, it hasn’t fallen as much for television as it has for newspapers. Local news dominates, followed by network and cable news.

⁵ James Klurfeld and Howard Schneider, “News Literacy: Teaching the Internet Generation to Make Reliable Information Choices,” (Washington D.C.: Brookings) June 2014. Accessed at: http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/06/news%20literacy%20klurfeld%20schneider/klurfeld%20schneider_news%20literacy_july%202014%20final.pdf

The big difference in television over the years is the fact that the dominance of the evening newscasts has virtually disappeared. For much of the television era, news consisted of one broadcast in the evening by each of the three big networks. Americans interested in the news had a severely circumscribed set of options: They could tune in to ABC, CBS, or NBC and get fairly similar coverage of the day's top stories. The following graph shows the steady decline in viewership of the evening news.

Network evening news ratings



Source: Pew Research Center

And while older citizens are more likely to watch the evening news than their children and grandchildren, over the past two decades the decline in viewership has occurred in every age group.⁶ The days when network news anchors were famous and trusted arbiters of the news are gone forever. These days most people don't even know who the news anchors are and the addition of overtly partisan networks like Fox and MSNBC has made the news as polarized as the country.⁷

4. AND SO IS RADIO

Radio is the oldest broadcast medium we have and, thanks to Americans' continuing love affair with the automobile, it has suffered less than newspapers. Traditional AM and FM radio still dominate the radio airwaves and enjoy a broad audience, even though the radio landscape is changing to include online outlets like Pandora and Slacker Radio. Talk radio also remains strong, with the number of news/talk radio stations growing and then leveling out in recent years.

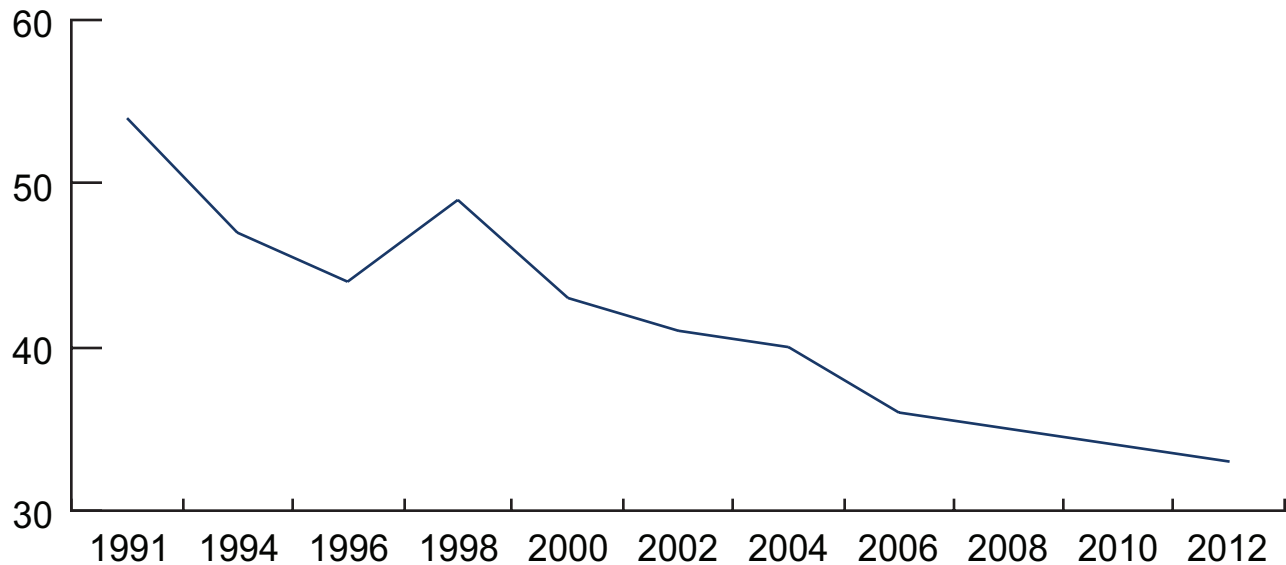
⁶ Rob Suls, "Who is this man? Many Americans don't recognize top news anchor," Pew Research Center, January 9, 2014. Accessed at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/09/who-is-this-man-many-americans-dont-recognize-top-news-anchor/>

⁷ Ibid.

But the impact of radio compared to other news sources and media platforms is low. The number of people getting their news from radio has also declined, as the graph below illustrates.

Americans turning to radio less as a source for news

Percent of respondents who said they listened to news on the radio “yesterday”



Source: Pew Research Center

To think about it differently, the number of all-news radio stations devoted entirely to news coverage informs a meager one percent of radio listeners. So although Americans still turn on the radio during drive-time, they are opting for non-news radio, Internet radio, podcasts, and talk radio.

5. NEWS IS NOW DIGITAL

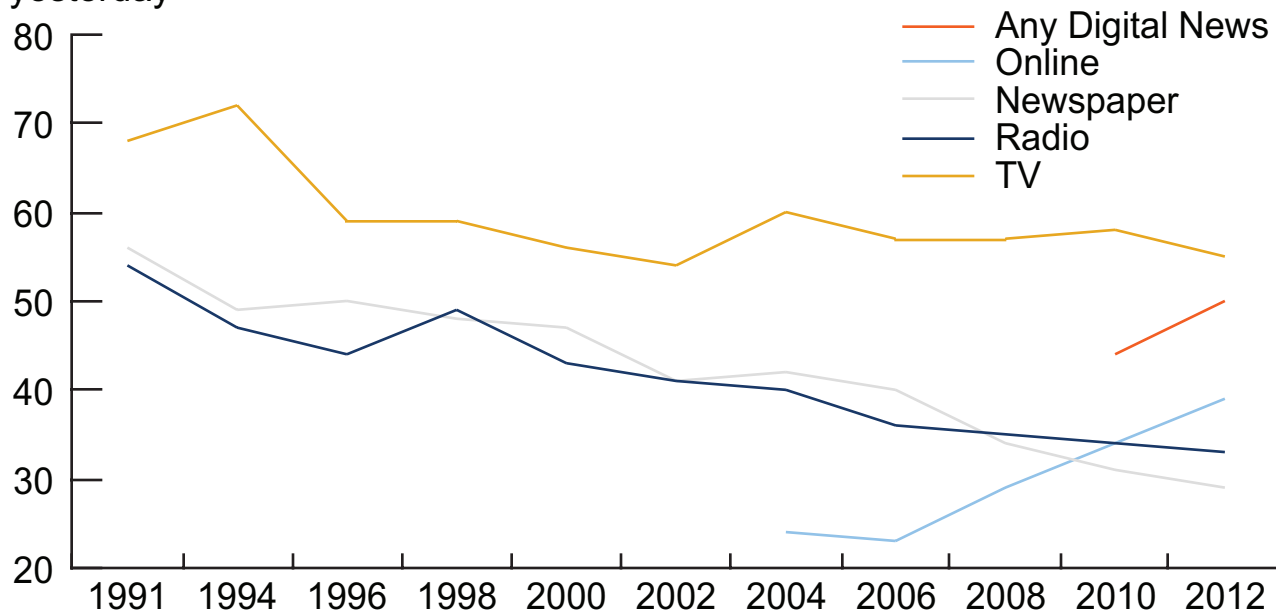
One of the biggest questions facing those who seek to understand what the changing media landscape may mean to democracy is whether or not traditional media is simply migrating to new platforms without any diminution in the quantity and quality of news citizens receive. As the following graph illustrates, more and more Americans get news from online and digital sources as traditional media sources fall. There is also a trend among the digital news audience of moving away from personal computers only and onto mobile devices. Out of the top 50 digital news entities, 39 have more visitors from a mobile device than a desktop computer.⁸

We’ve already speculated that digital news consumers—especially those on a mobile device—might be “flyby” readers. Whether or not this shift in news consumption to online platforms diminishes or improves citizen engagement is yet to be fully understood.

⁸ Kenneth Olmstead and Elisa Shearer, “Digital News – Audience: Fact Sheet,” Pew Research Center, April 29, 2015. Accessed at: <http://www.journalism.org/2015/04/29/digital-news-audience-fact-sheet/>

Digital news sources for Americans by platform

Percentage of Americans reporting they got news from a given news source 'yesterday'



Source: Pew Research Center

6. SOCIAL MEDIA ALLOWS NEWS TO GO VIRAL

However, before we jump to the conclusion that the younger, tech-savvy generation is less well-informed than their parents and grandparents, we need to look at the role social media is playing in the dissemination of news. The following chart shows that Facebook is virtually tied with local television among “web users” when asked where they get their news about government and politics. In other words—news is still getting to people, just not through the traditional means. Millennials aren’t necessarily less avid news consumers than generations past, but their news preferences and sources have shifted.

Percentage of web users saying they got news about government and politics from each in past week



Source: Pew Research Center

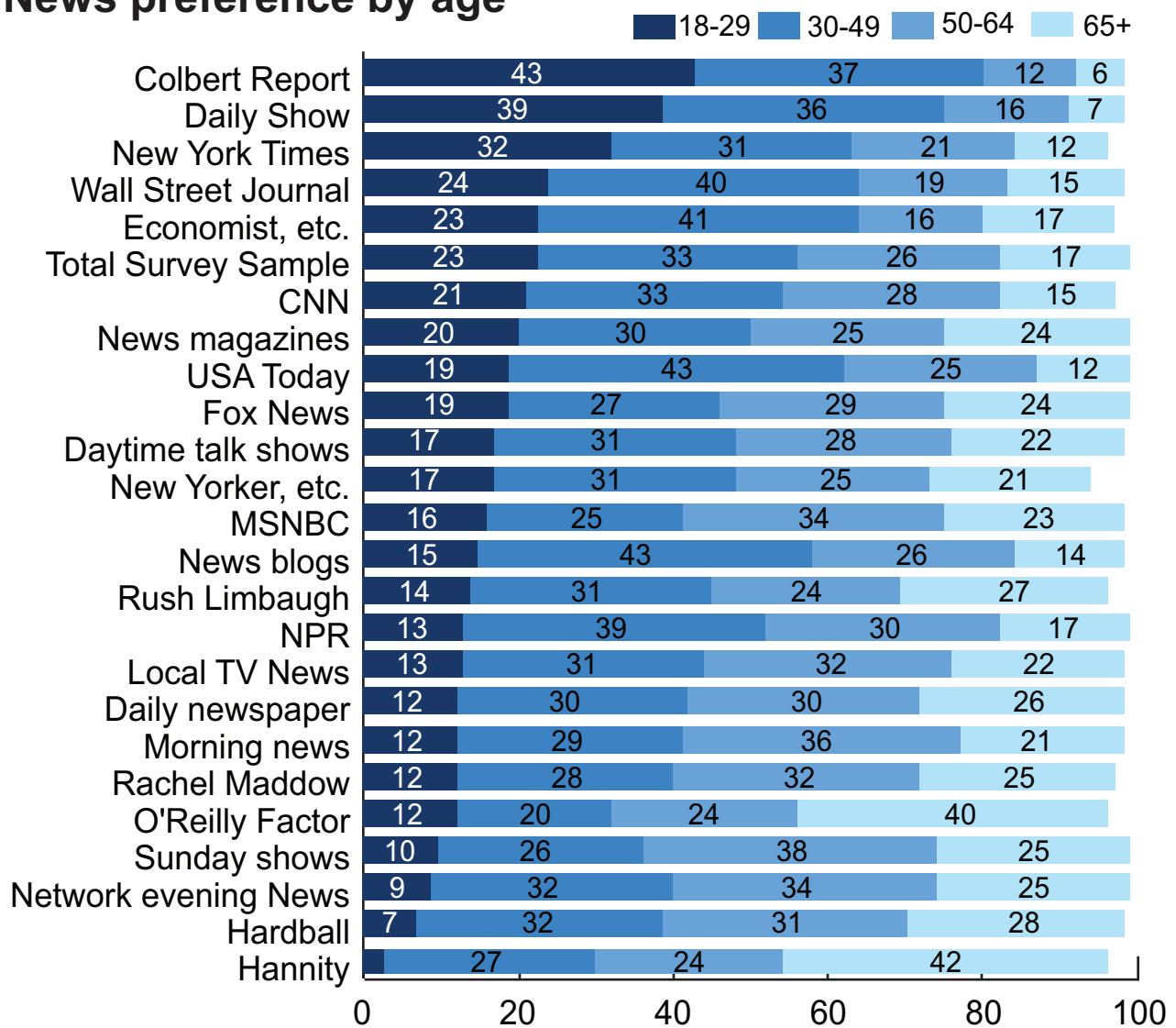
There are upsides and downsides to the role of social media in news. On the one hand, the ability to “share” on Facebook or “retweet” on Twitter allows for the rapid dissemination of news and can prompt a deeper involvement in the news through discussions with friends and the broader online universe. On the other hand, it can also lead to fake or inaccurate “viral” news. For instance, Klurfeld and Schneider highlight the case of how Reddit users falsely identified the Boston Marathon bombers:

In that case, Reddit asked its followers to help find out who was responsible for the bombing. Reddit users vacuumed up every photo they could find on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram combined with vague police statements, and crowd sourced a photograph of the two bombers. *The New York Post* then picked up the photo and plastered it on its front page. A great example of the value of social media... except for one problem: it was wrong. The two young men in the photo were completely innocent.⁹

7. FOR THE YOUNGER GENERATION, NEWS IS DELIVERED THROUGH COMEDY

One final data point that may be cause for concern. Or not. In 2012, most young people (here defined as aged 18 – 29) reported getting their news from two comedy shows, *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, both of which have left wing tendencies and are not the neutral sources for news that were associated with network news programs years

News preference by age



Source: International Business Times

⁹ Klurfeld and Schneider, "News Literacy: Teaching the Internet Generation to Make Reliable Information Choices"

ago. Steven Colbert has now gone on to host a late night television show and Jon Stewart has handed the host job of *The Daily Show* over to Trevor Noah, who has had an interesting career spanning educational TV, soap opera, and gossip TV. Although younger people also rely on non-satirical sources of news, we have to wonder—will the younger generation continue to get their news in comedy form or will they move to more traditional forms of news?

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

So now that we've come to the end of our listicle, it behooves us to ask whether or not any of this matters to the health of our democracy. We assume that an intelligent and informed citizenry is critical to the ability to make wise choices at the ballot box and to engage in meaningful civic activity. Has the Internet revolution degraded this ability, enhanced this ability, or simply moved it from one platform (traditional media) to another (digital, 21st century technology)?

The pessimists will focus on the decline in newspaper readership, network television, and the number of professionals collecting hard news as proof that there are serious consequences to citizen knowledge as a result of the internet revolution. The optimists will point out that news is reaching people in new and unexpected ways and that the absence of traditional “gatekeepers” with the biases that all humans have (no matter how much they try to be neutral) has broadened the landscape of knowledge and opinion to which the public is exposed—with positive effects for democracy. They will also point out that the new technology allows for a two-way engagement with the news in ways that the old never did.

Or is it possible that we just don't know yet?

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