

A decade of disruption brings digital downsides and the hope of more honest journalism

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It's that time when we look back over the last year, but in this article by the veteran Swedish Journalist Ove Joanson, (who has edited newspapers and run the Swedish public service broadcaster, and was a former chair of the European Journalism Centre) looks back at a decade of journalism change.

The digital shift and the challenges it poses constitute a historic dilemma. But it also offers a unique opportunity for all of us as serious journalists.

For the need and demand for independent and relevant information is great and increasing in an ever more complex world.

The information revolution is arguably the biggest change to mankind since Gutenberg invented the printing press. It changes everybody's life.

The information revolution is driven by a combination of technology and deregulation. This is a revolution to be welcomed. It enables a democratization of information and knowledge. Pyramids and hierarchies are turned upside down. No power structure will in the future be able to control information, knowledge and the way people interact. Many a regime is trying to prevent this from happening.



All change for newsrooms in a decade of disruption

Indeed one of the great struggles going on in the world today is fought between authoritarians of various persuasions trying to control and manipulate information, on the one hand, and free minds, including journalists, trying to promote independent thinking based on facts and unencumbered exchange of information, on the other. Google's "Project Shield2 is an important weapons system in this war.

But the information revolution is fabulous and it is a privilege just to be able to witness it, much less to get to play a

small part in it.

Digital Downsides

But this would not be a true revolution if it was not also riddled with complications, contradictions, uncertainties and numerous detestable features. Let me remind you of a few of the less attractive sides of the digital upheaval.

First: It has obviously strengthened democracy that the internet and social media offer more or less everyone a chance to express themselves on every issue.

But, I ask you, what does it do to democracy if everybody is talking and nobody is listening? Is the current number of listeners proportionate to the number of speakers? Yes I know that bloggers, for instance, like to quote the famous Roman, Cicero, who said “I do not count the people who listen to me, I weigh them”. But still, will the characteristics of the new democracy be to speak your mind rather than listening and bringing other voices into to the debate?

Second, and worse, still, is that not only do all opinions grow in cyber-space, all facts – or factoids – grow there too. You do not have to spend many minutes on the internet or with social media to find pages that profess to confirm the most bizarre views of the world. It is a kind of information LEGO that allows even the most outlandish of groups and individuals to build their own rickety universe – often in order to confirm views or prejudices that they already possess. As we have seen, one can even win a presidential election in a democracy by applying this approach.

Honesty Needed

But information is only informative if it intended to be correct and disseminated with the purpose to inform, not to misinform. This is why journalists, I believe, will be needed also in the future. And information turns into knowledge only if it is part of a meaningful context, if this context is analytical, critical and honest and if enlightenment is its purpose. This is why honest editors, I believe, will be needed also in the future.

The third effect of the digital revolution is the death of newspapers and the supposed demise of serious journalism.

When the digital revolution joined forced with the economic downturn about a decade ago it really brought havoc to the newspaper industry, at least in the Western world, and the proves accelerates. This evil will not disappear. We will never go back to “normal”, as we have known it. This is a serious challenge for anybody who believes that informed democracy is the preferred social and political system. It also means that serious journalism is facing a totally new landscape in which it will operate.

For Good Purposes

Real journalism will, of course, need to use the formidable new instrument at our disposal for good purposes, for honest exchange of views based on facts. And I believe that we are well underway towards finding our new and relevant role in the new world.

One of the many paradoxes is that when fragmentation increases – the need, and probably also the demand for, its opposite will increase also. The search for context is very strong force in today's world – also among those whose' values I do not share. The Flat Earth Society and all its friends are longing for order and structure. They just base their longing on incorrect facts.

But civilized societies will need market squares, common denominators – antidotes to fragmentation, arenas for the debates relevant to all and sources for reliable information. I can think of no better – and perhaps no other – such arenas and such sources than those supplied by strong, independent, broad-based serious journalism.

This article by the veteran Swedish Journalist Ove Joanson was based on a speech he gave at the leaving party for the former director of the European Journalism Centre, Wilfried Ruetters.

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