

Your News Is Our News: How Can Global Journalism Survive?

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For a global elite who care about the big international issues such as climate change, economic regulation or conflict and security, modern media is a wondrous but worrying thing. Thanks to great multi-national brands like the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera or the New York Times we have fantastic trans-national news resources. While the Guardian only has 300,000 sales in the UK, it has 30 million readers online across the world. And yet at the same time the level of foreign correspondents, international coverage and the commitment to understanding global stories is declining in the hard-pressed mainstream media.



This was the problem that [Columbia President Lee Bollinger](#) sought to solve in a Polis lecture that used his [new book](#) about media freedom of expression as a springboard to discuss the kind of journalism we need for a globalised world. [The podcast will be up soon, as will a full report on the actual lecture] ‘Your news is our news now’ he said. And the implication is that therefore we also share a need to find a solution to what threatens it. His answer was surprising and in a Chatham House Rules dinner afterwards was challenged by a former Fleet Street editor, a senior Conservative MP, and assorted UK academics, lawyers and an economist.

In short, Bollinger’s point was that we are all in this together and that mainstream news will need public financial support if it is to survive at the quality we need. He points out that across the world many people enjoy the BBC’s coverage thanks to UK taxpayers. He argues – as does [the report from Columbia by Downie and Schudson](#) – that US media also now needs subsidy. This might be in the form of tax breaks rather than tax handouts but he also looks to foundations, citizens and government to pay more to sustain local and international journalism. He is perfectly aware of the dangers to editorial independence this poses but he feels that this is not fatal.

When I first discussed the Schudson/Downie report with students I was surprised how quickly they characterised it as special pleading by a mainstream media that had lost much of its credibility, moral capital and relevance. They weren’t particularly enthusiastic about ‘new media’ but they recognised it has changed the rules of the game.

There were other criticisms from our group of media experts. The UK newspaper editor felt that US papers had been too complacent for too long. They simply did not provide a product that was engaging enough to demand attention, let alone payment either online or in paper. Now the advertising was gone, the veil had lifted and the weakness of the product was exposed.

The more political guests couldn’t see how journalism can make the case for subsidy while it refuses (correctly perhaps) to become socially compliant. And how would this public largesse be distributed? Who would decide which journalism deserves help?

In practice, ad-hoc versions of this subsidy policy is already happening in America as billionaires prop up the New York Times and philanthropists put their money into new ventures such as the Huffington Post and [ProPublica](#) – (both of which hope to make money at some point). Should it go further?

I don’t think subsidy will save mainstream US media. I have always thought much of the newspaper output was rather languid and ill-focused while US Network News is an impressive machine for delivering topical theatrics. When it had a monopoly is sometimes did great work but now the pressure is on its weaknesses are being highlighted. It’s not surprising that Fox News is both one of the most trusted and profitable channels when compared to the competition. I welcome the online editorial enterprise that is emerging across the USA. The New York Times is now much better online than in its paper edition. But like Bollinger I fear we will lose the good bits along with the

vast swathes of rather missable stuff.

Things are moving rather quickly in our industry and already significant parts of American journalism are disappearing. Perhaps a smidgeon more public help wouldn't go amiss in the attempt to ease the pain of the change. Meanwhile, perhaps we should not get rid of the BBC quite yet while the world is just starting to love it so?

On June 11th Polis is hosting a major conference on the Value Of Journalism – contact us for more details at polis@lse.ac.uk

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