

Networked to Death? Lessons from LA on journalism's survival online

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The very thing that promises to transform journalism could be the thing that kills it.

I am in the US where newspapers in particular are closing, filing for bankruptcy protection or slashing staff. The recession is speeding up an already painful process.

Now the US is not the same as elsewhere. There is no publicly funded media to speak of. Their newspapers were particularly bloated on easy profits and so have further to fall. The market is also different here, with less national media.

But the structure of the debate about the survival of journalism in a digital age, when in effect, convergence means all journalism will be online, is the same.

I am speaking at a conference at the University of Southern California later today about this. I have been greatly informed by a debate sparked by US journalism academic [Paul Starr in the New Republic magazine](#) and the response to it by [Harvard Internet Prof Yochai Benkler](#).

Read them for yourself, they are very worthwhile analyses. In brief, Starr argues that new media is all very good but it can't provide the amount of good quality journalism that can keep politics healthy. Benkler argues both that mainstream journalism wasn't that good at it anyway, and the new forms of journalism must be given time and support to work.

Columbia researcher [Christopher W Anderson](#) has his own research into local journalism in Philadelphia which acts some much needed evidence to this debate. In an excellent article he sums up the Benkler/Staff debate and concludes that, at least for local news, the prospect is not good.

Perhaps it is because I am in California, the land of peace love and understanding, but I agree with all three (up to a point). And this is what I will be saying at USC.

My idea of public participation in journalism called Networked Journalism is not a panacea. Journalism will not stay the same, some bits will disappear. But there are other ways of delivering 'news' or 'journalism' or providing the data and debate to inform public life, that just don't look like journalism as we know it.

The problem is partly that the very systems that promise better journalism: social networking, for example – can also destroy it.

I will argue at USC that there is still a lot of capacity left in news media. It must invest to adapt it to new production methods that embrace public participation.

But news media organisations must also think about partnerships. These could be with non-news organisations. Why shouldn't Guardian readers turn into Waitrose readers?

And journalism – with or without mainstream news organisations – will increasingly be provided by NGOs, councils, government, business, civil society groups, community groups and other public bodies.

There are all sorts of ethical and editorial issues around that process. But none of them are insuperable or essentially objectionable. More on that another time. But here's another "threat"?

What if Facebook does take over the world? What if social networking becomes so dominant as the form of communication that news gets lost in the process? Business is taking to social media, so are NGOs, even politicians. Why is the news media so slow to do the same?

Is it just a technical or skills issue or is social networking, with its disaggregated consumer-centred practice simply a hostile environment for mass public news communication?

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