

Journalism isn't the problem – it's the news business

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Some heavyweights have been charging in to the fray against new technology and its effect on the media.

[Jeff Jarvis](#) is battling with three critics of his enthusiasm for New Media. Now [Financial Times](#) editor Lionel Barber is the latest to pen a beautifully written peon to the best of print journalism including his time on the Washington Post in the 80s:

“To spend time as a reporter on the national staff was to experience a rigour that was bracing – and unfamiliar. “Good story,” growled Mike Getler, foreign editor, reading my first front page piece, “but you need to be more precise about your sources.” Phrases such as “it is understood” and “people close to the situation” – all grist to the mill in Fleet Street – failed to cut the mustard on 15th Street in DC.”

Barber accepts that US journalism is now at a ‘tipping point’ (a dread and dead phrase that surely should be on the FT’s banned list?). I agree with his version of media history:

“...the mainstream press lost touch with its audience at the very moment when technology, via the internet, was dramatically lowering the barriers to entry. Whether this was an unhappy coincidence or complacency is unclear. What is undeniable is that public trust in newspapers started to slip, to the point where a recent study by Sacred Heart University shows barely one in five say they can believe “all or most” media reporting (well below comparable British figures).”

I also agree with his precis of the business model problem:

“According to Michael Elliott, the British-born editor of Time’s international edition who has spent almost 20 years working as a journalist in the US, the decline in US journalism can be summed up thus: a broken business model overly reliant on classified advertising revenue that has now moved online; a mistaken notion that post-1945 newspaper staffs of 800-plus journalists were the norm rather than a historical aberration; and, crucially, a stultifying failure to innovate because of the lack of competition.”

I also agree with him that the only question now is whether good journalism can emerge from the maelstrom. That is the core question in my book [SuperMedia](#) and it is one that I answer in the affirmative, based on my model of ‘networked journalism’.

Now here’s the funny thing. I can’t speak for [Jeff Jarvis](#) but in all our conversations he has agreed with my version of things (mainly because much of it is based on Jeff’s writing!). So if I can agree with Barber is there really any material difference in tactics or understanding between the two camps?

I think that those like [Paul Farhi](#) of the Washington Post and [Roy Greenslade](#) of the Guardian and [Adrian Monck](#) of City University who are ranged against Jarvis may be fighting the wrong battle. Perhaps Jeff is, too. It is not who is to blame for journalism’s present challenges. The question is what you do about it. For the first time in a long while the news media has to justify its existence. The rhetorical squabble over the historical role of journalists in the decline of their business won’t get new forms of news media invented.

I guess Barber is in a good place because the FT appears to be coping better than most with the new technology. Standards aren't slipping noticeably and profits look good. It is adapting to the online environment.

Other newspaper groups are having to change their basic function, with the Washington Post, for example, becoming more of a political analysis centre than a breaking news machine.

So, funnily enough, even those people most ideologically wedded to the purity of journalism in the past appear to be playing their part in forging its future.

[See [here](#) for Jeff Jarvis' latest attempt to understand new business models for journalism.]

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