

The Death of Propaganda “News”

The mainstream media model was always fraudulent, and is now an artifact of a bygone era:

Wealthy traders and merchants underwrote the first news in the Americas, and it was all route intel. In the colonial period political parties footed the bill for most papers—party organs that were far more partisan and acrimonious than what we cry foul at today. It wasn't until the penny-press era—the 1830s on—that a new funding model developed: scale up the circulation, then sell readers' attention to advertisers. That advertising revenue could bring the cost of the paper down to something many could afford.

Writing to a mass audience, publishers began to recognize there was a market for real, honest news that could cross political divides and speak with a relatively neutral voice. This paved the way for professional journalism standards. And for most of the 20th century, it made newsrooms the information power brokers.

Then the internet smashed the model.

“For the last decade, we have seen a steady erosion of the advertising economy for newspapers,” says Campbell. That's the nice way of saying it. Revenue streams have been gutted.

Department stores and auto malls, the go-to advertisers, cut back on ads, facing their own disruptions: e-commerce competition and recession. Craigslist happened to the classifieds. And reader eyeballs, once concentrated among a few media outlets, are now diverted to Facebook, YouTube, and that thing you just Googled—and the bulk of advertising has followed them.

As they say in the industry, the digital transition traded print dollars for digital dimes and, in turn, digital dimes for mobile pennies.

One thing is certain: it's a fascinating time to study the news. Alum Seth C. Lewis (BA '02) holds the Shirley Papé Chair in Emerging Media at the University of Oregon and is a leading scholar on the digital transformation of journalism.

“We've gone from media monopoly to media disruption and ubiquity,” says Lewis. And in ubiquity, no one gets a sizable piece of the economic pie.

Lewis suggests that maybe the last century of advertising-based news subsidy—which fostered these objective, non-partisan notions—“was just a happy accident. Maybe instead we're returning to other forms of funding and thinking about the news.”

Now, instead of feigned objectivity provided by a limited number of tightly controlled sources paid for by advertisers with a surreptitious influence over what is, and is not reported, we're returning to the openly subjective model, which is to be preferred because it is more honest and accountable.