

The death of the city paper? Neglected trends in urban journalistic practices

Paper prepared for the Mediapolis workshop

To be presented in the session on “Journalistic Practices: Emerging Politics and Urban Geographies”

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

Cardiff University

Today’s discussions of journalism seem to be abuzz with celebrations of new forms of politics and participation, emerging with the help of new technologies. Practices and genres such as citizen journalism, user-generated content and blogging are singled out among observers who see them as evidence of a newly empowered audience of citizens/consumers, and as hopeful indicators of a brighter future for community engagement and wider political participation. Certainly these developments have created broader opportunities for engagement through a dazzling plethora of public forums, and they have challenged conventional and long-standing hierarchical relationships between news producers and audiences, journalists and readers, and between and among experts, elites and “ordinary people.” Here, however, I would like to suggest that while the excitement over the emancipatory potential of new technologies is certainly warranted, our infatuation with electronic utopias has tended to blind us to a host of more troubling developments in the journalistic practices that both shape and are shaped by our urban geographies. In particular, I want to highlight the beleaguered state of city newspaper, whether it takes the form of a regional daily or a local weekly. I would like to discuss why these papers are rapidly becoming undermined as the result of a series of interconnected trends. My argument is based

on interviews with journalists conducted over the past four years (e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2006).

Challenges to the local press

For most people, the local paper is the only source of information about the small and large events that shape their communities – council policies, births, marriages and deaths, new building projects, farmers’ markets, and the state of traffic lights and post offices. Local and regional papers – in cities and beyond -- are central to participation in communities, and as such they are also crucial to the very existence of these communities. It is therefore not surprising that they have such wide readership – 83.6% of the British population regularly reads local and regional papers, contrasted with a national newspaper readership of 69.6% (Aldridge, 2007: 14) . Today, there are 1276 regional and local newspapers in the UK, including 111 dailies (94 paid, and 17 free), 511 paid weeklies, and 637 free weekly newspapers (<http://www.newspapersoc.org.uk>, accessed August 15, 2007).

However, the role of these papers is continually contested and changing. Circulation has been in steep decline since the late 1980s. This decline has been particularly marked for regional evening newspapers and paid-for weeklies (Franklin, 2005). Regional evening newspapers are particularly central to the life of cities: They are the papers that once dominated the urban news landscape, providing the shared stories that created and maintained communities. Now, they are threatened by a combination of political economic and technological trends.

First, ownership of the regional daily and local weekly press is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few large companies: the largest 20 newspaper groups in Britain own 85 per cent of regional titles and control 96 per cent of the weekly circulation,

while the five largest groups own 76 per cent of newspapers by circulation (Franklin, 2005: 141). The drive for efficiency characteristic combines with ownership patterns to reduce the amount of truly local news. For the large corporate groups that dominate the British press, one of the advantages of chain ownership is that resources can be more efficiently used. This applies not only to technical aspects of news production, such as sub-editing and printing, but also to the content of the papers. It means that job cuts and savings are the order of the day in a profession which is already resource-starved (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005).

While paid-for newspapers have struggled for decades, the period between 1970 and 1990 saw the meteoric rise of the free newspaper. Between 1977 and 1986, the number of titles went from 201 to 886, and has since remained more or less stable (Franklin, 2005). Franklin argues that the rise of free sheets with limited editorial content has affected the substance and quality of local journalism more broadly (Franklin, 1998: 124). As a further threat to what some observers see as the traditional “serious news” role of regional dailies, evening newspapers responded to the loss of readers by converting from broadsheet to tabloid format – a swift change that occurred in the mid-1990s and also meant a turn to tabloid subject matter which is seen as more commercially viable (Franklin, 2005).

Threats to city dailies have gained force on the back of a strong new entrant on the free newspaper market: The national daily *Metro*, which contains small amounts of content specific to the 16 cities in which it circulates, and is distributed in busy urban settings and on public transportation. Today “some 1.3 million copies are distributed across the UK making *Metro* the world's largest free newspaper and the fourth biggest newspaper in the UK” (<http://www.metro.co.uk/about>, accessed April 24, 2008).

City newspaper editors also fear competition from the provision of local news and information resources on the websites of public service broadcasters, especially BBC’s

Where I Live sites, and from online classified advertising venues like Craig's List and Gumtree. It has meant that the type of information for which these papers were once the sole providers is now shared across varieties of media. In the eyes of editors, the fragmentation of information sources threatens their readership and advertising income and hence their financial basis.

Concluding thoughts

Here, I've sketched out a few key threats to regional and local newspapers, representing perhaps the most traditional of urban journalism practices. I would like to suggest that the health of local journalism is inextricably tied to the health of local communities. As a journalistic practice it is often forgotten by scholars who turn to more cutting-edge developments. But quality local and regional papers remain crucial to the public life of cities, and the clear and present danger of their extinction ought to be a matter of grave concern.

References:

Aldridge, M. (2007). *Understanding the local media*. Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press.

Franklin, B. (1998). No news isn't good news: The development of local free newspapers. In B. Franklin and D. Murphy (eds), *Making the local news* (pp. 125-139). London: Routledge.

Franklin, B. (2005). 'McJournalism': The local press and the McDonaldization thesis. In S. Allan (ed), *Journalism: Critical Issues* (pp. 137-150). Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2005). The market vs. the right to communicate: The anti-political local press in Britain and the journalism of consensus. *Javnost/The Public* 12(3), 79-94.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2006). Letters to the editor in local and regional newspapers: Giving voice to the reader. In B. Franklin (Ed.), *Local journalism and local media: Making the local news* (pp. 231-241). London: Routledge.