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Education Journalism

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Most education researchers, and educators generally, have a fairly standard, and justified, set of complaints about education journalism. The press seems to treat education as a second-order topic, so education coverage is understaffed and underplayed. Most reporters do not seem to be familiar with the large quantity of first-rate education research that is readily available to them, and many reporters are unable to engage with anything that uses, let's say, correlation coefficients. Self-appointed experts and misleading numbers get too much attention. Like other parts of journalism, education journalism overemphasizes personalities, anecdotes, and narratives—the charismatic principal, political correctness on campus—at the expense of analytic rigor and what is really important. An obvious attainable and supremely important task for education journalism, for example, is to use both research and the kind of ethnographic work that journalists are trained to do to make sense of the widespread assertions of inferiority or even failure in the American public school system.

All of these complaints are justified, but in order to address them effectively, it is necessary to understand what is going on in journalism. At the moment I am writing this, most of my conversations with my academic friends about the state of journalism are focused on the coverage of President Donald Trump. Are his relentless attacks on the press having an intimidating effect? Is the public excessively influenced by highly ideological news organizations like Fox and Breitbart, or unable to distinguish between fake news and real news? Is the Internet generating too much fragmentation, so that people look only at what they know they will find comforting?

Questions like these assume a press that is large and cacophonous, which is what people who focus on national political news encounter. Friends often tell me wistfully how much they long for the good old days of three television networks and just a handful of national newspapers and magazines, all striving to be authoritative and neutral. There are pros and cons to this kind of press, but set them aside for the moment. The overwhelming reality in American journalism is that, if understood as a field practiced by full-time professional reporters and editors, it is disappearing, for economic rather than political or cultural reasons. According to the authoritative Pew Research Center, total newsroom employment in the newspaper industry fell from 56,400 in 2000 to 32,900 in 2014. Can you think of another job category that has decreased as dramatically during the twenty-first century? There are now far fewer newspaper editorial employees today than in 1978, when Pew began issuing its annual reports on the state of journalism. And all signs are that the decline will continue.

I am focusing on newspapers here because, in most American cities and towns, they have been where the great majority of journalists were employed, and where most of the original reporting—by which I mean going onsite and interviewing the significant actors—was done. If you are in education policy and reading national papers like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, you are getting a misleadingly positive impression of the state of the newspaper business. In most cities and towns, when newspapers decline, journalistic capacity simply disappears. (The much smaller, but salutary, countertrend is the growth in the nonprofit sector in journalism, which I discuss below.) It would be a mistake to understand the situation as one in which newspaper journalism is being replaced by digital journalism. All newspapers produce digital journalism, and that has not stemmed their decline; and the digital-only sector of journalism has only about 5,000 editorial employees nationally, heavily

concentrated in new and probably money-losing enterprises that do not do much state and local reporting.

The economics of this situation are crystal clear in retrospect, though they were not so clear as they were unfolding. Back in the 1990s, the typical highly profitable metropolitan newspaper was a monopoly or quasi-monopoly. Its business was assembling a vast, highly diverse package of information that people could not easily get in one place (not just news reporting, but also weather reports, sports scores, stock prices, movie show times, and so on), creating a mass audience for it mainly in the form of low-priced home-delivery subscriptions, and then selling access to that audience to advertisers. Many newspaper publishers were excited about the advent of the Internet, because they thought it would mean that they could reach larger audiences and eliminate the costs associated with physical printing and delivery. Economically, they would become like television stations: they would offer themselves free to readers via their websites, increase their audiences substantially, and therefore make much more money from advertising while lowering their costs.

The big and very unpleasant surprise for newspaper publishers was that "platforms" like Google and Facebook, which produce no original content of their own and focus instead on building audiences via great software and content made by others, including their own users, wound up dominating the provision of information online, with news as only one subcategory in the ocean of information. Newspapers either had to offer their expensively produced content to the platforms or settle for far smaller audiences. In addition, Google and Facebook were able to offer a much better deal to advertisers: lower prices and more efficient targeting to potential consumers. Today, those two companies together have about three-quarters of all digital advertising revenue, and news organizations have to be content with the table scraps from the online advertising banquet. Total advertising revenue for newspapers, both in print and online, fell from nearly $50 billion in 2005 to less than $20 billion in 2012.

Google and Facebook have repeatedly and steadfastly said no to entreaties to get into the business of producing journalism themselves, but they are now by far the most powerful actors in American journalism. And only a few news organizations have been able to react to the failure of the expected online advertising bonanza to materialize by persuading their digital readers to become paying subscribers. Most readers of news stories encounter them individually and quasi-accidentally on platforms, not on new organizations' websites, and do not spend much time reading them.

It is worth remembering that the journalistic world we are now living in is one we thought we wanted. Most people who thought about the structure of the news media found the old regime of three highly regulated broadcast networks and one big newspaper in each city constricting. When Ronald Reagan deregulated broadcasting, ushering in the heyday of talk radio, political cable news, and profit-driven broadcast journalism, there were not a lot of protests. When the Internet was developed, the idea of a vast free system in which anybody could produce content for a global audience, and anybody could receive it, was immediately appealing. It was not clear then that this would lead to the substantial dismantling of journalism as a paid professional activity that reaches a mass audience.

If you see these developments as a problem, as I do, the medium to long-term solution is to open up a serious national conversation about what kinds of public policies

might shore up the socially valuable, non-market-supported aspects of professional journalism, such as investigative reporting, overseas reporting, and state and local "accountability journalism." Such policies might include tax and regulatory incentives for reporting, and establishing the kind of peer-reviewed public funding systems that support many other forms of research. But for now, for those primarily interested in education journalism, it is essential to understand how quickly and how much the environment has changed. Even *The New York Times* no longer has an education desk and most of the local papers that provide the bulk of coverage of school systems and higher education have reduced the resources they devote to this kind of work. The smaller, but generally high-quality, collective replacement is the new not-for-profit sector in education journalism: dedicated education sites like The Hechinger Report, Chalkbeat, and EdSource, and the education beat reporting at state and local sites like The Texas Tribune and Voice of San Diego. Also, as is common with every subject in the digital age, there is a vast ocean of opinion journalism about education.

In education reporting, then, what we are seeing is an overall reduction, but probably a rising level of specialization and knowledge, in the corps of education journalists. It is an added blessing that the Education Writers Association is one of the very best of the journalistic versions of academe's disciplinary associations. A significantly higher portion of education journalists than in the past is likely to be supported economically not by advertisers but by funders, who often see themselves as investing in expertise. Because nonprofit news organizations are often required to demonstrate research literacy in what they produce (for-profit news organizations never are), that can make for a benign form of pressure.

It has always been difficult to persuade journalists to become education reporters, because the prestige system in the profession has not rewarded that choice. Once they have decided—and if they have gone to work for an education site, they have decided—it is relatively easy to teach them to be more research-literate, if they are not already. We have been running a fellowship program for education journalists at the Columbia Journalism School, funded by the Spencer Foundation, for years now. The results have been very promising, including, in the case of every Spencer Fellow so far, a subsequent ambitious published work of education journalism that entails both original reporting and the use of education research.

Education seems to be a particular interest of the new generation of significant philanthropists, many of whom who made their money in technology or finance. A good deal of this philanthropy goes into research and advocacy, and some goes into education journalism. It is important that education journalism funders not think of what they are funding as a means of promoting the positions they already hold. Education journalism ought to be independent epistemology, aimed at telling readers what reporters' research has produced; tens of millions of Americans are students, teachers, and administrators, and most of the rest are closely connected to them, so education is an obviously essential journalistic topic. The American Press Institute has led an effort to develop a code of ethics for nonprofit journalism to be used by both funders and news organizations aimed at establishing the freedom of news organizations to come to their own conclusions. The more following this code becomes a widespread norm, the better it will be for education journalism.

I have been writing here on the assumption that my audience is educators, not

journalists. Non-journalists should understand what a dire moment this is for our profession, and also the precise contours of the problem. Fake news is not the big problem in education journalism. Ideological news organizations are not the big problem. The Trump administration is not the big problem. The big problem is the de-professionalization of journalism, especially outside of Washington and New York. The solution, in education journalism and elsewhere, is to focus on the professional remnant, and to try to raise its standards and increase its footprint as much as possible. This kind of journalism is a public good and should be treated as such. Beginning a larger conversation about the structures in which journalism exists is urgent too. We cannot solve our problems simply by reforming our practices—the problems are too big for that. We need your help.