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Who Needs Newspapers?

Journalists discover editors are bullish on print editions

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Journalists Sara Brown and Paul Steinle browse their "Who Needs Newspapers?" website Thursday in their Ashland home. The couple interviewed print editors at newspapers in all 50 states and assembled the website, which examines the evolution of newspapers in the digital age.

Julia Moore

October 09, 2011

By **John Darling**
for the Mail Tribune

After a journey across America, interviewing print editors in 50 states, two veteran Ashland journalists report that, while their profession may have gotten distracted by the promise of the Internet, printed newspapers not only will survive but will strengthen their mission as the primary source of community news and information.

After assembling a website crammed with video interviews of publishers and editors at 50 daily and weekly newspapers, Paul Steinle and Sara Brown say newspapers were wrong in thinking the Internet could match revenues of their print edition, and that digital ads would allow free online news.

"We discovered the industry was swept away by the Internet, but after 15 years, it realized the revenue potential was limited and growth was slow, so now they're focusing on print journalism," said Paul Steinle, retired Southern Oregon University provost, former television-radio journalist, president of United Press International and news director of KING-TV news in Seattle.

Steinle says 69 percent of Americans believe they can get along without a print edition, but he asks, "Where do they think the news comes from? Where will they get valid information (that goes online)?"

Editors uniformly emphasized that journalists are a vital part of every community, like teachers and firefighters — and they represent a "reputable marketplace of ideas" that, if lost, would result in chaos, loss of the "watchdog" function over government and other areas, "and people would no longer have a role in managing and directing the life of the community."

Journalism will evolve now as a combination of print and Internet, reaching a greater audience than ever, but accepting the reality that 90 percent of revenues come from print and only 10 percent from digital, said Brown, who worked in management and training for the Los Angeles Times, The Columbian in Vancouver, Wash., and has a doctorate in organizational systems.

Steinle said his survey showed that newspapers aren't dying, but it's an industry in transition, becoming a "multi-platform, multi-media" news and information system, merging print, graphics, Internet, social networks, pads and smartphones.

The project, viewable at www.whoneedsnewspapers.org, shows a striking phenomenon, he notes, that "nothing is going to replace weekly newspapers," because they serve a small, intimate market that isn't wired for the Internet — and it would cost much more than it's worth to wire it.

A weekly editor in Oklahoma told the couple, "We're the glue that holds the community together," said Steinle.

Newspapers a decade ago had 30 to 40 percent profit margins, but the Internet and bad economy have shrunk the margin to 5 to 15 percent. Despite that, "it's still a pretty good business," said Steinle, who took an economic profile of each paper.

Newspapers are in a difficult position, says Brown. They face the challenge of having to put money into new digital technology to stay competitive, "but they're not making much money from it" — and there's always a question about which new systems will work best.

The public's notion that news should be free has proven short-sighted, says Steinle — and many local newspapers, having a limited market, have put up "pay walls" and require subscriptions for online access.

"A newspaper is the greatest value in America today," he said.

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In shooting 75 hours of video interviews at 40 daily and 10 weekly papers, the couple created a unique historical record at a critical time in the history of journalism — one peppered with emotional and sometimes tearful moments as they asked each person to recall a time "when the power and purpose of journalism became clear to them," noted Brown.

"We got a lot of heart-wrenching stories ... something that changed the community — and some had tears in their eyes," she said.

These "journalistic epiphanies," said Steinle, included an editor in Lawrence, Kan., reminiscing on how he carried newspapers to the streets as a small boy on the day World War II ended and people were grabbing them from his hand.

"We asked everyone what the impact would be if newspapers closed and were not replaced," said Steinle. "And 90 percent of them said it would be devastating and made reference to the role of newspapers as part of democracy — and what would happen if people were not held accountable by newspapers. ... Journalism is the institution that spends all its time collecting and vetting information and reflecting it back to the community."

The task facing the reading public in the digital age, said Steinle, is to move beyond its "naivete" that news isn't that important and should be free.

The task for the industry now, Steinle added, is to realize "it's not the public's responsibility to save news; it's the newspapers' responsibility. ... It's time for the industry to invest energy in getting the message across about how it contributes to society.

"It's the best institution we have to reflect back to the community what it is and what it's doing. It'd be a dark age if it went away. We don't think it's going away."

The couple have given several speeches to journalistic organizations and plan more — and possibly articles and a book. They're seeking funding and students to continue their work, edit the video (now viewable online), update the website, and track developments in journalism as the years go by.

John Darling is a freelance writer living in Ashland. Email him at jdarding@jeffnet.org.

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