

Will the Last Reporter Please Turn out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix it

Edited by: Robert W. McChesney, Victor Pickard

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The newspaper industry is bottoming out; print media is in dire need of a eulogy. This has been the message thrust upon the public. And with an increasing number of people looking for the quickest way to get their news (not always waiting for their morning paper – and why? Because they don't have to), it is not completely unfounded.

“Will the Last Reporter Please Turn out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix it,” addresses this debate through a collection of 32 thoroughly edited essays written by journalism professors and media professionals. The collection is organized in three sections, structuring the book to flow from what is known about the media crisis, to a discussion of the crises framed around American tradition and finally to essays proposing various solutions.

While at times the essays seem a bit disorganized, they attack this debate on two fronts: the role the Internet and other new technologies are/should be taking, and the extent to which the government should (or should not) lend a helping hand.

In the first section, “The Crisis Unfolds,” Eric Alterman discusses in his essay “Out of Print” a brief history of the

newspaper, portraying the newspaper as the most important tool for keeping the public informed. David Simon calls for paywalls on Internet news sites in his essay, "Build the Wall," declaring that making people pay for content online is the only way to "still have a product ... still have an industry, a calling, and a career known as professional journalism." Paul Starr, in "The New Republic," states that "by giving away their content or limiting access, [newspapers] may be digging their own graves."

In "The American Traditions," the second section of the collection, names such as James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and Walter Lippman are thrown around when discussing the long-standing relationship between the press and government.

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Geoffrey Cowan and David Westphal argue there has indeed never been a wall between press and state. They say government support for the press took many forms, including subsidizing postal costs and tax breaks. One of the editors of the book, Victor Pickard, also argues for some form of state support. In his essay, "Revisiting the Road Not Taken," he positions American journalism as a two-faced entity, one of public service, the other, a commodity. It is a crisis in business model that the newspapers are facing, he argues; the quality journalism is still present.

In the final section of the book, "The Way Forward," Yochai Benkler argues that the new "networked public sphere" that is developing out of the ashes of the old monopoly model has the potential to be even better for journalism as it "combines several different elements, which represent diverse approaches along the axes of commercial and noncommercial, professional and amateur," but it needs time to do so.

The solutions proposed in these essays are preliminary, but well thought out, whether a reader agrees with them or not.

And while each essay posits its point differently, they unite under one general conclusion: The business model must change, and government support may be the answer.

While the organizational structure of the book was created with good intentions, it is not functional and not needed. The essays could be shuffled in any order and still make sense, building off one another. It is the lack of a substantial introduction to the book and to each section, which would normally provide a quality framework that allows readers to draw their own conclusions. The essays themselves, however, are concise and informative.

This is an informative, interesting read, but not distinguishable from other informative, interesting books on the same topic. And as it mirrors so much of McChesney's own earlier writings, one is tempted to ask, "Why bother?"