

Inquiring minds: The decline of journalism

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The American Society of Newspaper Editors is trying to find out what people want in a newspaper. It is worried about declines in readership—78 percent of adults read newspapers in 1970, compared to 55 percent last year. So far, it appears people want better service, more local news, reader-friendly presentations (graphics and narrative-style articles), and advertising. “Intensely local, people-centered news ranks at the top of the list of content items with the greatest potential to increase overall readership,” says the Readership Institute based at Northwestern University, which is conducting the research.

Better coverage of national and international events and more investigative journalism are not necessarily what readers want. And newspapers feel pressured to give people more of what they want.

Increasingly, staff and financial cuts in newsrooms have made it difficult for journalists to do original reporting of any kind. An analysis of reporting done during the 2000 presidential elections indicated that many news outlets used e-mail releases from the Gore and Bush campaigns without editing them. Bill Moyers, speaking in November to the National Conference on Media Reform, noted that at the end of the 1990s only the *New York Times* had a full-time reporter covering the Social Security Administration—an agency that affects or will affect every American. There were no full-time reporters at the Interior Department, which looks after the National Parks Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs and controls 500 to 600 million acres of public land.

Since 9/11 mainstream news media have been more afraid than ever to dig deeper into stories and to ask critical questions. They hide behind the veil of “he said, she said” objectivity.

One glimmer of hope has been the outcry over the Federal Communications Commission’s action last June to liberalize rules governing ownership of TV and radio

stations and of newspapers. The FCC's action, which would allow even greater control of media outlets by single corporations, provoked a reaction from both liberals and conservatives. Common Cause and the National Rifle Association joined in opposing the rules changes, recognizing that control of what gets published and aired would fall into the hands of a few media moguls. But congressional efforts to overturn the FCC action remain blocked in the House of Representatives.

We all know that a democracy can't survive without an informed public. Moyers noted that America "is so polarized it is in danger of being paralyzed and pulverized." In such a democracy, there is no substitute for a free, responsible and tenacious press, nor for responsible citizens with inquiring minds.