

News stand: Reporting requires revenue

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"Freedom of opinion is a farce," observed Hannah Arendt, "unless factual information is guaranteed." That is why the economic health of the news industry is of concern to every citizen.

In his book *Losing the News*, veteran journalist Alex S. Jones reports that traditionally newspapers have generated 85 percent of all news reporting done in the U.S. But newspapers are in trouble. The decline in newspaper circulation, which began with the baby-boom generation, has accelerated in the age of the Web and cable TV. In the second quarter of this year alone, newspaper circulation dropped 10 percent. As circulation has declined, advertisers—long the financial lifeblood of newspapers—have abandoned the field in large numbers, a trend exacerbated by the recent recession.

Lots of newspaper readers now turn to the Web for news—but so far newspapers have not figured out how to generate revenue from the Web. That means they have to continue to cut their staffs to stay afloat.

While opinion journalism has exploded with the rise of cable TV shows and the blogosphere, "accountability journalism" is in danger of disappearing. Accountability journalism includes investigative reporting that shines light on government agencies, businesses, educational institutions, the health-care system and other public institutions that usually prefer doing business in the shadows. This kind of reporting is expensive—it requires time and money. The most experienced and capable reporters are often the ones to be let go first, because they add the most to the expense side of the ledgers.

With necessity being the mother of invention, some new models of reporting are emerging. A recent report in the *Columbia Journalism Review* points to the emergence of nonprofit organizations like ProPublica, based in Manhattan, which aims to do journalism in the public interest. The financial crisis is sparking more

cooperation between news organizations that previously duplicated services. For instance, the eight largest newspapers in Ohio have formed the Ohio News Organization to share statewide reporting duties.

The *CJR* report suggests some ways to shore up the news industry, including passing legislation that would allow newspapers to become not-for-profit businesses supported by foundations and private donors. It also recommends that public broadcasting companies increase their investment in news. And it challenges journalism schools to model themselves after medical schools and encourage students to work with professors to provide serious professional reporting.

Neither new nor old models of news reporting can survive without the revenue to support them. We the people should demand high-quality reporting from news organizations. But we may also have to demand something of ourselves: the willingness to pay more for journalism. The future of democracy and the common good may depend on it.