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“Old New, New News or No News???”
with
Robert Thomson
Editor-in-Chief, Dow Jones & Company
Managing Editor, The Wall Street Journal, New York

Thank you very much, though I’m inching closer to that age at which the reading of a CV starts to sound ominously like the makings of an obituary. Basically I’m just a disreputable journalist whose industry has fallen into disrepair and so your generous indulgence is particularly welcome, if very poorly timed. I see before a vast range of professional Australians and Australians who are professionals, which, of course reminds me, of a very lackluster joke. And being a lackluster joke it needed a lackluster prompt like “which of course reminds me”.

Anyway, an architect, a doctor and a journalist were arguing furiously and intemperately over which was the world’s earliest profession. The doctor insisted that it must have been the medical profession because “a doctor had removed the rib of man to create woman” but the architect countered by insisting that it was a member of his esteemed profession who created order from the primordial chaos – the journalist just looked dismissively at the two of them, knowingly and a little condescendingly, and said “mate, who on earth do you think created the chaos”....as you can tell from the accent, it was not just a journalist, but an Australian journalist who created the chaos.

The perceived danger is that if you invite a journalist to speak in a decade a so you will be calling upon a relic, an antiquity to reminisce, to shuffle through fading memories, a former ink-stained wretch who has become nothing but a wretch, not even the ink stains remain. There is no doubt that newspapers around the world are being confronted by premonitions of their impermanence, that some have already suffered death by a thousand cuts and that others are destined for the same unfortunate and painful fate.

That the entire press is predestined to fail is a popular theme for the so-called netizens, the i-inhabitants, the e-elite, the digerati, many of whom are quite content to appropriate content from newspapers for their bloviating blogs of blather and many of whom run sites that are fact-free zones. There are newspapers which are still increasing sales, well, I should immodestly say, that there is one, The Wall Street Journal, but it is true that most papers are struggling, both with circulation and advertising revenue.

The anfractuositities of the modern marketplace are difficult to divine, but that is because reading and living habits are changing quickly and those changes are far from done. Ponder how your own routines have changed over the past decade and the damage that the Blackberry has done to your personal relationships. There is more strain to come, there will be more digitally inspired divorces, more people who will injure themselves and others because they are texting while walking, and more people who use the wonder of the web to indulge their fascinations to the point of obsession.

There are two social themes that I would, rather pompously, like to examine in imperfect detail: do we become more or less a community with the web?; and what happens to communities when the local source of factual immediacy, that is news, is no more? We are at the very early stages of comprehending the full impact of the web on societies and on people and on the interaction between the two.

We have extraordinary access to the past through the web but we are still uncertain of its impact on our future. For example, if you look at the archive on The Times of London's website you can read the original account of the arrest and trial of Ned Kelly, in the original paper, though in electronic format. Type in any event in the search field, say, the Titanic in 1912, and you will read the news as it unfolded for the audience of the day. There were three layers of headline on the front page of April 16, 1912.... "Titanic sunk", "Terrible Loss of Life Feared", "collision with an iceberg"the other noticeable characteristic is that the headline style of 97 years ago in London is not far removed from the headline style of some US newspapers today.

You could soon do a similar search at the Wall Street Journal, which began publishing a little later, in 1896, (The Times was born in 1785) and compare life in the Great Recession, in which we now find ourselves, with life in the Great Depression. This is truly a modern marvel and the pattern is repeated across the web. For the curious, the opportunity is endless, but for the strange, the opportunity is also endless. As we descend into content verticals, as they are called, does that mean we are doing so to the detriment of the ultimate content horizontal, that being society itself.

The endlessly interesting can become the merely endless and pointless. It is certainly true that communities are being created across the world by these points of interest – you can find a friend in Argentina or Thailand who is equally captivated by the Titanic, but that is both reinforcing your interest and, potentially, narrowing your engagement with the society in which you actually live. The out-of-body experience is made real on the web. The net benefits of the net are indisputable but the net consequences are far from understood.

Typing skills are on the rise, but if you don't have to speak to a person why develop the skill of delicately handling an awkward conversation? Now we are able to communicate without being adept at communication. I realize that I'm being both a little perverse and a tad abstruse, but I suspect you get the point of my provocation. Why learn something new when you can learn even more about a subject which you already know very well? You can access the familiar effortlessly, so why make the extra effort to grapple with the unfamiliar? If you like the company of the like-minded why bother with the individual who is different? I wonder if one net effect will be that expatriates become even more attached to their home country and that little bit less interested in the international – the experience of the expat in the past was an Australian-themed pub, a jar of Vegemite and a yellowing clip from the local newspaper. Now we are simultaneously living abroad and reliving our experiences at home.

If we are to relive history in the future, to revisit the scene of the Titanic, or to assess the historical impact of Napoleon's intercepted letters in 1812, as reported in *The Times*, or track the collapse of GM in 2009 – on whom are we going to rely for a reasonably accurate account of events? Professional journalists have their faults, ranging from alcoholism to attention deficit disorder, but there is no doubting the social relevance of the narrator trained to verify facts and provide a reasoned and reasonable account of reality. So the failure of local papers and the decimation and more of journalists is creating an interesting content contradiction.

The web has launched a thousand blogs, indeed hundreds of thousands of blogs, a fraction of which are fact-based, the majority of which are good, clean fun, and some of which are the rantings of feverish, tormented minds, of score settlers and of patients who have forgotten to take their medication. It's to the great benefit of all that hundred schools of debate have blossomed, but what we have seen is the exponential growth of opinion as the factory of facts is facing foreclosure.

If I could be personally discursive for one moment – it is joked, quite accurately, that at every given moment, somewhere in the world, there is a journalist eating or drinking on Rupert Murdoch's tab – generally it's more than one journalist and generally it's more than one drink. But it's also true

that at any given moment, there is a journalist or more on the front line in Iraq or Afghanistan, in Atlanta or Adelaide, in the field ferreting out facts, rummaging through social reality, gathering evidence to flesh out the news narrative and prompt, provoke or inspire countless commentaries from those who were not there. Much of that journalism would not happen without Rupert Murdoch's support and his enthusiasm and his tab.

We journalists deserve scathing criticism for misreading our audience. We are supposed to have an innate sense of how people live their lives, but somehow didn't notice that lifestyles changed and are changing. There has been debate about whether journalists should be subsidized, much like anachronistic exhibits at the Natural History Museum, but we shouldn't be kept men and women, wards of the state, whose independence has been compromised by a journalistic take on the TARP.

But there is another reason why journalists are an endangered species or e-endangered, and that's because revenue related to their content is being skimmed by aggregators and hyper linkers and by those very same funky bloggers and net nihilists who have such visceral contempt for old media. We really are at a moment in time at which the very value of content is being re-evaluated; its value to readers and its value to societies. The internet is supposed to increase transparency and yet some of the most influential players are far from transparent about their motives. It's easy to claim the high-minded defense of "idealism", but it's not ideal when your actions create a drought of diversity.

We are generally an opt-in society, but some would argue self-interestedly that we are an opt-out society – that authors should have their books copied unless they specifically say no, that paragraphs and more can be purloined at will from newspapers. That it is always appropriate to appropriate. Thankfully we are starting to debate the content consequences of this somewhat self-serving attitude. If content was king, then he was digitally dethroned. That period of regicide is over and while it will not necessarily be a grubby journalist (such as me) who ascends the throne, the creators of content will again take their rightful place, front and center stage - and the audience will have to buy a ticket to the performance.