

Open for Business

If you want readers to buy news, what, exactly, will you sell? The case for a free/paid hybrid.

BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO

In the dark winter and spring of 2009, as dispatches from the news business grew ever more grim, as Jim Romenesko's posts took on the feel of casualty reports, newsrooms across the land began to feel like the Emerald City when the Wicked Witch soars overhead, trailing smoke and sending everyone scurrying not for cover, but for an answer, to the Wizard. So it was that in the midst of this gloomy time help appeared, and not merely

the illusion of a wizardly hand. It came from Walter Isaacson and from Steven Brill, who were quickly joined by a determined chorus that, no longer willing to stand idly by as its trade died, took up a call that was clear, direct, and seemingly unassailable in its logic: *make the readers pay*.

They envisioned a happy time in which people so loved, or at least appreciated, what journalists did that they would pay to listen, watch, and read online. Excited by the prospect of compensation commensurate with their best efforts, news people raced to find evidence to support this encouraging talk. Suddenly, Peter Kann, dismissed as hopelessly un-Webby when he placed *The Wall Street Journal* behind a paywall in 1996, was being touted in retirement as a man so prescient about revenue streams that Rupert Murdoch, who had taken over Dow Jones with thoughts of bringing that wall down, was now preaching the wisdom of charging for access. People pointed to the money that came from subscribers to such

sites as *Congressional Quarterly*, *Consumer Reports*, and *Cook's Illustrated* as evidence that Isaacson, who had made his case first at a speech this winter at the Aspen Institute and then on the cover of *Time*, had been right. Readers not only would pay, but were already paying. They paid for information and for access to newspaper Web sites, too—in places like Little Rock, Albuquerque, and Lewiston, Idaho. They paid by the year, the month, the week. Perhaps they might even pay by the story—a micro-payment, like for a song on iTunes.

But then, as often happens when euphoria is built on hope born of despair, the good feelings began to recede. The readers-will-pay chorus was ever more drowned out by the voices of the doomsayers, the apostles of information-wants-to-be-free.

Paid content, they insisted, was an illusion. Take a closer look at the sites that charge, they argued, and you will see flaws in your logic: for one, many of them cater to audiences of narrow interest—lobbyists compelled to follow legislation through every subcommittee; business people whose firms cover the costs, so that they might make a buck at the expense of their competitors; lovers of the best, kitchen-tested recipe for Yankee pot roast. And as for those few newspapers that had gotten away with charging for Web access, note that almost all were small, or the sole purveyors of news for hundreds of miles around. These voices were joined by those who saw in the vanishing of the American newspaper a necessary death—much like the Israelites wander-

ing the desert for forty years, waiting for those wed to the old ways to die out.

And so it went, variations on familiar themes that tended to leave little room for the clutter of a middle ground. The back and forth produced a stalemate on the difficult question of whether it was possible, or reasonable, to expect people to pay for news that they had come to believe should be free.

But it obscured the big questions that, logic suggested, would have to come next: If you were going to charge, what, precisely, were you going to sell? And if you sold something new, would that alter, or even revolutionize, the nature of the news?

One

In the beginning, there was the 900 number.

The service had been around for decades when, in 1987,



AT&T allowed businesses leasing 900 numbers to charge for calls. People started to pay—for sports scores, news, weather, and stock quotes. Men also paid, sometimes quite a lot, to listen to women talk dirty. The change in dialing habits revolutionized the *idea* of the phone call. The telephone was no

longer merely a device that allowed for remote conversation at minimal cost. It became a vehicle for running a business—you could make money with a phone, so long as you sold what people wanted to buy.

That lesson was not lost with the coming of the Internet. Even as people fretted about whether anyone would figure out a way to make a buck online, the pornographers, ever on the vanguard, shifted technologies and began charging not merely for a voice, but for a peek. Others took notice, with higher aspirations. Even as the early apostles of Web culture extolled the virtues of every-man-a-publisher, content did, in fact, go on sale.

Some of it sold. Much didn't—or at least not enough, in the news business, to make up for all the potential lost advertising revenue that has always been the financial backbone of the industry. Slate charged for access for about a year, only to reverse itself in 1999. The *Los Angeles Times* charged for CalenderLive, only to drop the fee in 2005, after twenty-one months of declining page views and modest revenue. *Variety* and Salon took down their paywalls, as did many of the handful of small newspapers that had charged—among them the *Creston (Iowa) News Advertiser*, the *Newton (Iowa) Daily News*, and the *Aiken (South Carolina) Standard*, whose page views tripled after its wall came down in 2007. *The New York Times* ended TimesSelect in 2007, having calculated—at that time—that it could more than make up for the \$10 million in lost revenue with the advertising generated by all the many new visitors to its site.

'We're like heroin for UT football fans. We've got all the nuts that exist. We cover what the people want to pay for.'

Still, there were holdouts, and the titan among the paid-content stalwarts was and remains *The Wall Street Journal*, which continues to charge subscribers \$100 annually. While the number of subscribers has grown steadily to its present one million, they pale in comparison to the 20 million monthly unique visitors to *The New York Times*, which, for the moment, remains entirely free—but may not be for much longer.

The sense among the free-content advocates, though, is that the *Journal*, great as it is, is an outlier, a publication not

written for a general audience but for the world of commerce. The same was being said of other specialized online publications that cater to people with a financial stake in the news they provided. The growing online presence of the trade press, in the view of the believers in free content, meant only that people already conditioned to spending hundreds or thousands of dollars a year for the brand of news that served their particular needs were now logging on, and not waiting for the newsletter to arrive.

Besides, walled-off content meant content that was not searchable, which meant that it did not draw the great flows of online traffic in a world where the hyperlink had become the coin of commerce and notice.

Sites like CQ.com—which boasted a multitude of databases, brought in about 43 percent of CQ's annual revenue (somewhere between \$50 million and \$100 million; the company is privately held and will be no more precise about earnings), and had a large editorial staff (CQ Inc. employs more than 165 people)—while admired for the work they produced, were nonetheless relegated to the fringe because they were not part of the greater, link-driven conversation. And hadn't CQ subsequently started a free site, CQ Politics, which, while it generated less than 2 percent of the company's revenue, did attract an average of 450,000 uniques a month, ensuring that CQ was not left out of Washington's overheated political conversation?

The criticism was much the same for those sites that sold news whose value was not necessarily fungible—politically or financially, either in money earned (the business-to-business press) or in money well spent (*Consumer Reports*). These sites sold news that mattered only because everyone in particular slivers of the online world was talking about it. These were the sites that had occupied small pockets of Chris Anderson's Long Tail, his theory about the rise of niche businesses online. Places like Orangebloods.com.

Orangebloods is a site that, depending on the time of year, has between eight thousand and ten thousand subscribers paying \$9.99 a month, or \$100 annually, for steady updates about all known thought regarding the University of Texas football team. The site covers practices and assesses the team's strengths and potential worries, but the least important thing it does is cover games. Everyone covers games, the reasoning went, and everyone *watches* games. So instead, Orangebloods found a niche within a niche: it reports and sells what no one else can provide, which is year-round coverage of Longhorns recruiting. Its reporters fan out across the state, and sometimes across the nation, meeting, observing, and collecting footage of leading high-school football players. They then pour all this into the Orangebloods site along with information about those potential Longhorns' size, speed, bench-pressing capacity, and GPAs, all the while offering interviews, commentary, starred rankings, and candid assessments of the Longhorns' chances of securing a commitment: *Solid verbal!*

Orangebloods is one of the 130 paid college-football sites that are part of Rivals.com, which Yahoo bought in 2007 for \$100 million. Rivals is run by Bobby Burton, who in the early 1990s, as an undergraduate at Texas, worked in the football



Hook 'em! A number of University of Texas football fans pay for year-round coverage of the Longhorns' recruiting effort.

team's film library, converting film to video and then editing the footage so that coaches could study, say, tendencies on third and long. Burton took that passion—he uses the word often—to the *National Recruiting Advisor*, a newsletter that reported on recruiting and augmented its service with updates on, yes, a 900 number.

The business went through several iterations—free, then paid, then failing—before re-emerging in 2001. By then Burton had abandoned the idea of using citizen journalists to do his reporting for him, having determined that he needed professionals. In time, the combined editorial staff at Rivals grew to over three hundred and, as the site's reputation grew among the college-football cognoscenti, its subscriptions rose to its present 200,000; Orangebloods is among the most popular.

And that popularity, that desire to subscribe, says its editor, Geoff Ketchum, is as much about the news it reports as it is about the talking and ruminating with an audience that cares beyond all apparent reason about Longhorn football. They make full use of the site's message board, offering lengthy and deeply-felt opinions, and talk with one another with such familiarity that when one subscriber's child was diagnosed with cancer, his online friends raised money for treatment.

"We're like heroin for UT football fans," Ketchum says. "We've got all the nuts that exist." He says this with the affection of someone who recognizes his own. "We don't cover all the sports," he adds. "We cover what the people want to pay for."

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Two

But would the people pay for news aimed not at the few but at the many? As zealots on either side of the pay divide duked it out, Nancy Wang ran the numbers. The news was not good. For either side.

Wang, who with her husband, Jeff Mignon, runs a Manhattan media consulting firm, crunched nine different scenarios for newspapers of two different approximate sizes—100,000 paid circulation and 50,000. (Here her base scenario was for most typical American paper, which has 50,000 circulation, publishes seven days a week, charges \$17 a month for print subscribers, has a Web site with 250,000 unique visitors, and online revenues of \$700,000.) The analysis, Wang says, were based on real numbers, but were intended as projections of potential, not actual, revenue.

Her conclusions, which were reported in March 2009 by the Newspaper Association of America, essentially boiled down to this: once a newspaper put all its content behind a paywall, online subscriptions dropped dramatically and those subscriptions did not come close to making up lost advertising revenue. The advertising projections, she explains, were based on "very conservative," pre-recession numbers. "It's hard to say that putting in a paid model for content would pay on its own," she says.

But her results were not all that encouraging for the free-content crowd, either—those who advocate an advertising-only model despite the fact that revenue for online ads, though rising, is a fraction of what it is for print.



The online scenario that worked best, she concluded, was a compromise—combining free and paid content, at a percentage of 80 to 20, free to paid. But, she cautions, “there has to be something that people are willing to pay for.”

Could that “something” be local news? Wang built her analysis on numbers from the NAA, the media buyers AdPerfect and Centro, as well as from Borrell Associates, a Virginia consulting firm whose president, Gordon Borrell, had for years preached that publishers were wrong if they continued to believe that local news as currently constituted would sell.

Borrell had begun his career as a reporter for *The Virginian-Pilot*, and so came to his conclusion with an understanding and empathy for the work reporters do. The problem, as he saw it, was that newspapers assumed they could continue to sell what he regarded as a tired and tedious product in a new medium simply because they had done so well selling it in an old one.

Borrell had issued his first comprehensive study on paid content shortly after the 9/11 attacks, a time when the public was devouring news, and so a moment when the prospect of online revenue would be running high. He surveyed nearly 1,900 online-newspaper readers and discovered that while people were willing to register for sites—a necessity in attracting advertisers—and might be willing to pay for some news, they were not about to start paying for general online news they had become accustomed to getting for free. He had thought at the time that they might, one day.

Lack of competition was good for profits but turned many dailies into vanilla approximations of themselves.

But now, eight years later, he saw no evidence of that happening. Readers simply did not value local news enough to pay for it. Borrell found only about 12 percent of most markets went to the Web for local news.

They still bought newspapers, though in diminishing numbers, and quite often not with the same imperative that drove Borrell’s one-time newsroom colleagues. While journalists envision people tossing out the coupons to get to the news, many readers perform the ritual in reverse—tossing the news to get to the coupons, a practice confirmed by an NAA study that found that fully half of all readers bought local papers for the ads. Such, Borrell concluded, was the fate of a product that, in the eyes of its intended audience, was “not that compelling.”

But wait. Hadn’t the industry been pinning its hopes for well over a generation on local news, on bringing to suburban

readers targeted versions of the traditional mix of local politics, cops, fires, courts, and the occasional strange doings that used to fill the big-city papers that everyone in town read? And hadn’t the mix grown to include dispatches on schools and zoning and features of local interest? And hadn’t some of that work been of consequence, hadn’t it won awards and allowed publishers to speak of their “watchdog” role and to suggest, channeling Jefferson, that their work kept the citizenry informed and enlightened? *Not that compelling?*

Or did Borrell have a point? Was it possible that the self-satisfaction with which news organizations regarded themselves and their role had been undermined and diluted? The news purists had been warning for years of the danger of a culture in which publishers cheapened the value of their content with cutbacks intended to satisfy investors and media analysts. But no one had paid them much mind, because even in a diminished state the product still sold. If you could do it on the cheap, why not?

But it was not just the shareholders’ fault. Competition, the catalyst that drove journalists, that fueled their anxiety, fear, ruthless streaks—qualities of personality that propelled them to succeed—had been vanishing for decades. Fewer newspapers in fewer towns found themselves in direct competition for stories, and while this helped make a good many papers very profitable (Exhibit A: Gannett), it also had the effect of rendering many newspapers into vanilla approximations of themselves. The papers weren’t necessarily bad; they looked good and read well enough. But it was hard to imagine anyone standing on a street corner shouting, “Extra! Extra! Read all about it!” when the headline screamed ZONING DISPUTE.

The problem with the content, however, did not stop there. Stories were ever more routine, in the subject and in the way they were told—so much so that news, as defined and presented, had for years been an ongoing object of parody in, most famously, *The Onion*.

The pity of it was that in the decades that preceded the recent downsizing of content, newspapers had been stretching the definition of news in ways that made papers of the more distant past seem hopelessly narrow. *Front Page* romanticism aside, readers of, say, the *St. Louis Star* in 1942 would have had no sense of the dark and frightened mood in town in the first winter of World War II, because the paper did not consider such matters news. A generation later, everyone, it seemed, had an investigative team, as well as education, immigration, and health-care reporters, and a local columnist or two. The best writing was no longer necessarily on the sports pages and there was no shortage of FOIA requests. The definition of news expanded, as did the way news was told.

But then, over a stretch of years long enough that it was hard to notice, the reports that came back from once-proud-and-lively newsrooms were that it was getting very hard to, say, sniff out local corruption or capture the zeitgeist of a community when your beat had expanded from three towns to ten, and when the unspoken but well-understood directive from above was to feed the beast, in print and, in time, online. Newspapers still produced admirable work, but the appearance of another plaque on the newsroom wall tended to obscure the fact that while great work was still being accom-



Stirring Chris Kimball's *Cook's Illustrated* readers pay for recipes.

plished, a good deal of what was otherwise being done was of diminishing value and allure.

So for Borrell, editors and publishers and owners who rallied to the cry of paid content were working under the misapprehension that what they had given away or sold very cheaply would suddenly be regarded as having value by readers whose needs had been sadly undervalued for a long time.

But Borrell still believed that there was money to be made in the news business—online and in print. Print was the place for display advertising, and for all those coupons and end-of-summer ads. Free online access brought the readers—the eyeballs—advertisers wanted. As for paid content, Nancy Wang and Jeff Mignon had for some time been preaching the virtues of a hybrid approach of mixing paid and free online content to the fifty or so news organizations of various sizes they consulted for, and the result, she says, was almost always the same: the young, Web-savvy people would get excited by the possibilities, and their older, more tradition-bound editors, she says, would scream, “NO!”

The resistance, she explains, was not a function of blind stubbornness, but rather a fear that that which they hold sacred was about to be diluted in the name of making a buck. And they were not altogether wrong.

It was at this moment in the conversation that publishers and editors were forced to confront a difficult choice: if a newsroom had a finite number of reporters, and if that newsroom needed a new revenue stream to make up for declining circulation and lower ad rates, it needed to report something that people wanted enough to pay for. Not all people. Just some, with the money and the willingness to pay.

That, in turn, meant *not* devoting the time, the staff, and

the money to report on what was presumably of interest to everyone. It meant making the choice to provide content that was exclusive to paying customers. It meant satisfying the core readership at the expense of those unwilling, or perhaps unable, to prove their loyalty with a check or money order.

Something had to go, if you were going to stay in business. But if you were going to start selling news, you had decide what you could offer that people might buy.

And so once the conversation moved past the arguments about the *idea* of paying, and it became ever more apparent that news organizations would do well to charge for *something*, the word heard most often was “value.”

Three

Peter Fader was such a fan of TimesSelect—the opinion-oriented section that *The New York Times* briefly put behind a paywall—that had the price doubled he would gladly have paid it. TimesSelect represented value for Fader, a quality, he says, that always eclipses price when a purchase is being considered. Fader is a professor of marketing at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. He explains that pricing “is a trade-off attitude.” Economists, Fader says, often make the mistake of building projections upon the supposition that people are rational beings. But people, he says, will perform the irrational act of paying for all kinds of things that they can otherwise get for nothing.

They will, for instance, pay 99 cents for songs on iTunes that can be downloaded for free because Apple makes the transactional experience not only legal, but easy, attractive, and accessible. People will also pay for subscriptions. They will, for example, willingly allow their bank accounts to be dunned \$17 a month for Netflix even though weeks may pass without a rental or download. No matter, Fader says; those subscribers have fallen into an “electronic trance” in which they refuse to cancel because they anticipate renting one day, real soon.

Perhaps the best and most alluring analogy for selling news online is cable television. TV used to be free and in some places still is. But cable transformed the idea that the medium came without cost by making it into a medium that provided a wide choice of occasionally terrific content that was exclusive to those who paid for it.

The transformation did not come instantly, and despite all the new channels, the experience of watching cable TV is often as it was in the old five channels-plus-UHF days: *Nothing's on*. But cable offers lots of choices, on a sliding scale, and Fader says people will continue to pay for the promise of value because whatever disappointments they might have experienced—for instance, a weeper on Lifetime—have been outweighed by, say, *The Sopranos*.

New technologies arrive with lamentations for the institutions and traditions and old technologies sure to die out. It was that way with television—the *death of movie theaters!* And with FM radio—the *end of live concerts!* But new technologies do not replace the old, they merely take a place at their side. Grand and aging movie palaces became multiplexes, and owners did such a brisk business that people decided it was worth spending an extra \$1.50 to pre-order tickets on Fandango. So



it is that Fandango sells what once came without cost, but which now represents admission denied to someone else.

That, in a sense, is also the calculus for success at *Congressional Quarterly*, which sells information that is available elsewhere at no cost but at considerable hassle. If you are, for instance, a lobbyist who needs to know the status of a particularly worrisome piece of legislation, *CQ* can sell you, through its BillTrack database, the full text and an analysis of the bill, its status in committee, a profile of that committee, a district-by-district breakdown of the members of the committee, a dollar-by-dollar breakdown of those members' campaign contributors—in short, everything a clever lobbyist needs to know *before* that information comes to another clever lobbyist for the opposition. This is what Robert Merry, *CQ*'s president and editor-in-chief, calls “information paranoia,” a particularly virulent affliction in Washington.

CQ sells access to thirty-five different databases. It has four niche verticals—homeland security, health, a budget tracker, and its political money line. It does give some information away for free. So do *The Wall Street Journal*—a story at a time—and the *Financial Times*—a limited number of stories each month, before the paywall goes up. But these are, from a marketing standpoint, the journalistic equivalent of movie trailers on Fandango: *If you loved our report on this stimulus package, you'll want to see...*

Merry thinks of *CQ* as a pyramid. At its base are the many visitors to *CQPolitics* who pay nothing but who do deliver eyeballs. At the top are those so ravenous for particular slices of news they can use that they will pay \$10,000 or more a year for access. In other words, *CQ* sells various products for various media to audiences who differ not by geography or income but by need. It was doing so well before analysts like Wang and Mignon began preaching the virtues of the “hybrid” model to their sometimes-reluctant clients.

The Wall Street Journal will soon expand its existing free-for-a-single-story “hybrid” model into one that includes micropayments. *The New York Times* is considering such revenue streams as metered payments (like those at the *FT*) and premium content memberships that presumably would cater to the paper's most loyal readers. It is one thing for the *Times*, the *Journal*, and the *FT* to impose fees on some of their content because their content is so highly regarded by so many. But what of those general news publications that have done away with so much of their original coverage of anything that is not local, and have diminished even that? Are they doomed? Or can they save themselves by redefining their content, and by extension, news?

General news has long been predicated on the idea that people's primary interest in news was defined by where they lived. But that was never completely so. The ethnic press, for instance, is as much about where you are from as about where you landed. Similarly, magazines are now almost exclusively defined by the particular interests of their readers. (The demise of the general-interest magazine offers a powerful and emotional parallel to the fate of the general-interest newspaper: a generation ago it seemed impossible to envision an America without *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, and *Look*.)

Yet most newspapers still represent a model defined by borders. This makes for a relatively easy business to run when most readers lived in one place—a small town or a city. With the post-World War II exodus to the suburbs, however, the urban newspaper model built on cops, courts, fires, and politics was essentially picked up and transplanted not to one locality but to many disparate places where, it was assumed, readers had little interest in the goings-on across the town line, and the ever more remote downtown. Gone was the big-city paper; in its place came the regional daily.

But now, *The Washington Post*, for one, has begun to embrace the idea of defining itself not as the newspaper of Washington, the physical entity, but as Washington, the idea—just as *The Wall Street Journal*, which the *Post*'s new editor, Marcus Brauchli, used to run, is not about Wall Street, a district in lower Manhattan. In a memo to her staff last December, the *Post*'s publisher, Katharine Weymouth, wrote of the paper as “being about Washington, for Washingtonians and those affected by it.” The latter phrase is key. It suggests that the paper is both acknowledging the physical boundaries of a portion of its coverage—“the indispensable guide to

Transform the everyday work of journalism from a reactive, money-losing proposition into a more selective enterprise.

Washington”—while expanding beyond them. It means that Washington is, in a sense, everywhere—in every tax dollar, FAA hearing, wherever Washington's institutions and influence reach. A new and different hyper-local.

If this succeeds, what's to stop, say, the *Detroit Free Press* from augmenting its definition of Detroit as a municipality with Detroit as an idea—say, all things automotive? There is news in cars, lots of it. And there are people who need to know it, not all of them residents of greater Detroit. One wonders what the denuded *San Jose Mercury News*, a paper that had been a model of the regional news organization, might have become had it positioned itself as the definitive source of tech news for a readership well beyond Silicon Valley.

Once a news organization sees itself as something more than in service of a place, it puts itself in a position to tap into one of the emotional imperatives that sustain the niche sites. Geoff Ketchum's Orangebloods, for instance, is not limited to resident Texans. Regardless of where they live, his core readers have proven themselves willing to pay for the knowledge his site offers so that they can remain a part of a conversation. “Newspapers can't entice us into small payment systems,” argues the media thinker Clay Shirky, “because we care too much about our conversation with one another....” Newspapers, as presently defined, cannot. But if

Orangebloods can, why can't a vertical on what is otherwise a general news site?

Those conversations can be inclusive (pay \$9.95 a month and become an Orangeblood) or exclusive (CQ BillTrack), but what they have in common is that each, in a sense, represents what might best be called a Community of Need. The need is for the news that fuels a particular conversation. So long as there is something new to report.

Niche sites succeed, in large measure, by staking out a line of coverage that represents precisely the kinds of stories that newspapers decided to abandon years ago because so many readers found them so tedious: process stories. The relentless journey of a bill through a legislative body—*cloture vote!* Tracking a running back as he decides between Baylor and Texas. But process stories are stories that, by their nature, offer an endless source of developments; there is always something new happening, even if to those on the outside of the conversation, it is news of little value. Robert Merry wonders, for instance, why so many newspapers abandoned their statehouse bureaus when those capital cities were awash in money, lobbyists, legislators, and eager-beaver aides who'd be willing to pay quite a lot for information that might give them an edge. They did so because most readers said the stories were boring—and that was true for most readers, but not all.

But there is an important caveat: such projects do not succeed if they're done on the cheap. They require reporters whose primary responsibility is to supply the endless news that feeds those relatively few readers' needs. The need is for news. Not opinion. (Bobby Burton is not alone in believing the *Times* erred in what it chose to place behind its Times-Select paywall, which was not news but the opinions of its famous columnists.) The problem with opinion is that the Web has made everyone a columnist precisely because it costs nothing to offer a point of view. Nor does it cost very much, or sometimes nothing at all, to fill a site with well-intentioned work, and opinion, provided by citizen journalists. But as Burton discovered in the early days of Rivals, those amateur journalists may have wise and clever things to say, but when he wanted to regularly break news he went out and hired people who knew how to do it—and he pays them between \$30,000 and more than \$150,000 a year.

Orangebloods is only as good as its next scoop; because if its stories begin appearing with any frequency someplace else—and perhaps, for free—the compact that Ketchum has with his readers is in jeopardy. Which is why there is nothing passive or reactive about the site's approach to its work. That, however, has not always been the case for general news that has traditionally defined itself by default: it's news because it's always been news. This, in turn, has created a culture of news in which the operative verb, far too often, is *said*, a culture in which all a reporter needs to do is listen and record.

As a result, too much of what fills the news pages is, as is often said, stenography. And because it can be done quickly, and at great volume, and with relatively little effort, it endures. The timing could not be more dispiriting, given that the generation in power in journalism now came to the field with a sense of journalism's possibilities, and broadened the idea

of what news could be. But this generation also came of age at a time of growing newsroom prosperity.

This expanded sense of what the content could be made newspapers fatter; new sections appeared; nothing had to go, save for those process stories that no one wanted to read. Not a tough choice. Not like now, when the redefinition of news may mean deciding what you can sell to those willing to pay, and, by extension, what you will give up in the rest of the day's report so that you can redeploy your shrinking staff.

Inevitably, this raises an existential issue: What are newspapers for? Do they exist to serve narrow bands of interest? Or are there issues that transcend the paying niches, journalistic responsibilities that we should worry might well be overlooked and ignored in the interests of satisfying those who foot the bill?

It is not enough to simply hope that editors and publishers will retain their nobler instincts, not when times are tough. But, at the risk of sounding cynical, there is every reason to believe that they might continue offering stories of consequence for a larger, and perhaps unpaying audience for another reason—because it might be good for business. There are stories that transcend demographic borders. They are stories that are universal in their appeal, and infectious in their presentation. Not all novels, after all, are written for niche audiences; some speak to people who, on the surface, have nothing in common with one another. And as it is with novels, and movies, and television shows that attract wide followings, there are stories that capture the eye and the imagination, and which lure readers who might stick around, or even come back, and bring advertisers with them. The burden rests on the news organization to do what news people have always done: find those stories.

So it is that journalism's crisis offers an opportunity to transform the everyday work of journalism from a reactive and money-losing proposition into a more selective enterprise of reporting things that no one else knows. And choosing, quite deliberately, to ignore much of what can be found elsewhere.

People will pay for news they deem essential, and depending on the depth and urgency of their need, they will pay a lot. Their subscriptions, in turn, might well help to underwrite the cost of producing original work that might remain free and be of interest to more than a select few.

Those subscriptions will not save newspapers. They alone will not pay for the cost of reporting. No one revenue stream will—not online or print advertising, or alerts on handheld devices, or new electronic readers that display stories hand-somely. The hope is that they *all* will.

The means of distributing the news will change, but what is clear and unchanging is people's desire to know things, to be told a story, and to be able talk about it all with other people—for such things matter.

Extra! Extra! Read all about it! **CJR**

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