On Campus

Bad News Bearers

Summer 2006

It wasn’t a good day for newshounds when the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) recently released its annual State of the News Media study, concluding that while there exist more news outlets today than ever, they’re covering a narrower range of topics, and the coverage is less in-depth than in the past.

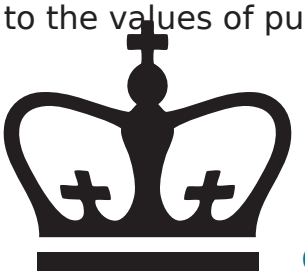
The study by PEJ, which is an affiliate of Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism and is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, examined news in print and on television, radio, and the Internet in the United States on a single day last year, chosen randomly, and found remarkable repetition in the reporting. For example, similar accounts of two dozen news events constituted all of the 14,000 articles accessible during that 24-hour period on Google News, which gathers stories from major news producers around the world.

“As the number of [outlets] delivering news proliferates, the audience for each tends to shrink and the number of journalists in each organization is reduced,” according to the study. Yet, national news organizations all need to cover certain big events, so “we tend to see more accounts of the same handful of stories.... Such concentration of personnel around a few stories, in turn, has aided the efforts of newsmakers to control what the public knows. One of the first things to happen is that the authorities quickly corral the growing throng of correspondents, crews, and paparazzi into press areas” away from the actual news sites.

Big-city metro papers are the big losers in the increasingly saturated news landscape, the PEJ study finds. These newspapers are the organizations “most likely to have the resources and aspirations to act as watchdogs,” yet they “suffered the biggest circulation drops and imposed the largest cutbacks in staff,” reads the report. The New York Times, for example, cut 60 people from its newsroom last year, and the Los Angeles Times let go 85. Meanwhile, bloggers are assembling, editing, and analyzing plenty of news, but doing little firsthand reporting.

The good news? Traditional newspapers are getting more creative with the Web and seeing revenue growth in that area. “The big question is whether the Internet will produce journalism in the 21st century at the level of quality we came to expect in the 20th century,” says PEJ Director Thomas Rosenstiel. “If it doesn’t, then we’re going to have a much lower level of journalism and public knowledge in the future.”

To that end, the report says, look to see whether the traditional news media over the next few months demand that Google and Yahoo!, which cut into their revenue, pay for the content they republish, and whether the online aggregators’ fledgling attempts to produce original content demonstrate “more than rhetorical allegiance to the values of public-interest journalism.”



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