

To the commission:

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address you. I think this is critical work the commission is undertaking and I'm happy to contribute in a small way.

By way of introduction, I'm a business columnist at the San Jose Mercury News, where I've worked for nine years, and I've been a professional journalist for 16 years.

As the decline of the industry that I love has accelerated in recent years, I've become involved in two, separate but related projects that allowed me to explore the changing landscape of news. The first was The Next Newsroom Project (www.nextnewsroom.com), funded by the Knight Foundation as part of their News Challenge Grant program to promote innovation in digital and community news. Our goal was to research and design the ideal newsroom for the next 50 years.

The second project was called Rethinking the Mercury News. I was part of a task force whose charge in the summer of 2007 was to "blow up the newsroom." We were told to re-imagine everything we did from scratch. We spent several months conducting interviews and observations of people in the South Bay. We used the anecdotal information from these usability studies to guide us in making prototypes and reorganizing the newsroom. Although the project was ultimately abandoned, I believe the insights we gained are relevant to the commission's work.

I'd like to summarize some of the key takeaways from both projects.

While this remains a grim time for newspapers, it's important to note that this is also one of the most exciting times in the history of journalism. There is an explosion of tools and technologies that have greatly enhanced our ability to connect with our community, gather information, and tell stories. But at the same time, the way people choose to receive this information and how they consume it is changing and expanding.

What makes this era that we've entered particularly exciting is that there won't be one "next newsroom," but many next newsrooms. In researching dozens of newsrooms, particularly newspapers, over the past year, and thinking about how my own operates, one of the most shocking things you quickly notice is how homogeneous newsrooms have become. I can walk into just about any newsroom, and I'll find the same types of people doing the same types of jobs to produce the same type of product. This creates a culture that has inhibited innovation and is unhealthy for communities and democracies.

That's changing. The good news is that there is a phenomenal amount of innovation and experimentation taking place. These are all adding to a growing news ecology that is becoming more diverse, and more informative. The old newsroom operated in a linear fashion, like an assembly line. The audience was at the far, right end of this factory.

But in this new era, the community must be at the heart of the newsroom. Their roles have expanded and become far more complex. They range from traditional, passive consumers of information to commenting to active participants and partners in creating news and information.

As part of Rethinking the Mercury News last year, we spent a lot of time trying to better understand these changing news and information consumption habits. We sent groups of employees out into the community to interview and observe more than 100 randomly selected people. We began these interviews by asking an open-ended question: What is your most important source of information?

We learned a couple of things. First, it turns out that everyone on the planet does in fact use Google. And that mirrors what we know about how people find information and news. Most of the traffic to the MercuryNews.com website comes from Google or other news aggregators. People tend to come, read one story, and then leave.

But the other most common answer that people gave to our lead question was more intriguing to us. When asked their most important source of information, the next most common answer was: **Other people**. At first, this left us perplexed. But as we thought about it more, we realized that this simply reflected the way people lead their lives. When you want recommendations, information or ideas, you turn to your friends, your colleagues at work, your network. In other words, you turn to the people you trust the most.

I think this also makes sense in terms of the rise of social networking online. People want to connect, and they're looking for people who can help them with things they need to get done in their lives. This becomes even more important when you consider that people are overwhelmed by the explosion of media. They are consuming more media than they ever have in history, but where they really want help is finding the best and more relevant information.

We came to see this as a big opportunity to change our relationship to our community. We no longer needed to try to be the sole source of all information. We could play a vital role by becoming a community hub that helps people connect, facilitate conversations, and aggregate the news and information already being produced throughout the community. We would focus our own resources on investigative, watchdog, and enterprise stories.

The good news is that there is tremendous innovation going on and new technologies that would help accomplish this. Let me highlight just a few.

1. Geo-tagging of all content.
2. Aggregation
3. Social networks, particularly tools that let people create their own niche networks.
4. Printcasting, or on demand printing.

The other big theme that emerged from our research at the Mercury News was: **Choice**. People have been telling us this for years, though as an industry, we've been unable to respond. But the message is clear. People look at the decline in print circulation and deduce that there's a crisis in journalism. I think this misses the real truth. Newspapers give people one product, in one form, at one time. For an increasing number of people, that product no longer fits into their lives. Instead, they get their news and information from a growing list of platforms and devices.

It's critical, then, that any news and information organization be fully integrated and able to produce or broadcast across any platform. A newsroom has to be platform agnostic. And within those platforms, it has to offer maximum choice and personalization. The first, most important thing any newsroom must do is fully understand how people in their community find and consume information. The answers and complexity of this will surprise you.

For instance, a lot of the discussion about news tends to focus on the Web and the need to be online first. But as we talked to people in Silicon Valley, we realized that one of the most important places people consume news and information is their cars. On average, people spend a tremendous amount of time commuting and will happen to listen to whatever happens to be on the radio. So if I was going to tackle the information needs of Silicon Valley, I might consider starting a community radio network.

Another example of this can be found at Duke University, which is where the Next Newsroom Project is based. The university wants to build a new campus, and has a social media person working in the dean's office to solicit student input via tools like Facebook, Twitter, and other such avenues. The response has been poor. So what does work? Posting flyers. This simply fits the way people consume this kind of information on a pedestrian campus.

Finally, there are a few attributes that any newsroom or information organization has to have if it's going to thrive and truly serve its community in this era. I've already mentioned a couple:

1. Put the community at the center.
2. Be fully integrated and platform agnostic.

To those, I'd add that this organization has to be:

3. Transparent. Both physically and philosophically, a community needs to see and understand what happens in a newsroom to build trust and participation.
4. A center of innovation. We can't know what's going to happen in two years, let alone 50. But we're coming out of an era where a single model served newspapers for almost 150 years. This new era will be one of constant change at an ever increasing rate. Any media organization that doesn't make innovation a priority in this era has already failed.

5. Collaborative. This newsroom or news organization has to be able to work in partnership with the community and other news organizations in this new ecology.

Thank you again for this opportunity to speak today. And I'm happy to answer any questions.

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