

I'll go with the Dickens cliché, and say it's the best of times and worst of times in meeting the public's information needs.

Thanks to the Internet, just about any member of the public can easily get access to a lot of information that used to be much more difficult to get. You can find your property taxes online. You can research whatever illness you or your kid might have. You can view the agenda at your local city council meeting. You can get a good sense of the quality of local schools. You can communicate with neighbors without leaving the home. You can find the locations of child molesters. You can get crime reports and restaurant menus. And I think we've only seen the beginnings of what communities can do by leveraging the power of the Internet. So in many ways, it's the best of times.

But I would argue that there's also something dangerous occurring.

We're seeing a big decline in the number of professional journalists – now, some people might think that's a good thing. But I'd think it's bad news for everyone.

Historically, the best journalism in this country has been bankrolled by private corporations – newspapers and television stations, largely – and it's been funded mostly by advertising.

More and more advertising dollars – particularly classified advertising dollars – are moving to the Internet and away from newspapers and TV. And that's causing more news organizations to cut back.

An example: The Mercury News' newsroom had 380 people in 2001. Today, we have 150. Two years ago, we had more than 100 reporters. Today, we have 57.

And that has an impact. We don't regularly attend council meetings at some cities. We don't cover as many court cases. We don't send as many people on reporting trips. We still do some very good journalism – but we don't do as much.

And it's happening all over the country. News organizations everywhere are cutting back.

Are bloggers picking up the slack? I don't think so. They're certainly contributing to a more robust discussion of issues. But I don't see a big surge in great watchdog reporting.

That sort of reporting is an expensive proposition – and I'm not confident that bloggers are investing the time and energy to go to meetings, sit through trials, fly off to Haiti as a hurricane approaches. That work requires real money, and the money presently being earned on the Internet won't pay for it.

So it's the best of times in many regards, but it's also a frightening time. Increasingly, it's a good time to be a crooked politician or a rogue cop or an unethical business person – because there are fewer people watching out for them.

What's the answer? I don't know and I'm worried that there isn't one.