

Meeting the Public's Information Needs in Silicon Valley

Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy

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It's either wonderfully appropriate or a cruel joke that this community forum is being held in the heart of Silicon Valley, because the seeds of the "creative destruction" that has so disrupted the news media were sown here. Many of my journalism brothers and sisters would say that participating in an event at Google is sleeping with the enemy. They wouldn't feel any different if it were down the road at Yahoo.

There is a paradox at work here: The explosion of information has made it possible to be better informed than ever before in history. At the same time, it has made it harder than ever for established news institutions to thrive, both financially and in their reach and impact. Nowhere has this been demonstrated more dramatically than in this valley, with Exhibit A being the San Jose Mercury News, for which I used to work and for which I have great affection. I believe that no newspaper in the United States has been affected by these changes more than the Mercury News — at first to its advantage, but more recently to its detriment as an essential element of community news and information.

During the last half of the 1990s, during the dot-com boom, no newspaper benefited more than the Mercury News. It was a dominant force in journalistic coverage of the boom itself, and advertising revenues fueled an expansion of the paper that defied credulity. By early 2001, it was perched in the upper branches of the world of U.S. journalism. It had bureaus throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, and had even started a San Francisco edition. It covered major national and international stories as well as local ones. It had an excellent Sunday magazine, an outstanding Sunday opinion and commentary section, and topical sections reaching a variety of specialized audiences. There were more than 400 men and women working in the newsroom.

In 2008, less than eight years later, that newsroom staff is down to about 150 people. The Sunday magazine and opinion sections are gone, and so are most of the bureaus. The newspaper's ambitions are smaller as well. It doesn't have the same reach in local news coverage as it did — how could it, with such a reduced staff? Many outstanding journalists continue to work at the Mercury News, but the limitations cannot be completely overcome, good intentions and determination to the contrary.

The result has been a diminution in the scope and quality of news and opinion the newspaper is able to provide. I cite opinion because it can be just as important as news in helping a community understand what is happening, so that it can make intelligent decisions. Let me

offer one small example: California being California, each election brings not only a few high-profile races like president, governor and senator, but myriad ground-level positions as well — school boards, city councils, water boards — not to mention judicial races. The Mercury News editorial board used to be a valuable resource in deciding how to vote in many of these elections — who has time to research four candidates for a Superior Court judgeship to assess their intelligence and temperament, and yet what could be more important in deciding who should hold a position with such power over people's lives? A reduced editorial page staff means that kind of independent evaluation is rarely available.

One of the great opportunities of the online world is the possibility of sources of information that are alternatives to the mainstream news media. My sense is that in terms of information that the public needs to make informed decisions, these alternative sources have not reached critical mass. Let me offer one example from my own neighborhood in Palo Alto, which one would expect to be one of the most linked-in communities imaginable. There is a considerable controversy over a proposal to smooth the traffic flow on two major thoroughfares, the Oregon Expressway and Middlefield Road, in part by widening the roadway. Among the most bitterly disputed issues is the potential loss of trees and landscaping buffers in a residential neighborhood. I would have expected that opponents of the project would have created a website, organized online petitions, blogs and other techniques of democratized information.

Instead, if you Google “Oregon Expressway Project,” the first 40 or so hits are definitely old school, mostly newspaper stories (albeit with comments at the end) and the official project website of the road department. The opposition, again in high-tech Palo Alto, is relying on such advanced techniques as paper flyers and hand-carried petitions. Yes, the new information tools permit me to gather information about this dispute from a variety of sources— but they don't do much to help me understand it.

The information revolution has drastically altered how journalists see their work and even the role of journalism. This, too, has implications for the quality of information that reaches the public. As recently as a few years ago, most journalism came in an assembled package, delimited by space and time, driven by journalists' judgment of what was important and interesting, designed to be read, watched or heard at a particular time, by readers, viewers or listeners in a specific geographical area: it was “appointment journalism.” In the case of print journalism, it was a manufactured product as well, with raw materials transformed via sometimes messy production processes — ever spent much time around a pressroom? — into a finished product. That product, in turn, was sold to advertisers, who had no choice but to pay for the entire audience. Advertising revenue was aggregated to subsidize everything from national investigative stories and high-profile columnists to high-school football scores, movie listings and the horoscope.

The web destroys the dominance of that model, because it makes it possible for each person to assemble the news and information that she or he wants, when she or he wants it, no matter where in the world she or he is. Fewer and fewer people want the full package, especially since it costs something and the online version doesn't. But it's more than that. It's a change in the way people look at news and its role. News is no longer the *culmination* of the process of informing oneself; it's the *beginning* of that process. Journalists must adapt to this new role, and for many, it is challenging. Simultaneously, serious journalists are striving to preserve the most important values of the craft, at a time when there exists little agreement on what the most important values are in the context of the media landscape. Some elements that we once thought were sacrosanct now seem antique and quaint.

New forms are emerging, including a number incubated by the Knight Foundation's News Challenge and its specific emphasis on geographical communities. Adam Holovaty's EveryBlock model is one example. Various citizen journalism initiatives are another. Others, including those at this table, are much more knowledgeable than I about them, but my sense is that although they are serving the public interest in many ways, they have not reached their full potential.

I am cautiously optimistic about what lies ahead. Journalists should take heart from one thing we have learned the last few years: There is a tremendous thirst for information out there. The challenge is to create the new forms and models that will slake that thirst. For better or for worse, we have to do this in the midst of chaos. Howard Weaver, vice president news for McClatchy Company, put it this way recently, first in an email to a young McClatchy editor and then on his blog, Etaoin Shrdlu (<http://editor.blogspot.com>): "My current metaphor for the business is this: we have to move, and we can see a secure spot for ourselves right across the river. The good news is, there's a bridge; the bad news is, it's on fire. There's time to get across, but not to [screw] around. I intend to get to the other side before the bridge burns up. Who's coming with me?"

Let me close with something Stewart Brand wrote more than 20 years ago, which was prescient at the time and ever more relevant today: "Information wants to be free. Information also wants to be expensive. Information wants to be free because it has become so cheap to distribute, copy, and recombine — too cheap to meter. It wants to be expensive because it can be immeasurably valuable to the recipient. That tension will not go away. It leads to endless wrenching debate about price, copyright, 'intellectual property,' the moral rightness of casual distribution, because each round of new devices makes the tension worse, not better." The challenge of informing communities is gathering, synthesizing, evaluating and distributing information in a way that is free enough to be accessible to all while being expensive enough to support the very real costs of this process.