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Re-Imagining Education Journalism

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Education journalism is going through a gut-wrenching transformation of its business model and its organizational structure, even as the ways in which news is delivered are changing rapidly. Old business models have collapsed, and new ones are struggling to find their footing. Digital technologies have fundamentally altered the way news is delivered. People are accessing information through Kindles, iPads, mobile devices, laptops, RSS feeds, Twitter, Facebook, and desktop computers. Much of the content consumers once paid for when it was delivered on paper is available for little or nothing in digital form. The result is a media ecosystem that is dramatically different from earlier eras.

In trying to imagine ways of improving and expanding the coverage of education, we have canvassed the views of leaders in the field and conducted case studies of specific ventures. This paper summarizes new trends in education coverage and how major news organizations are re-imagining their futures. It outlines the development of niche publications, news aggregators, social media, and new content providers. We also look at alternative business models, including subsidized content, for-profit models, and indirect public subsidies.

We conclude that while education journalism faces great challenges, it is transforming into a new digital form that looks and behaves differently than the models to which we're accustomed. It has clear strengths, including immediacy, interactivity, and diversity. But these virtues must be linked more effectively to the delivery of an old-fashioned product, namely in-depth substantive reporting. We also note the enduring importance of what remains the most important source of education news for millions of our citizens, the "old" media. The key challenge for national leaders is to build on strengths of new media platforms, while finding ways to develop high-quality coverage that is crucial for democratic governance.

Education Journalism During a Time of Fiscal Stress

There is no doubt that the last few years have been a bleak period for education journalism and the news industry as a whole. Virtually every trend in traditional print readership, viewership and ad revenues is down. Daily print circulation of newspapers has declined from 62 million to less than 49 million nationwide over the past 20 years. Subscriptions to leading newspapers are down from 10 to 20 percent in just the past two years (see West, 2009 for a more extended review).

It is not just readers who have fled print publications. With a weak economy, advertising revenues for many traditional print outlets have dropped by 41 percent since 2006 (Pew Research Center, 2010). A wide range of employers, publishers, and makers of educational goods and services have

reduced their advertisements or switched promotional dollars to online outlets, often at a fraction of the previous cost. "We got hit by a perfect storm," Phil Semas, president and editor-in-chief of the Chronicle of Higher Education, said in an interview. The resulting financial pressures on various print outlets have led to downsizing, restructuring, layoffs, early retirement buyout packages, and in some places outright bankruptcy.

Speaking at a December 2009 Brookings Institution Forum, Teacher College Hechinger Institute Director Richard Colvin commented on the decreasing number of education reporters at major newspapers and magazines. "I counted," he said. "If you think of the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today, AP and Time and Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report, there are 10.8 reporters who are full-time on education among those publications, and the Wall Street Journal just closed its Boston bureau at the end of this month, and there will be less. There will be fewer positions entirely."

The explosion of online information and media platforms gives consumers much greater choice and makes it difficult for news organizations to charge for online content.

Columbia, he said, once offered a seminar for editors, but their positions have been cut along with reportorial jobs. "We used to do a seminar every year and have 30 or 40 education editors come. We abandoned that two years ago because there aren't enough people whose job is education editor anymore," he said. This has had a negative impact on education writing because "they can't assign more sophisticated stories because they themselves don't understand" what is happening in education.

At a time that news organizations face extreme fiscal stress, new technologies have altered consumer behavior as well as news-gathering and delivery. Many people no longer rely on subscriptions to a handful of news outlets, but instead use a larger number of mostly free publications or Internet sites. They also employ a wide variety of platforms, from mobile devices and smart phones to Kindles, iPads, or other electronic readers. The explosion of online information and media platforms gives consumers much greater choice and makes it difficult for news organizations to charge for online content.

Problematic Features of the Current Media Era

For those who believe that media organizations have a responsibility to inform public discourse, recent economic woes clearly have made it harder to fulfill that mission. "News is a business of substance and providing information for the sake of democracy," Bill Buzenberg, the executive director of the Center for Public Integrity, told us in an interview. Every theory of democracy requires news organizations that inform people about current events and help citizens hold leaders accountable for their actions.

In the past, subscriptions and advertising provided sufficient revenues to cover both basic news – weather, sports, business, and obituaries – as well as public policy and political events, including investigative journalism. This

"general purpose" role of news outlets allowed them to cover a variety of topics without having to get consumers to pay for every specific item in the paper.

That business model has collapsed. News organizations have lost subscribers and advertisers, and are facing nimble new web-based competitors. These web outlets typically are small, specialized, and have far lower personnel costs than mainstream print publishers. In a fragmented news environment that includes a wide variety of platforms and delivery systems, it is harder to finance high-quality education coverage. Thus, our earlier report (West, Whitehurst, and Dionne, 2009) found that education stories in national outlets constituted only 1.4 percent of the total front page and prime news hour coverage during the first nine months of 2009.

But it is not just the quantity of news coverage of education that is problematic. We also documented that a disproportionate amount of the local and national coverage focused on the politics of education, as against coverage of the actual work of schools and school reform. Local news outlets did a better job in these matters, but they too face economic difficulties.

In interviews, some education leaders suggested that too much of education reporting focused on school activities that are unrelated to education. Susan King, the vice president for external affairs and director of the journalism initiative for the Carnegie Corporation, noted that some organizations count as news coverage, any story that had the word "education" in the title. But she says, "Stories of high-school gang warfare do not advance education."

The most basic problem is a broad decline in the number of education beat reporters. As news organizations have cut budgets, news rooms have seen their beat reporters' responsibilities stretched to general assignment reporting, and their general assignment reporters covering stories that once constituted a beat. This is worrisome, as explained by Peggy Girshman, the executive editor for online of the Kaiser Health News, because beat reporters and editors who are knowledgeable in their issue field are able to take questions that are "very complicated to understand" and explain them in a "compelling and interesting way." Colvin used almost the exact same words: "How many people can then take that very technical knowledge, and make it into compelling stories?"

While there are many gifted general assignment reporters, they are simply not as prepared as beat specialists in areas such as health or education policy. Education, Colvin pronounced, "is really hard stuff to cover." There is, he says, a "huge hurdle both in terms of knowledge, and then technical and professional skill in being able to make those into stories."

With declining time, money, and expertise, there are fewer incentives and outlets for longer analytical pieces. Dale Mezzacappa, president of the Education Writers Association, notes that "you can get reporters who have

developed a pretty good expertise of how to observe a classroom and know good research from bad research and everything, but they don't have the time the way newspapers are structured today to actually spend what's really needed to do in-depth stories to advance the issues and inform the public, and enlighten the public. They always get pulled off on the daily stories, which are not unimportant, but which prevent the longer-term projects."

The number of Washington-based newsletters rose more than 50 percent during the past two decades, from 140 to 225.

Emerging Trends

Increasingly, news consumers rely on digital niche publications, news aggregators, social media, and new content providers such as universities, think tanks, foundations, and non-profit organizations (see West, 2009 for a discussion of these trends). This section examines how these new approaches have affected education coverage. The rise of the Internet and other digital platforms is central to many of these developments. New delivery systems pose risks for the media ecosystem, but as Semas noted, they also offer the virtue of "multiple ways to reach people."

Niche Publications

There has been a demonstrable shift from general purpose to specialized news outlets. The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism released two "State of the News Media" reports (2010 and 2009) that documented how general-purpose news outlets are in serious and probably irreversible decline. For example, most print and broadcast outlets have laid off reporters, editors, and producers, and eliminated their Washington D.C. bureaus. Some newspapers have closed or restructured under bankruptcy proceedings. Local television ad revenue dropped by 24 percent in 2009, while it fell 26 percent for newspapers.

What received less attention, though, was the flourishing of niche and specialty publications (Pew Research Center, 2010 and 2009). The number of Washington-based newsletters rose more than 50 percent during the past two decades, from 140 to 225. According to www.NewsletterAccess.com (2010), there are 272 newsletters devoted specifically to education. This includes outlets such as Campus Crime, The Learning Edge, Academic Leader, Education Daily, and Department of Education Reports.

In addition, there are a variety of new online publications such as InsideHigherEd.com, GothamSchools.org, and EduWonk.com, among others. These focus on particular topics (higher education), geographic areas (New York City), or type of coverage (commentary), respectively. There also specialty web sites such as ASCD Smart Briefs that give people access to many different topics and viewpoints. For people who avail themselves of these information sources, the explosion of information outlets has diversified their

consumption of the news. As Phil Semas of the Chronicle of Higher Education noted, "the largest part of growth is taking place online. Advertisers are more interested in the web than print."

Niche outlets clearly do not serve the same function as general-purpose newspapers, which allowed readers to receive information about a wide variety of different topics in one place. Readers who came for general news or sports still had some exposure to education coverage. In a world of specialty outlets and niche publications, it is harder to reach the "inadvertent" audience of those not particularly interested in education.

News Aggregators and Web Portals

Some media outlets serve primarily as news aggregators. They synthesize existing education coverage from a variety of sources and serve as a clearinghouse for news information. This includes portals such as Yahoo!, Google News, AOL, and MSN, each of which attracts a large number of visitors each day. Some aggregators such as Yahoo! and AOL now provide some original content in addition to their republished material.

These mass and specialty aggregators offer helpful information because they draw from a range of different content providers and gather what they deem to be the best material in one place. They serve a valuable function as "go-to" portals for news about particular topics. But they face legitimate criticism for a lack of originality and for drawing on the work of others without any compensation for the creators.

Media sources that provide original content that is aggregated by others generally welcome aggregators that provide links to the original sites when they republish material. This practice allows those sites to generate traffic, monetize their content, and charge advertisers higher rates based on increased traffic. But this cycle is blocked when aggregators republish without providing a clear link to the original site. For example, columnist Sharon Waxman (2010) complained that Newser.com republished material with obscure or nonexistent link placements to the original source. This meant that her primary organization, TheWrap.com, received few "click-throughs" and therefore could not generate traffic or ad revenues off the republication. Failing to link to the original story means the primary content provider gets no referrals and cannot benefit monetarily from either enhanced site traffic or advertising.

Social Media and Blogs

One of the most noteworthy features of the new media system is the democratization of news-gathering. In the old regime, professional journalists served as gate-keepers. They gathered the news, placed information in

context and decided what was important. Now, news-gathering for public consumption is carried out by those far outside the world of professional journalism. As Education Week president and editor Virginia Edwards noted in an interview, "journalists don't have to have a monopoly on information" and there can be wisdom to the crowd.

Blogs, Facebook, and Twitter have become popular social media outlets for young people and in some school systems. In the Portland, Oregon area, for example, eight schools regularly use social media to communicate with students, parents, teachers, and community members (Melton, 2009). They do this on a voluntary, "sign-in" basis, meaning recipients have to request communications through these vehicles. Administrators use social media to promote school events, explain budget decisions, or describe new procedures.

It is estimated there are more than 5,000 blogs in the United States devoted to education.

High school students in California, meanwhile, gained attention for using Facebook to protect their school librarian from a scheduled budget cutback. When the Tracy Unified School District announced cuts of $13.9 million, concerned pupils launched a Facebook site with names and e-mail addresses of board of education members and the school superintendent. The students asked visitors to their site to contact these school officials to stop the librarian layoff – while also advising writers to refrain from "cursing at, threatening, or doing any other inappropriate thing [that] will not make them change their minds" (Barack, 2010).

Education blogs have also proliferated. It is estimated there are more than 5,000 blogs in the United States devoted to education. There are blogs for current college students such as College v2 and Year One. Blogs advertising the "latest news in the world of education" include Eduwonk, The Answer Sheet, This Week in Education, Assorted Stuff, and Guy Brandenburg. Activists seeking to reform schools have blogs called Change Agency, D-Ed Reckoning, Education Intelligence Agency, Practical Theory and Schools Matter. There are blogs that focus on learning, such as 2 Cents Worth, Informal Learning Blog and a Random Walk in Learning. Research-based blogs include Free Range Librarian, Research Buzz, Deep Thinking, and Dissertation Research. Teaching is the focus of Are We Doing Anything Today?, NYC Educator, and Teachers Teaching Teachers. And instructional technology represents the focus of Bionic Teaching and Ed-Tech Avenue.

Finally, there is citizen journalism that takes a variety of different forms: instant news reporting from ordinary citizens, crisis coverage from eyewitnesses on the scene, and blogging and commentary. CNN has "iReporters" who upload video reporting, commentary, or analysis to the cable news network. Meanwhile, Current TV specializes in "viewer-provided-content," which is news or entertainment features from viewers around the world.

Whether blogs, social media, and citizen journalism offer value to the news ecosystem depends largely on the substantive contributions of the

content provider. These new forms are capable of finding and reporting news, analyzing developments, providing substantive critiques, and even of undertaking investigations. They can also trivialize, sensationalize, and distort.

New Content Providers

As traditional news organizations have cut budgets and laid off employees, education news content increasingly is being provided by universities, think tanks, non-profits, and foundations. Geneva Olverholser (2005), director of the School of Journalism at the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication, has called for a new business model based on non-profit news. The idea is that non-profits and other organizations can step in and substitute where coverage begins to disappear in important areas. The Pew Research Center (2010) estimates that in the last four years, $141 million of non-profit funding has gone into new media outlets, including public broadcasting. However, this represents less than one-tenth of the $1.6 billion in newspaper resources lost during this time period.

Researchers from a variety of "knowledge" industries disseminate findings to maximize impact and influence the public debate. Think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, Cato, Hoover, Heritage, Center for American Progress and the American Enterprise Institute release policy reports, analysis, commentary, and video questions and answers. As an example, the Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings alone generated over 175,000 page views over the last year and a half. This education content is available and accessible to the general public – but the public needs to know it is there and have an interest in finding it. Universities offer a rich supply of information on education in terms of books, articles, reports, and events. Many schools have expanded their public outreach activities, constructed television studios, and encouraged faculty members to explain their research to external audiences beyond academia.

There also are new, community-based non-profit newspapers supported by local foundations and individual donors. Chicago, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Seattle, and San Diego have witnessed the emergence of non-profit papers seeking to fill the local news void created by the collapse of major metropolitan newspapers. San Francisco's Bay Area News Project (now renamed The Bay Citizen) was given $5 million by philanthropist Warren Hellman. It features collaboration between the project, KQED-FM, and the University of California at Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. Students at the school and staff at the radio station combine to report on news of interest to the Bay area (Perez-Pena, 2009).

In the education area, there are non-profit portals that provide substantive content. For example, EdNews.org represents a leading source of online news

about elementary, secondary and post-secondary issues, and claims to reach 1.3 million unique monthly readers. Other outlets, such as EdWeek.org, evolved out of a print publication, Education Week. It features a mix of sources, and attracts 400,000 unique monthly visitors.

Alternative Business Models

The Center for Public Integrity's Buzenberg thinks that non-profit news is adapting better to the changing landscape of the industry than commercial news.

In today's environment, there are several emerging business models that offer hope for the future of education journalism. In this section, we look at three variants based on subsidized content, for-profit models, and indirect public subsidies. Each of them has a mix of features that need to be assessed, from revenue streams and new initiatives to ways in which they are transforming their overall approach. The challenge in each model is generating sufficient funds to cover personnel, infrastructure, distribution, and marketing. As Education Week president and editor Virginia Edwards noted, "We are racing to come up with new ways to sustain ourselves. It takes a lot of electronic products to make up for a page of print ads."

Subsidized Content

Concerned about the declining amount of education coverage, a number of foundations provide grants to support education reporting. As budget cutbacks have slammed newsrooms and revenue drops have led to staff reductions, this option has helped some outlets provide high-quality content.

This approach has been tried in other policy areas. For example, the Kaiser Family Foundation specializes in health care, and it has created a web site that undertakes original reporting on health care and makes that information available to news organizations free of charge. In the area of investigative journalism, the Center for Public Integrity and ProPublica (the recent winner of a Pulitzer Prize) undertake investigative reporting in a variety of areas, and make that information available to news organizations (Kurtz, 2010).

The Center for Public Integrity's Buzenberg thinks that non-profit news is adapting better to the changing landscape of the industry than commercial news. At the many conferences he has attended on the future of news, he says it has been the non-profit sector that is "talking about technology and moving forward," in contrast with the old private-sector models caught in the financial crisis.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Carnegie Corporation provide expertise and financial support for National Public Radio (NPR) to boost education-related reporting. The Gates Foundation has specifically funded education coverage on public radio, says senior program officer Marie Groark, because it believes radio has an audience that "is stable, perhaps even

growing," compared to other media outlets. They also see the public radio audience as including opinion leaders whom foundation officials want to reach. Chris Williams says that the Gates Foundation wants to "increase the bandwidth, quality and depth" of reporting and that foundations have a "critical role" to play as a supporter of education coverage.

Foundations such as Spencer, Gates, Carnegie, Hewlett, Joyce, Pew, Mott, Metlife, and Wallace support reporting at Education Week. That publication started as non-profit print outlet and its first issue appeared on September 7, 1981. Part of Editorial Projects in Education, it features a number of different components such as TeacherMagazine.org, TopSchoolJobs.org, and Digital Directions. Education Week was one of the first education publications to go online in 1995 and it has invested heavily since in its www.EdWeek.org website. It has about 50,000 paying subscribers and an estimated 260,000 who see each issue since there are multiple readers for many subscriptions. Currently, 40 percent of its revenue comes from non-print sources, according to president and editor Virginia Edwards.

Such support is helpful, Edwards says, when it covers "big, broad swaths" of the field, ranging from teaching and district-based reform to the impact of the economic stimulus package. Funding for broad topics preserves editorial independence and allows writers and editors to decide which specific topics get covered. Many foundations don't underwrite general operating expenses, but rather topics linked to areas of coverage.

But foundation money does not fill all of the gap between revenue and expenses. Non-profits, no less than for-profit news outlets, have had to be entrepreneurial in seeking alternative income sources. Education Week's webinars (online seminars) have proven popular, and the publication undertakes three of these each month -- triple last year's rate. They are able to draw 2,000 to 5,000 paying live watchers, plus another 2,000 to 5,000 people who view it later. The organization has sponsors for its webinars and attracts attendees from schools, government, and business.

Education Week's daily "e-newsletter" has 240,000 followers and regularly sells out its ad space. It offers RSS e-mail feeds (Really Simple Syndication) on 75 different topics, allowing recipients to personalize their news delivery. From time to time, it sponsors live forums in cities around the country to extend its brand and generate revenue and sponsorships. It is developing a book club for teachers and has content accessible through mobile devices.

There are partnerships that further spread the publication's content out to other people while also gaining it access to new content. Soon, Education Week stories will appear on the Associated Press newswire. It also has partnerships with the McClatchey Wire and with education aggregators such as ASCD Smart Brief that bundles K-12 content from hundreds of sources. This allows writers to reach new audiences and develop alternative

distribution systems.

Of course, all of these products complicate the lives of sales departments. Edwards noted that "sales used to sell one thing, print advertising. Now, it is like the guy with a bunch of watches and a rain coat. We have distinct products that we are selling that come in different flavors, such as live events, e-newsletters, webinars, and chats. Sales people have to be agile."

In making the transition from print to digital publication, education outlets have to navigate a delicate balance: between offering free online content to boost traffic and attract advertisers on the one hand and continuing to attract paid subscribers to its print products and subscription parts of their web sites on the other. Education Week monitors this balance very carefully. So far, it has found that only half of its print subscribers have registered to receive free access to that part of the web site requiring payment. Getting users to access online material for which they already have paid through print subscriptions represents a key goal of the new digital world. If people don't register, it becomes harder to move towards online payment systems for premium content.

Some worry about the long-term sustainability of a non-profit approach since it is at least partly dependent on foundations or individual donors supporting education journalism. Funding priorities may change or funders and grantees may come to disagree on on important issues. According to Doug Lederman, an editor at the for-profit InsideHigherEd.com, "the foundation model is designed to invest, build, and get out". It is a "temporary" answer, but not sustainable in the long-run.

Foundations do not have unlimited resources for program support. Chris Williams of the Gates Foundation cautioned against thinking that foundation and non-profits could "offset costs and take over issues" from news organizations, because of the uncertainty of future budgets. In fact, he described such a scenario as "the worst thing" that could happen, because "who knows where foundation and non-profit news funding will be in the future?" (also see King, 2009).

The Carnegie Corporation does not have a large journalism program to support funding, so it focuses its resources on university journalism programs, Education Week, and National Public Radio, among other areas. A few years ago, Carnegie provided NPR with funding for the express purpose of strengthening its local coverage and conducting local training. In that grant, NPR specifically stated that it wanted to develop better rapport with individual school systems. Carnegie's vice president Susan King thinks that her foundation has a role in supporting NPR because it covers K-12 education (which is a Carnegie focus area) and reaches Carnegie's target audience of practitioners and policymakers.

Though the number of groups pursuing non-profit journalism has increased, King says that the available funding has actually decreased. "Every

time I turn around, there are a few more news organizations," she says, "but we don't have more money. We have less money." This is especially the case when all the groups are "competing for the same dollars." She said that some have suggested that foundations set up a consortium of sorts, whereby everyone would contribute to a common pool of funding to support journalism.

This idea has not yet found wide support, but Buzenberg sees pooling resources as the key to sustaining non-profit news over the long run. "Economies of scale and linking and interconnecting are important," he says. He believes that because non-profit news is not about one company's ego and brand, the non-profit news industry is better placed to use its collective resources efficiently and effectively. The possibilities of such partnerships include providing back offices for smaller investigative groups, collaborating on projects, or even doing joint fundraising. Building on that idea, the Center for Public Integrity partnered with two dozen news organizations to create a new "Investigative News Network" for watchdog journalism. Buzenberg notes that the Associated Press and National Public Radio both began as groups of newspaper or news stations that created an alliance. "It's the linking world we're in," he says, "and non-profits can be more successful in adapting to that."

Of all those interviewed, Buzenberg was the most optimistic about the future of non-profits news. He believed that the non-profit sector was creating "a new eco-system for information." It would be built on enthusiasm for the work, bolstered by the large stream of talent flowing from commercial news into the non-profit world. He was cautiously optimistic about whether non-profits have the necessary resources to compete in the news business. While acknowledging that the financial challenges are substantial, he notes that more and more models have been created that allow for individual support. "While only 16 percent of any audience will ever give money," he says, "that 16 percent plus institutional support can sustain a non-profit news organization." NPR, he notes, has four times as many bureaus worldwide as any corporate network.

Buzenberg thinks that if a foundation were willing to invest the resources, the Kaiser Health News model could work for education, though he does not think that there will be a one-size-fits-all news model. "Eventually, the best Internet models will likely be adopted and spread, but we're just not there yet," he says. "We're in a period of massive experimentation on many, many levels…But there's a lot of hopefulness."

For-Profit Models

A number of for-profit print outlets have migrated to the web and use paid subscriptions in conjunction with advertisements to support their coverage.

The Chronicle of Higher Education is one such entity. Originally a print outlet, it now has a website www.Chronicle.com that reaches more than one million unique visitors each month. The Chronicle has 70 full-time editors and writers and 17 foreign correspondents around the globe.

As the first newspaper on the Internet in 1993 through a Gopher service, the Chronicle has a robust web site. It is updated every day and sometimes on an hourly basis, depending on news flow. It has two e-mail news alerts a day that are very popular. The morning e-mail goes to 100,000 followers and there is another one each evening summarizing the day's events. The print edition has 70,000 subscribers and there are versions of the web that are customized for mobile devices and smart phones.

While growth clearly is moving to the Internet, Semas believes "print still has a big role to play and that the print product is very robust. It will be around for some time."

Similar to Education Week, the Chronicle does not post all its content online free of charge. A subscription is required for what Semas describes as their "best stuff", i.e., material that is not easily accessed elsewhere. Since publication involves not just content, but creating a community and a conversation, Chronicle.com has blogs, and also allows readers to comment on articles, and on forums about jobs. Sometimes, online conversations develop spontaneously without being led by the staff. This occurred, for example, after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. While some blogs are written by outsiders, several staff reporters write blogs on hot topics such as athletics and admissions.

The Chronicle plans to expand globally, and will soon launch an edition of its web site aimed at overseas audiences. According to Semas, "we need to become a global enterprise and cover more international issues." International companies have a need to recruit Americans for jobs and there is extensive interest outside the United States in what is happening in American higher education.

While growth clearly is moving to the Internet, Semas believes "print still has a big role to play and that the print product is very robust. It will be around for some time." However, advertisers are more interested in the web than print, and job services are moving toward the web.

Other outlets have been started with venture capital, and they rely mostly on advertising. The online www.InsideHigherEd.com was founded in 2004 by three people (Kathleen Collins, Scott Jaschik, and Doug Lederman) who previously worked for the Chronicle of Higher Education. Jaschik and Lederman both quit The Chronicle on the same day in 2003. According to the New York Times, "there was speculation among the remaining staff that they had been forced out over differences with Mr. [Corbin] Gwaltney [the owner.]" Lederman remarked, "We had come to the conclusion that we and The Chronicle's owner had different visions about what the publication and company should be." Scott McLemee, who currently works at Inside Higher Ed as an "Essayist at Large," said: "The Chronicle was traditionally oriented towards the administration - there was a brief period where it tried to reach a

larger constituency, and then it retrenched…They have no particular interest in reaching anyone else" (Miller, 2005).

Inside Higher Ed sought to distinguish itself from others by being online-only and making all of its content free. The founders told the Washington Post that "The Chronicle's $82.50-a-year subscription price was out of reach for many in higher education, especially graduate students" (Shin, 2005). Including the three founders, Inside Higher Ed has a staff of 19 writers. The site includes listings of available jobs, recent job change notices, and scheduled events and conferences. There are also news stories, regular opinion columns, blogs, and recordings of conferences on higher education topics.

In a recent interview, Editor Scott Jaschik said the goal of Inside Higher Ed's web site was to "build a bigger audience" and "monetize it." He said "colleges want to recruit and companies want to reach a college audience." Since its content is entirely free and online, its business model centers on advertising and job searches. Traditionally, colleges and universities advertised only a small percentage of their overall jobs because of the cost of an ad. They tended to advertise dean's positions, but not junior admissions officers.

InsideHigherEd.com aims to expand the number of college jobs that are advertised nationally. It sets its job posting price based on school enrollment and there is no word or space limitation. Job applicants can link to in-depth information about the school and some of its news articles post links to relevant positions. One of its unique features of contemporary higher education, according to Jaschik and fellow editor Doug Lederman, is spousal hires. Academic searches increasingly involve dual-career families. Their site has an ability to search for job titles in different subjects and focus on a particular area, such as greater Philadelphia or Boston. This allows applicants to look for joint positions in specific metropolitan areas across specific schools and particular disciplines. That has proven very popular in faculty and administrative searches.

Their site also focuses on corporate advertisers interested in academic audiences. This could be technology companies such as Google, financial services firms such as TIAA or Fidelity, or college publishers. Book publishers, for example, can place the first chapter online and provide a link to interested readers. A web publication, Jaschik explained, is "not just a print version", but needs to be used more creatively to link to relevant information and be searchable with a high degree of precision.

On the day we talked with its editors, Inside Higher Ed had 4,900 ads online. The site attracts 600,000 unique monthly visitors, and 10 percent come from abroad. Its daily e-mail news alert goes to 80,000 people. The site has found that e-mail alerts drive traffic each day and encourage people to look at stories of greatest interest to them. It also uses RSS feeds to customize content

of interest to particular readers.

Similar to the Chronicle, Inside Higher Ed views blogs as a way to build community and create connections with readers. Unlike the Chronicle, it relies on outside writers mostly in academia for its blogs, not its own staff. And just as Education Week is building a partnership with Associated Press, Inside Higher Ed has a relationship with USA Today for the latter to publish one of its stories each day.

Most of the successful online publications have a clear niche and well-defined audience.

Jaschik sees the for-profit model as more sustainable over the long run than a foundation or non-profit approach. "We have hundreds of advertisers, not one, and no one departure would harm us." In contrast, he pointed out, a foundation model "is supported by a small number of donors and this makes them vulnerable to their supporters."

Even in the case of investigative journalism, which is one area where non-profits and foundations have been quite active, Jaschik is skeptical. He says funders employ the "parachute approach" and want a big splash. The problem, he notes, is that "the best big project is born out of beat reporting." It takes good contacts and top sources to break open scandals and exposes.

"The long-term solution," Jaschik says, "is the evolution of a bunch of business models. Our business model works because of our audience." The fact that InsideHigherEd.com has a defined niche (colleges and universities) and a national scope allows them to be effective. Most of the successful online publications have a clear niche and well-defined audience. He predicts that successful news outlets will be online, have subject areas that are national in scope, be part of a community, and avoid talking down to readers. The niche has to be specific enough that people will pay for content.

Indirect Public Support

It is a myth that there is no government support for the American media. The United States has a long history of direct or indirect public support for various publications. In the days before mail delivery, the post office would place "to be picked up" notices in newspapers informing people they had mail at the local post office (West, 2001). Today, we have the equivalent in terms of legal notices and foreclosure notes in contemporary newspapers. These are mandatory notices paid for by government agencies or private companies to inform the general public, and represent a valuable source of paid advertisements.

The national government provides indirect tax subsidies through low-rate mailing fees. Newspapers and magazines long have benefitted from subsidized postage rates. Television stations get broadcast licenses from the federal government, and are subject to regulation by the Federal Communications Commission. Dating back to the depression, the government supports a Universal Service Fund and now the Federal

Communications Commission has proposed to transfer some of that money from telephones to broadband for under-served communities.

From time to time, the government aids the news industry through legal rules on competition, mergers, and acquisitions. In the 1890s, for example, cut-throat competition and a large number of newspapers in each community made it difficult to make money. Over the following decades, the government allowed a series of mergers and acquisitions to form national newspaper chains. This reduced competition and ushered in a more stable business model for the industry.

Despite this history of indirect support and favorable legal rulings, many Americans object to a role for government in the current period. Jaschik describes government support of journalism as a "colossal waste of time. It isn't going to happen and I wouldn't want government handouts for journalism."

Others want to help an industry seen as crucial to the functioning of American democracy. Senator Benjamin L. Cardin of Maryland has introduced the Newspaper Revitalization Act that would allow newspapers to become tax-exempt, nonprofit organizations under the U.S. tax code. This would allow donors to deduct charitable contributions in support of "coverage or operations" and enable companies and advertisers to write off advertising and subscription expenses from their taxes.

Of course, many people don't itemize so they are not able to take advantage of these tax incentives. According to the Internal Revenue Service, about 35 percent of individual filers itemize their deductions and therefore are able to write off subsidized information.

Some media scholars have proposed that tax laws be changed to provide a credit for news subscriptions for any filer, including those who do not itemize their deductions and do not claim that the news product is related to their work. Robert McChesney and John Nichols (2010) suggest a tax credit for the "first $200" spent on daily newspapers. To qualify for this credit, the paper would have to publish at least five times a week, be a minimum of 24 pages each day, and have less than 50 percent of its space devoted to advertising. The virtue of this approach is that assistance is focused on consumers, not individual news outlets. It provides indirect support for the industry without picking specific news organizations to aid. Critics would argue that use of the tax code to incentivize particular forms of media consumption could interfere with market efficiencies, retard innovation, and lead eventually to unwanted political control. But the virtue of the McChesney-Nichols proposal is that it would allow subscribers, not the government, to direct the flow of the indirect subsidies.

On Not Forgetting the "Old" Media

New technologies can enable education reporters across the country to share their experiences and pool their reporting.

We have focused in this report on how new technologies have created opportunities for new approaches to education coverage. But millions of citizens, notably including parents, still rely on older media forms for most of their information on education. And for all the cutbacks in newsrooms, the older media still provide the vast majority of day-to-day coverage of school systems across the country. There can be no enduring improvement in education coverage absent support for the reporters and editors at newspapers around the country who continue to make coverage of our schools and universities their vocation and, so often, their passion. And a few of the very technological changes we have already described have already begun to improve education coverage around the country.

Some of the findings of the earlier study bear repeating here. We concluded, for example, that local education reporting continued to be one of the country's most important sources of substantive news about education. As we wrote then: "In general, local papers appear to be more substantive and to devote greater attention to education policy and school reform than do national news organizations. Local education writers tend to focus less on crime stories or episodic coverage."

We also noted the spread of education blogs and of the opportunity created by online editions of newspapers to vastly expand the space devoted to education issues – since "space" is not a constraint online. Again from the earlier report:

> Local readers count on their newspapers to keep them informed about institutions that have a great impact on their own lives and their region's prosperity. They also count on the media to hold such institutions accountable – or, at least, harbor the hope that they will. And parents are not content with coverage focused only on hot button questions or episodes. They are vitally concerned with what their children are learning and how they are advancing. We believe that nationally-oriented media outlets have a great deal to learn from how local reporters cover education.

There is a major opportunity for building on what already exists. A major focus for those who would improve education coverage should be to build a variety of alliances among education reporters around the country. Already, education sites that aggregate coverage give at least some attention to strong local reporting. But newspapers themselves – led by staff members concerned about education coverage – should do far more than they do now to share coverage with each other. The education problems in similarly situated communities tend to be overlap. Reporters covering inner city schools in Chicago, Detroit and Philadelphia frequently confront the same issues; the same can be said for those who cover suburban schools in, say, Montgomery

County, Maryland, Lake County, Illinois and Westchester County, New York. New technologies can enable education reporters across the country to share their experiences and pool their reporting. Innovations that work in one school district might also work in another. Program failures in one place can inform the choices about to be made in another.

Here is an area where modest amounts of outside funding from foundations, local as well as national, might encourage a pooling of resources and expertise. And many of these partnerships would be natural. The National Education Writers Association (EWA) already brings together journalists with a vital interest in education coverage and provides resources to its members. The EWA could become a focal point for partnerships among newspapers. In a sense, the best thing that could happen to national education reporting would be for it to take on the characteristics of local education reporting, with its steady focus on what is happening in schools, what works, and what doesn't. Partnerships among local reporters are among the keys to improved education coverage.

It is also important to recognize that the national media, which tend to be located in large metropolitan areas, tend to give far more attention to inner city and suburban schools than to education in rural areas. Correcting this balance by focusing more attention on the problems of often under-financed rural schools should be a matter of concern to foundations and others engaged in school reform and school improvement.

Another area where existing media can build on success involves the rise of education blogs and the creation of areas on newspaper websites devoted entirely to education news. Our earlier report called attention to this good news about education news through case studies in four cities. But there are many other news outlets following the same path. This reflects an effort by many newspapers to create useful niches within publications that aim at a general audience. Here again, education bloggers often know each other and frequently share insights. Increased cross-linking across local education blogs is another way to bring the local to national attention and to apply local lessons to national concerns.

In a critique of our earlier report, Jay Mathews of the *Washington Post*, one of the nation's most respected education writers, argued that its attention to the paucity of national education reporting was misplaced. (Appropriately enough, Mathews offered his criticism on his widely-read education blog, "Class Struggle.") Here is part of what Mathews wrote:

> Maybe *national* education news is hard to find. Maybe it deserves to be, as boring and repetitive as it can be. But education reporting, at least the local kind that fills most of my days, is alive and well and provides more than 1.4 percent of what Americans read in their newspapers each day.

> Granted, there aren't as many education reporters as there used to be. There aren't as many newspaper reporters of any kind. But the Post still has nine local education writing slots (including higher education). Smaller papers are still devoting much of their space to schools. The inflated importance of national school news is not just a footnote. It is my life, and illuminates a widespread misunderstanding of what education reporting should be. . .
>
> National education stories have a place, but too often they are about ideology, politics and budget fights (Will the Adequate Yearly Progress rules be changed? Who will get the Race to the Top money?). The most important changes, I learned long ago, occur in classrooms because of the actions of educators, not members of congress. . .
>
> Let novice reporters cover national education news. It won't take many of them if it's only 1.4 percent of the total. Let the rest of us report the more valuable story of learning at the local level, for which there is still a lot of space in the paper.

To a large degree, we find ourselves in agreement with Mathews (and he, in turn, noted that our earlier report "recognized the importance and depth of local education news"). We share his view that national education coverage is too focused on "ideology, politics and budget fights."

But it is precisely because national education reporting risks being too ideological (and also, perhaps, "boring and repetitive") that we suggested then and suggest again that national education coverage needs to learn from, be informed by, and more closely resemble local coverage. It's why good local coverage deserves more national attention, why pooling the work of education writers around the country may provide the most promising path to improving national coverage, and why we hope more ways can be found to encourage local education writers to work together on national projects.

Mathews himself already does some of this on his blog and in his reporting, and the national reach of his newspaper's website puts him in a position to affect the national debate. What we hope for is more of this sort of interaction between the local and the national. The very technologies which, in the short term, are endangering newspaper business models can also enrich their coverage of education by encouraging communication and interaction among education writers, the sharing of success stories and policy lessons across the nation, and the creation of new partnerships among the very journalists most committed to improving the coverage of our schools and universities.

The New Media Reality

There is little doubt that the new world of education journalism is going to be digital and interactive. While print outlets clearly are going to be part of the media universe, all of the large education newspaper outlets have invested heavily in online platforms and see future growth coming largely through digital content. The old distinction between for-profit and non-profit has broken down to some extent because virtually all outlets are experimenting with new revenue streams and supplementing standard education coverage with paid webinars, subscription events, advertising, book clubs, news alerts, RSS feeds, chats, and blogs.

Outlets that have a well-defined niche and offer content that is hard to get elsewhere have been successful at developing premium content and subscription web sites.

In the end, it is impossible to predict which business model(s) will be successful. As Chronicle President Phil Semas noted, "anyone who says they can predict [the future], I immediately mistrust them." But Google Chief Executive Officer Eric Schmidt recently told newspaper editors their new business model would be based on "a combination of advertising and subscription revenue" (Tessler, 2010). He said it was necessary "to experiment with everything from social media to personalized content to engage readers." The virtue of the current period, he said, is that "technology allows you to talk directly to your users" and that new delivery systems would emphasize smart phones, electronic readers, and mobile devices (Tessler, 2010).

The movement toward a new digital press is fundamentally shifting the nature of the news industry. Speaking at a 2010 American Educational Research Association panel about traditional print journalism based on paid subscriptions, Jaschik concluded that "journalism is dead and a new version is taking place. It is a more inclusive model and doesn't privilege elites." Rather than engage in the "politics of nostalgia" and yearn for a recreation of the old media order, he argued, executives must adapt to the new environment and create business models that make sense in a digital world.

The clear dilemma facing all media is figuring out how to get readers or advertisers to pay for online content. Determining how to migrate from an ecosystem with a large amount of free online material to paid content is the chief contemporary puzzle. Leading news providers need revenue to support the creation of original content. While news aggregators and social media outlets can synthesize content from various sources, someone has to cover events and provide material for commentary, analysis, and republication.

Niche publications already have figured out how to get people to pay for online content. Outlets that have a well-defined niche and offer content that is hard to get elsewhere have been successful at developing premium content and subscription web sites. If people need stock market information, economic data, or sports coverage, they will pay.

The challenge for education areas that are not specialized or where content

is available elsewhere is getting readers and advertisers to pay. Without a clear niche or specialized content, it is hard to generate the revenues necessary to sustain a vibrant news organization. And while education plays an essential role in the economy, it is not directly linked to profit-making in the same way that job ads or home sales data are.

In the coming years, we will see whether general purpose newspapers can get people to pay for content. Along with the Financial Times and Wall Street Journal, the New York Times recently announced it will charge visitors to its web site starting in 2011. It has not set the fee or explained how access will work. But editors have suggested that readers will be able to read a certain number of stories for free each month before having to pay a fee based on number read (Ahrens, 2010).

News Corporation, owner of the Wall Street Journal, uses a metered system in which people pay a sliding fee depending on how many stories they read. Rob Grimshaw, the FT.com managing director said it would take "4 billion page views per month in order to make $50 million in revenue per year." Right now, the Financial Times generates 85 million page views per month (Ahrens, 2010).

Entrepreneur Steven Brill believes people will purchase online content if transaction costs are low and if it is easy to pay. He and his partners Gordon Crovitz and Leo Hindery, Jr. have developed a company called Journalism Online that offers readers a metered system with a "simple-to-use account and password for hundreds of publications." This account will allow people to purchase "subscriptions, day passes or single articles with one click" (Ramirez, 2009).

The idea is similar to an "iTunes" model proposed by Walter Isaacson (2009) of the Aspen Institute. When newspapers set up free websites in the 1990s, readers got used to accessing information without cost. As online content proliferated, it became increasingly difficult to impose fees because of the great supply of free online news. Micropayments could come in the form of a "one-click" digital system that allows "impulse purchases of a newspaper, magazine, article, blog or video for a penny, nickel, dime or whatever the creator chooses to charge" and this would allow news organizations to adapt to the digital era and monetize their content.

Commentator Michael Kinsley (2009) has disputed the premise behind Isaacson's concept. In a New York Times op-ed column, "You Can't Sell News by the Slice," he argued the funds raised through this system would be insufficient for any major newspaper. Using the example of the New York Times, he calculates that the paper sells a million copies a day. A charge of $2 a month for the entire paper would generate only $24 million a year, well below the $1 billion in annual revenue currently collected by the New York Times.

Solving the puzzle of monetizing online readership is the central

quandary for education journalism, just as it is for journalism in general. User fees, paid advertisements, novel revenue streams, and indirect public support may generate solid and reliable income, but the specific designs depend on the segment of the audience being targeted. Several of the news executives we interviewed have found business "green shoots" over the last few months that are boosting their advertising revenues. The very digital technology that torpedoed traditional business models may lay the groundwork for new approaches to sustaining education journalism.

As the economy comes back, we need to figure out ways to raise the stature and prestige of online journalism. For the traditional print and broadcast world, there are prizes, awards, fellowships, and professional development opportunities. The Spencer Foundation has provided $2 million over four years starting in 2007 for education writers to take a year-long fellowship at the Columbia School of Journalism. The National Education Writers Association has best press coverage prizes to recognize outstanding reporting and has a "public editor" who coaches individual reporters. There are fellowship programs (Nieman, Harvard, Stanford, and Annenberg) that recognize and support high quality education reporting.

These programs recognize quality work and may help keep reporters in journalism. We looked at a group of reporters who have received prominent fellowships from the Spencer Foundation (its Fellowship for Education reporting) and the National Education Writer's Association (its Research and Statistics Boot Camp fellowship). We found that 60 percent of those who received fellowships in 2008 were still writing on education issues two years later.

But these and other awards are not numerous enough to transform the field and many of them focus on traditional, not digital journalists. The latter have fewer prizes, awards, fellowships, and professional development opportunities targeted on them. Columbia University has provided fellowships for practicing journalists. But according to Colvin, "the work that we've done over the last three years with an ongoing fellowship that we've had, where we basically underwrite journalists to do in-depth coverage, has produced 29 projects about community colleges of some substance over the last 3 years, and we've got 10 more in the pipeline. So, over the years, through these fellowships and other mechanisms such as our seminars, we've tried to improve the quality and the quantity over coverage. But over time, we recognized that these methods, even though they were useful and met our goals, they weren't serving a larger purpose. There weren't of a big enough scale response to the needs."

One of the problems of the education beat is reporters and commentators perceive it as a non-prestigious assignment. If they are successful in education, reporters use it to gain a better assignment. Blogger Andrew Rotherham said "this is not a beat, let's be honest, that really leads to a lot of

places. So what you see is, and I'll single out Siobhan Gorman whom many of you probably know. Siobhan came on the scene, was writing at National Journal, some of the best coverage of the elementary and secondary education act, No Child Left Behind. What happened to her? Well, she wanted to get onto a beat that had a bigger path up. She ended up at the *Baltimore Sun* covering national security and is now at the *Wall Street Journal* covering national security. … That's the path you see with a lot of young reporters."

Until people perceive education journalism as a route to long-term professional success, it will be hard to re-invigorate school-related coverage. It is a great paradox. Most journalists and media entrepreneurs value the education that gave them the opportunity to do the work they love. Virtually everyone in public life acknowledges that improving education and expanding educational opportunity is central to the solution of many other problems. Yet journalism itself has never conferred on education coverage the honor and status it accords to so many other fields. Just as we undervalue the teaching profession, so do we undervalue education journalism. Our schools will not achieve as we would like them to until we give adequate respect and reward to teaching. And in the same vein, education journalism will not be what it needs to be until we give greater respect to those who cover our schools, colleges, and universities.

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