

Broken News: What went wrong, and how to make it right

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I was at a conference last Friday in New York where we talked, no surprise, about the search for new models that would make it possible to sustain independent, high-quality journalism.

The organizer of the conference was Geanne Rosenberg, director of journalism at City University of New York's Baruch College. She shared a YouTube clip from more innocent times, back in 1981, when San Francisco television station KRON aired a breezy report on an offbeat new idea – making daily newspapers available on the screens of the boxy personal computers that were just then beginning to make their mark.

I'd like to begin with that brief clip, to give you a sense of how far we've come. You can find it online, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WCTn4FljUQ>

What I liked especially was the editor saying newspapers were spending a lot of money trying to figure out the Internet but that he wasn't sure they'd ever make much money – and then the television anchor at the end noting that it took two hours to download a copy of one day's newspaper and that each hour of internet access cost \$5. Not much chance, she said that electronic delivery of newspapers would be much competition for the print edition anytime soon.



I don't think any of us anticipated how fast the economics would change, how the internet could destroy the business basis of an industry that year after year had been among the nation's most profitable while at the same time that same internet could shrink the world and democratize the flow of information like nothing since Gutenberg's press.

It happens that my career encompassed the golden era of newspaper journalism, and at the same time what will most likely be seen as its final days.

I got out of college and started my career in the summer of 1974. I joined the *Post-Dispatch* as an editorial writer and within weeks was writing on the heady topic of urging the House to proceed with impeachment. By August of that summer Richard Nixon had been driven from office, the reputations of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were made for life, and everyone I knew, knew that nothing could be more glorious, more empowering than to be an American journalist.

For me the internet and the personal computer were incredible tools, giving us access to resources that no one could have dreamed of before. I began in the era of bound quarterly copies of the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, poring through the guide for promising stories on subjects of interest and then tracking down the reference librarian at a newspaper or magazine and cajoling them to make a photocopy and mail a copy to me. I vividly recall a project on nuclear waste management and what a breakthrough it was when I came across the listing for an article that had appeared in the *Rocky Mountain News* on a Colorado waste-treatment facility -- and my excitement, a week later, when the U.S. Postal Service delivered a copy of the actual article.

In one of my first reporting trips abroad, during and after the U.S. mini-war in the Caribbean island of Grenada, how thrilling it was to pound out stories on the Radio Shack Trash 80 – a notebook-sized computer with an 8-line screen that ran on double-A batteries and enough memory to hold about as many words as I've said so far – and the somewhat less thrilling experience of trying to transmit stories via acoustic couplers like the ones they used in the KRON clip -- incredibly slow and glitch-prone and you never knew until you made a second call back to the office whether the transmission had gone through at all.

On the technological side, the next couple of decades were a glorious time of ever-better, ever-faster, ever-smaller computers – roughly speaking, the opportunity to buy a new laptop every other year that was at least twice as good and always under \$1,500. On the economic side we suffered a bit early on in St. Louis – the Pulitzer-owned *Post-Dispatch* and Newhouse's *Globe-Democrat* were the first beneficiaries of the Failing Newspaper Act, which in the name of preserving newspaper competition permitted joint business-side operations that would otherwise have been prohibited under antitrust laws. Both papers limped along until 1986 when the Pulitzers bought out Newhouse, agreed to share profits, and became the monopoly franchise in St. Louis – with an immediate increase of some 50 percent in circulation and a healthy jump in profits. The company was minting money on its television stations as well, with the happy result for those of us on the journalism side of ample resources for staff and stories. When I became Washington bureau chief in 1993 I led a staff of seven; we did aggressive coverage of Missouri and Illinois issues but also took pride in giving readers our own take on congressional and presidential campaigns and at least two or three big enterprise projects overseas each year.

For me personally there were some extraordinary experiences – spending the summer of 1989, traveling through eastern Europe as communism began to crack; a couple of months in South Africa the following year, just after Nelson Mandela's release from

prison; and then a similar trip across the former Soviet Union the next year as that empire came unglued. There was a month in Nanjing, writing about the new China; coverage of the Balkan wars and the aftermath of the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin; the better part of two years investigating defense contract fraud and then nearly another whole year traveling with two Missourians, Dick Gephardt and John Ashcroft, covering presidential campaigns that in those two cases never made it even to the starting gate. We did lavishly reported series, richly illustrated by our own staff photographers, and we competed for national prizes. We didn't focus nearly enough about taking the product of that reporting beyond our own community of St. Louis readers. We didn't worry nearly as much as we should have that our circulation, like that of virtually every metropolitan paper, was shedding 2 or 3 percent a year.

We did worry through those years about a diminution in coverage of international news. But in the economic boom years of the Bill Clinton '90s, amid glib talk of the end of history and globalization trumping all, this was attributed less to economic constraints than to the shortsightedness of our editors, readers and leaders. The 9/11 attacks refocused us all, or so it seemed – and in my case that meant three years of reporting projects from Iraq, Afghanistan and the other Muslim countries of the Middle East and Africa. The war in Iraq was testament to too much reliance on too few journalists, I thought, with editors too willing to follow the lead of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and a handful of other elite outlets with too-credulous coverage of Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction. The absence of multiple journalists' voices in the field was in my view a disservice to the public, to journalism and even to the administration of President George W. Bush, which would have benefited greatly from a more robust debate on Iraq before the war began. Like many other journalists, I hoped that lessons learned in Iraq would reinvigorate the news media's sense of its own obligation aggressively to cover the news.

Very few understood that the challenges were about to get much, much worse.

My story in St. Louis is again a case in point. It was four years ago this winter that the Pulitzer family announced its intention to sell the *Post-Dispatch* and its chain of twenty-some smaller newspapers. A group of veteran journalists at the paper, myself among them, tried to persuade the family's largest shareholder to keep her stake in the paper, accepting a smaller return on investment in return for keeping the *Post-Dispatch* alive as a vital voice. With this "quiet capital" banks would have been happy to lend us the money -- \$900 million, at high-interest preferred debt, the amount we needed to complete an employee-ownership purchase of the paper. Had we prevailed we would have spent the past four years firing our friends, desperately shedding costs to meet the payments on that debt. The Pulitzers wisely listened to their advisers at Goldman Sachs instead, and sold the newspaper properties for \$1.6 billion to Iowa-based Lee Enterprises.

As it happens that was the last "good" sale of a newspaper, just before the bottom dropped out. You can look it up. A few months later the far larger Knight-Ridder chain, Charlotte included, was sold to McClatchy for \$4.3 billion – an amount that most journalists considered absurdly low but that turned out for McClatchy to be disastrously

high; its stock price dropped from \$75 a share at the time to less than \$3. It has sold off the once-great *Philadelphia Inquirer* and announced last month that it will try to sell another once great paper, the *Miami Herald*. The question is, will there be a buyer? Press accounts noted that the *Herald's* biggest asset was its prime waterfront building --but in the current economic tailspin the value of the building had plummeted, too.

In the last few weeks alone we've seen the closing of Copley's Washington bureau, the announcement by Cox that it is selling all of its papers except for two and that it will shut its five foreign bureaus and their DC bureau as well. The *Chicago Tribune* has filed for bankruptcy and just a few days ago announced that it is contemplating the shutdown of its DC and foreign bureaus and the contracting of that work out to *The Washington Post*. The *Los Angeles Times*, part of the beleaguered *Tribune* chain, has lost the heart of its DC and foreign staff. The *Christian Science Monitor* as of this April will print only weekly, with daily coverage relegated to the web. The *New York Times* is borrowing against its new building to stay afloat and last month sold a chunk of itself to a Mexican billionaire. *The Washington Post* is increasingly dependent on its non-newspaper operations, and NPR announced that it would lay off 7 percent of its staff.

And Lee Enterprises, the chain that had hoped to enter the front rank of American media chains with the purchase of Pulitzer? A month ago it received warning notice from the New York Stock Exchange that it will be delisted this spring unless it comes up with a credible plan for dealing a staggering debt load that has sent its stock price south of a dollar a share. The company that raised \$1.6 billion in cash four years ago to buy the Pulitzer chain now has a total capitalization of \$18 million.

Some people say it was Craigslist that killed the newspaper, sapping our classified ads. Some say it was Google, shamelessly stealing our reporting and teaching the public that news should be free. Some say an industry based on the massive pulping of trees and house-to-house distribution via clogged highways and endless exurbs was doomed in any case – but others note that network television news hasn't face those distribution issues but has seen its audience numbers drop nearly as fast. In part the “news” as a whole is victim of huge shifts in the culture itself, from a common local or national conversation mediated through a few trusted sources to a cornucopia of atomized niches. And in part, no doubt, we have to blame ourselves, for losing touch with the communities we serve and letting too much of journalism become instead a one-way monologue.

That's the really depressing part of my message tonight -- and don't let anyone tell you that it's not a problem, that sophisticated readers can find whatever they want on the Internet, that *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* remain vital presences and will give us the information an informed citizenry needs. It was the *Times* and the *Post* that set the tone for coverage of Iraq in the run-up to the war, and both papers let us down. Even at their best – and surely with the *Wall Street Journal* they are the best we have – those two papers cannot be made to shoulder these responsibilities alone.

Don't pretend that Google alone is the answer either, or television – which is still the predominant source of news for most Americans. I want to show just a few slides that speak to what we're getting from those media, in the way of news, and what we're not.



14,000 top stories on Google News home page covered 24 news topics

Source: Pew Foundation and Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, 2008

The world as it looked to viewers of American network and cable news programs, based on seconds of coverage in February 2007 ...

– source: Alisa Miller, Public Radio International



February 2007 News Map

Based on an analysis of data from The Associated Press Television News Archive.



In February 2007 U.S. news accounted for 79 percent of all network/television news coverage

Russia, China and India accounted for less than 1 percent

One U.S. story got more coverage than any country other than Iraq ...



Anna Nicole Smith Coverage

Eclipsed coverage of all other countries except Iraq and received 10 times the coverage of the IPCC report



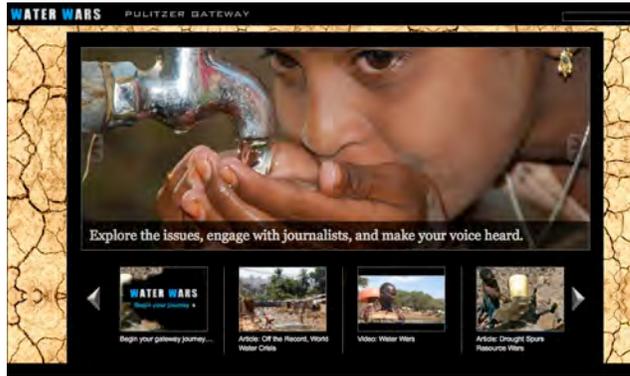
So that's the environment we're up against, about as gloomy as one could imagine. Except that I'm here to report from the frontiers of new media reporting -- and from my experience it's anything but grim.

The organization I run, the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, is small but we've funded a significant number of projects -- some 80 in total over the past three years, and nearly half of them entailing short video documentaries for public television as well as print and radio reports. We've enabled coverage of topics ranging from the [downside of the surge in Iraq](#) to the [water crisis in east Africa](#), from a [14-month investigation of health and safety hazards in China](#) to work on the [conflict among oil companies, environmentalists and indigenous peoples](#) over some of the most remote, pristine parts of the Amazon. These stories that would not have otherwise been covered and have appeared in leading American media outlets from *The Washington Post* and *Time* to NPR, BBC, *NewsHour*, *Foreign Exchange*, and major regional papers across the country.

The slides that follow suggest the scope of our work, geographically and by topic. The subjects range from [reporting on HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean](#) to environmental conflicts in [Africa](#), [South America](#) and [Asia](#), from repeated projects on [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#) to some of the first and most extensive reporting on last summer's war between [Russia and the Republic of Georgia](#). Current projects include the [conflict in eastern Congo](#), where we have just commissioned our third project in the past year, and Zimbabwe, where we've partnered with Frontline/World and *The Washington Post* on [reports from a courageous Zimbabwean journalist](#) writing anonymously from inside that ravaged country. Many of our projects are simply a matter of funding competent journalists to cover issues that would otherwise go unreported. Others are long-term investigative projects, such as the 14-month inquiry we helped fund of health and safety risks in Chinese factories that won several of the major awards last year for investigative journalism.



We're also deeply engaged in taking this reporting beyond its initial print or broadcast. Our [Global Gateway](#) education initiative has taken half a dozen of our projects, and the journalists behind them, out to middle schools and high schools across the country. The pilot program that began in St. Louis has now expanded to schools from Seattle to New York to Nairobi, and with our [Water Wars project](#) this fall we initiated an interactive web portal that makes these reporting resources and the journalists available for online



engagement with schools anywhere in the world. Last week we launched a similar portal based on reporting we funded on India's internal conflicts. We're collaborating with the Choices Program at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Relations to make this resource available to Watson's network of 5,000 high schools.

We're also working with YouTube and Google to bring our short video documentaries to that vast audience. A breakthrough for us was the video we funded in the fall of 2007 on the [surge in Anbar province](#). The News and Politics category on YouTube made it an "editor's pick" for a day – and as a result this quite serious piece of journalism generated a quarter million views in five days, with no other advertising. YouTube then asked us to partner with us on the design of a video reporting contest, [Project:Report](#), aimed at encouraging the creation of serious, substantive journalism.

The three-stage contest featured our documentaries for public television as the "model videos" for each round, along with "how-to" we videotaped with our journalists on how to do a profile, a local issue with global impact, or a collaborative video. We worked closely with journalism schools around the country and four of the 10 semifinalists were J-School students. YouTube then turned its home page over to the Project:Report winners, for two days running, with the result that their videos have been viewed over 1 million times.



On the university side we've just initiated the Campus Consortium, a network of colleges and universities that agree to partner with the Pulitzer Center to bring our journalists and our online resources on campus.

We've done some 60 of these events already, often in partnership with academic departments as a way to build interest and an audience. What we're trying to do now is to systematize that relationship, getting each participating campus to commit \$10,000 each year in exchange for one on-campus event, a paid student liaison position to promote use of Pulitzer Center reporting materials, and access to all of our resources. The hope is that we will create a social network of engaged students and faculty, making use of Pulitzer reporting from around the world on a regular basis and, in the process, breaking through the sorts of stereotypes that surface with each incidence of terrorism or conflict abroad.



I mention all this because I think the lesson is obvious. We're a tiny organization, a staff of five people in three rooms and an annual budget well under a million dollars. That we can produce all of this content, and engage people on so many levels, is proof that there is a great demand for quality reporting, engagingly produced, a huge reservoir of people who want to be engaged, and opportunities less constrained by money than by imagination and will.

I don't think we can count on the traditional news media to take on this task. Most of it is too consumed with its own demise, or willing to throw restraint aside in the name of whatever sells a few more papers or scores a few more ratings points. But that doesn't mean the task can't be done – or that you don't have new media players willing and eager to collaborate. Of course the Pulitzer Center is willing to collaborate, as I've suggested – but it's also the satellite channel Link TV, public broadcasting platforms like *Foreign Exchange* and WNET's new venture WorldFocus, or the for-profit GlobalPost that launched last month from Boston.

This is an organization that actually believes it can make money on international reporting. It has hired over 50 stringers around the world, each of whom is filing stories in exchange for a modest monthly retainer and shares in the company – with any luck the next Google. We're partnering with them too, offering short dispatches from our journalist grantees in hopes that this will lead to more exposure and income for our journalists. For GlobalPost it means the opportunity to highlight the Pulitzer Center's in-depth enterprise work – with reporting so far from Gaza, on food security issues in Nigeria, and the restive state of Baghdad's Sadr City.

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Israel and the Palestinian Authority



On Jan. 23, worshippers flocked to mosques like Al-Amari Mosque in Gaza City for the first Friday prayers since Israel announced a unilateral cease-fire. The Imam stressed a message of "patience." (Elliott D. Woods/Pulitzer Center)

Game of life and death continues

Despite cease-fire, Gaza still feels to many like a war zone.

By **Elliott D. Woods** - Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting
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 Updated: January 29, 2009 22:21 ET

GAZA CITY — Seven-year-old Ahmed Haslan was playing at a neighbor's house last week, in the ruins of a building destroyed by Israeli forces during the recent conflict.

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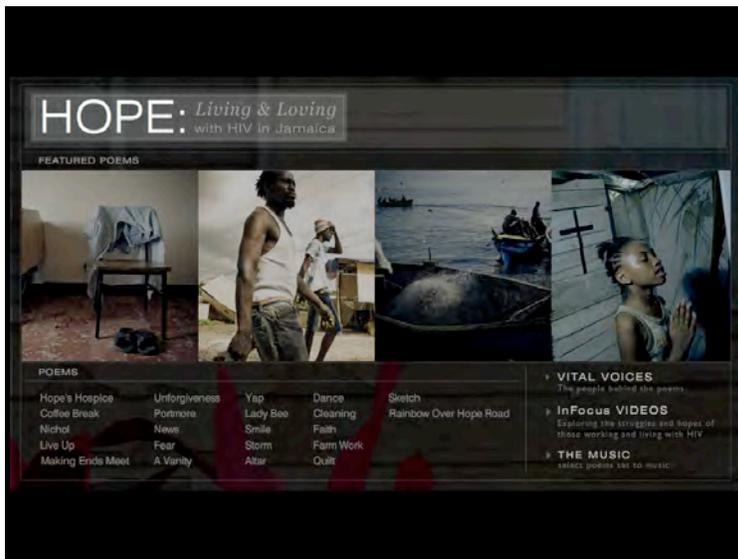
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 The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting is an innovative non-profit leader in supporting the independent international journalism that U.S. media...[Read more >](#)

I'd like to conclude with an audio slide show of an original poem from one of [our most ambitious projects of 2008](#), Kwame Dawes's searing portrait of the human face of HIV/AIDS in his native Jamaica.

Kwame Dawes is a professor of English and the poet in residence at the University of South Carolina. This was a highly unconventional journalism project. Kwame had never written about HIV/AIDS before and the core output of the five trips he made home with Pulitzer Center support were the 20 original poems he composed based on interviews he conducted with individuals who were either HIV positive or engaged with the epidemic in some other way, as caregivers, doctors, relatives and educators. We sent videographers down to record the interviews and eventually photographers and web designers; we even commissioned original music to complement the poetry.

Not exactly a normal newspaper project – and yet the very unconventionality of it has led to continuing news coverage – a short essay by Kwame for *The Washington Post*, a long essay for *Virginia Quarterly Review*, an extended interview for *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, and now an hour-long radio documentary that is airing across the country. Our hope is to stage a multimedia music/spoken word performance of this work next August, at the National Black Theater Festival in Winston-Salem – so stay tuned!

In the meantime I'd like to show a brief intro to the livehopelove.com website and then play an audio slide of show of Kwame's poem "Nichol," one of the featured poems on the livehopelove.com site.



The Jamaica HIV/AIDS project says so much about what the Pulitzer Center is about – a place for collaboration, experimentation and innovation, for filling gaps in traditional news media sources and for finding new ways of reaching audiences now untapped – on YouTube, on college campuses and beyond.

Think about that clip from 1981 on KRON with which we began, those blinking green characters on a black background – and contrast that to the richness of this Jamaica site, and what extraordinary tools we now have. I'm not naïve about the dark news in journalism today – the evidence is all around us, and barely needs elaboration. But when you think of projects like Jamaica, or the many others we've been able to undertake, you can't help but be confident of the future -- about what you can achieve with passion and will and by reaching out to collaborate with every possible partner.

In my view no partner is as important in this endeavor, of finding a sustainable means of creating and disseminating high quality journalism on issues of moment, as educational institutions – high schools, universities and great colleges like Davidson. You have the expertise that cuts across disciplines, the students who are more ripe perhaps than at any other time in their lives for engagement with global issues. A journalism reconstituted for the digital age, attuned to emergent issues, open to community engagement, can and will be a force for good, for insuring an informed citizenry and a robust democracy.

So I would conclude with this – that assuredly these are not the easiest times for journalists, for getting good journalism done and making a living wage. But I do think that in years to come we will look back and say that for journalists these were in fact the best of times – when we worked together to recreate and reinvigorate this craft that is so important to us all.

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