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The soon-to-be-lost art of science reporting . . .

Posted on December 5th, 2008 by earlelland



While all eyes have been focused on the potential disintegration of the auto industry, a surprisingly silent and astonishingly broad purging has been taking place throughout some of America's major news media.

And while some may immediately react with, "It serves them right," the truth is that the scientific and medical communities may suffer the most from this loss.

Among the most visible to suffer the ax was the [CNN reporting team](#) assigned to cover science, medicine, the environment and technology, including long-time correspondent [Miles O'Brien](#). These specialists were charged with monitoring advances in these fields and informing the public. And while some might argue over just how well they did the job, without them there, what will happen to news about science?

The CNN move, no matter how prominent, is dwarfed by the flood of dismissals throughout the [Gannett](#) chain, publisher of [USAToday](#), where nearly 1,800 newspaper jobs were eliminated as of yesterday (12/4). Other news media outlets and chains, while smaller, have been cutting back as well and the trend is clearly eliminating both specialist reporters and those with ample experience.

The explanations lie with economics – that substantive cuts in staffing are needed to insure that media organizations are viably profitable, although the newspaper profits have generally run higher than those of other industries. So-called "niche" or specialist reporters and veteran journalists are much too costly. New young reporters are "fresher" in their approach, media outlets argue.

And much, much cheaper, the outlets seldom admit.

CNN's spokesperson explained it this way: "We want to integrate environmental, science and technology reporting into the general editorial structure rather than have a stand-alone unit." Translation: "We want specialized topics covered by generalist reporters."

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Researchers should see this as more than just worrisome.

As science, medical and environmental reporters lose their jobs, the journalists knocking on scientists' doors are going to be even more clueless about the research they're sent to report. They're likely to lack an understanding of the scientific method – how research is done – much less any kind of institutional memory to guide them in determining what new findings are truly important.

For researchers, dealing with the news media has always been a mixed bag. While the recognition that comes with news coverage is usually pleasing, occasionally the coverage is embarrassingly wrong, making investigators more reluctant to deal with journalists in the past. In the future, instead of a science or medical writer, the researcher may be trying to explain genomics to a reporter who usually covers the local school board.

The ranks of journalists have ebbed and flowed in the past. There's no guarantee that in the future, specialist reporters will be brought back. Therefore for public research institutions, the obligation to accurately describe the work they do has just increased several orders of magnitude.

With the internet's ability to convey information, the drawbacks of eliminating the news-media middleman from telling the public about science are diminished.

But the responsibility also increases. Journalists have argued, right or wrong, that they were the ones to provide an unbiased view and maintain the credibility of the information passed along to readers. With their fading from the system, we need to insure that what we tell the public is free of spin and agenda, but still full of wonder.

Public research institutions will now need, more than ever, to carry the mantle of public trust.

Whether we like it or not. __Earle Holland



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3 Responses to “The soon-to-be-lost art of science reporting . . .”

Michael Rogers // Dec 9, 2008 at 12:49 am

There has been a constant effort to dumb down the citizenry over several decades starting, I believe with Nixon's era to make them more manipulable, It also serves to make the media less expensive and to appeal to a wider lowest common denominator.

The sixties was the start in that the population had reached an awareness that enabled them to understand that things could be much better and had set about trying to make it so to the discomfort of the establishment who had profited economically and psychologically from the status quo.

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Since then education has grievously suffered not only in not using the advanced techniques learned since then but has become prohibitively expensive functionally driving us back into the stone ages in our understanding of the humanities. Technology has continued to advance but has become ever more elusive to the average person. Fortunately, this is being increasingly offset to the increasing percentage of the citizenry that have found out that the Internet is a veritable cornucopia of knowledge. For those that are interested, there is all that most will ever want to know of. It is now up to scientists and academics to be sure that information is put there.

[Michael Payday](#) // Dec 10, 2008 at 1:57 pm

Well said, I happen to have worked in newspaper for two years and studied media/communications in college, so we've covered topics like this extensively.

The interesting thing about major news media outlets and the internet is agenda. When someone goes on the internet and look for information, they have an agenda. They know what they are looking for and they look for it. They find what interests them. Certainly there are ads and offers along the way that interest them in other things, but by and large a person's use of the internet is largely based on their own interests and agenda.

The major news media, however, are agenda setters. Most people still get their news from newspaper or TV, not the internet. This is disturbing because these people still control our interests. When you watch or read, you can only watch or read what the media publishers give you. When they stop giving us news on science, medicine and other important topics, the general public stops seeing these things as important.

I mean c'mon, what could possibly be more important than the latest Britney Spears gossip, or the newest political scandal? Pretty ridiculous that whole shows are devoted to gossip and celebrity news, yet there now remains no major outlet for news on science and medicine. Hopefully people stay interested enough to subscribe to blogs like this one.

[CV Harquail](#) // Feb 6, 2009 at 12:06 pm

Nothing about the disappearance of skilled science journalism is good, but all is not lost. There is still an opportunity for scholars to learn to communicate the value and/or practical applications of their work, using media other than professional journals and mass media outlets. In the middle lies the blogosphere— a promising and underdeveloped space for translating scientific findings for a more general public.

As a management scholar who blogs (often about management research), I find it distressing how little interest my colleagues demonstrate in blogging specifically and in reaching outside academia in general. Just as writing textbooks is a skill that can be valuable to students, to the faculty member and to the faculty member's institution, blogging is a skill that can contribute to many areas of our professional goals. We don't need to leave it up to the University's pr department, we can take in on ourselves.

<http://www.AuthenticOrganizations.com>

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