

Newsroom cuts a boon for PR but a turnoff for readers, report finds

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Traditional newsrooms have shrunk but new players have emerged, the report said. Credit: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/noodlepie>

Widespread cost cutting in newsrooms has led to less investigative journalism, more weather and traffic reports and greater opportunities for lobbyists to get their message into the media, a [US report](#) has found.

The State of the News [Media](#) 2013, an annual report produced by the [Pew Research Center](#), found that recent cutbacks in US newsrooms put the number of full-time professional newsroom employees below 40,000 for the first time since 1978.

"In [local TV](#), [our special content report](#) reveals, sports, [weather](#) and traffic now account on average for 40% of the content produced on the newscasts studied while story lengths shrink. On [CNN](#), the cable channel that has branded itself around deep reporting, produced story packages were cut nearly in half from 2007 to 2012," the report said.

The study identified a growth in the number of organisations using the services of companies that produce content using algorithms, rather than humans.

Coverage of live events by [cable channels](#) fell 30% from 2007 to 2012 while interview segments, which tend to take fewer resources and can be scheduled in advance, were up 31%, the report said.

A separate survey conducted by the same organisation found that 31% of [respondents](#) "have deserted a [news outlet](#) because it no longer provides the news and information they had grown accustomed to."

At the same time, the ratio of public relations workers to [journalists](#) in the US has grown from 1.2 to 1 in 1980 to 3.6 to 1 in 2008, the report said.

Statements made by politicians during the recent [Presidential campaign](#) were more likely to go unquestioned, the report said.

"That meant more direct relaying of assertions made by the campaigns and less reporting by journalists to interpret and contextualise them," the report said.

"Only about a quarter of statements in the media about the character and records of the [presidential candidates](#) originated with journalists in the 2012 race, while twice that many came from political partisans. That is a reversal from a dozen years earlier when half the statements originated with journalists and a third came from partisans."

Despite the shrinkage of traditional newsrooms, new organisations had emerged offering services traditionally provided by journalists, such as fact checking and policy analysis, the report said.

Brian McNair, Professor of Journalism, Media and Communication at the Queensland University of Technology said the report contained good and bad news.

"The report shows the impact of resource cuts on the news media's growing reliance on sponsored advertising, computational journalism providers such as Narrative Science, and public relations feeds. The quality of journalism is suffering from declining editorial resource across the board," he said.

"But the picture painted by Pew isn't entirely bleak. Many new providers of publicly valuable information and news are coming into the market, often specialising in science, health and lifestyle, and other themes. My own experience as an avid consumer reflects this trend. Where I once used a couple of newspapers and TV channels for my news, today I regularly access literally dozens of online providers, from big global providers like the Guardian and the BBC, to quirkier, independent sites such as Gawker and BuzzFeed. Although they operate on very different business models from those of the old media, I find their quality to be high, and their approach innovative."

The report illustrated "not the death of news and journalism, but the ongoing transformation of the industry, and the expansion of provision,"

said Professor McNair.

"That brings challenges of quality control, but the old media were hardly free of those challenges."

Andrea Carson, a lecturer in Media, Politics and Society at the University of Melbourne said the latest Pew report continued a theme of decline in the number of full-time journalists and the overall numbers of readers and news-watchers, particularly those aged under 30.

"These trends have also been identified in Australia through other research. Free-to-air television and newspapers are not the strong institutions they once were in either the USA or Australia. Viewers and readers are turning off and circulation and ratings figures reflect this. This in turn adversely affects advertising revenues and leads to cost cutting, such as job losses," she said.

Australians may consume some news on the Internet but studies showed that most time online is spent on social activities, she said.

"What this means is that transnational companies such as Facebook and Twitter have enormous cultural power, which is displacing the power that television and newspapers have occupied in society," said Ms Carson.

"Does this matter? It shows that audiences are now highly fragmented and the power of traditional mass media is less. This makes it more difficult for politicians to get across their policy messages, unless they speak to many audiences through newspapers, social media, radio and television."

Framing politicians as celebrities who deliver their message in soundbytes was not a great way to keep voters informed, she said.

"It also means that domestic laws are limited against the power of these global media companies. They do not represent a 'public good' role that traditional media has fulfilled, nor do they pretend to. Unlike traditional government-sponsored and commercial media, these transnationals do not operate under the self-regulatory codes of ethical conduct and practice."

The British Leveson Inquiry and the Australian Finkelstein media inquiries showed that the traditional media is not without its problems, said Ms Carson.

"But the critical difference is the new digital multinational companies can position themselves beyond the jurisdiction of a single state and beyond enforcement. For example, YouTube, owned by Google, refused initially to remove an anti-Muslim video from its site that had incited hatred and violence against thousands, and was associated with the death of an American ambassador, Christopher Stevens, and three others in Libya," she said.

"In Australia, Facebook also refused for days to remove pages that incited hatred against the man charged with the rape and murder of ABC employee Jill Meagher in Melbourne in September 2012. Only after online public protests and repeated police requests, arguing that the pages would compromise the prosecution of the murder case, did Facebook eventually comply."

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