

## Yesterday's papers

Is Rupert Murdoch right to predict the end of newspapers as we now know them?

"I believe too many of us editors and reporters are out of touch with our readers," Rupert Murdoch, the boss of News Corporation, one of the world's largest media companies, told the American Society of Newspaper Editors last week. No wonder that people, and in particular the young, are ditching their newspapers. Today's teens, twenty- and thirty-somethings "don't want to rely on a god-like figure from above to tell them what's important," Mr Murdoch said, "and they certainly don't want news presented as gospel." And yet, he went on, "as an industry, many of us have been remarkably, unaccountably, complacent."

The speech--astonishing not so much for what it said as for who said it--may go down in history as the day that the stodgy newspaper business officially woke up to the new realities of the internet age. Talking at times more like a pony-tailed, new-age technophile than a septuagenarian old-media god-like figure, Mr Murdoch said that news "providers" such as his own organisation had better get web-savvy, stop lecturing their audiences, "become places for conversation" and "destinations" where "bloggers" and "podcasters" congregate to "engage our reporters and editors in more extended discussions." He also criticised editors and reporters who often "think their readers are stupid".

Mr Murdoch's argument begins with the fact that newspapers worldwide have been--and seem destined to keep on--losing readers, and with them advertising revenue. In 1995-2003, says the World Association of Newspapers, circulation fell by 5% in America, 3% in Europe and 2% in Japan. In the 1960s, four out of five Americans read a paper every day; today only half do so. Philip Meyer, author of "The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age" (University of Missouri Press), says that if the trend continues, the last newspaper reader will recycle his final paper copy in April 2040.

Gotcha!

The decline of newspapers predates the internet. But the second--broadband--generation of the internet is not only accelerating it but is also changing the business in a way that the previous rivals to newspapers--radio and TV--never did. Older people, whom Mr Murdoch calls "digital immigrants", may not have noticed, but young "digital natives" increasingly get their news from web portals such as Yahoo! or Google, and from newer web media such as blogs. Short for "web logs", these are online journal entries of thoughts and web links that anybody can post. Whereas 56% of Americans haven't heard of blogs, and only 3% read them daily, among the young they are standard fare, with 44% of online Americans aged 18-29 reading them often, according to a poll by CNN/USA Today/Gallup.

Blogs, moreover, are but one item on a growing list of new media tools that the internet makes available. Wikis are collaborative web pages that allow readers to edit and contribute. This, to digital immigrants, may sound like a recipe for anarchic chaos, until they visit, for instance, wikipedia.org, an online encyclopaedia that is growing dramatically richer by the day through exactly this spontaneous (and surprisingly orderly) collaboration among strangers. Photoblogs are becoming common; videoblogs are just starting. Podcasting (a conjunction of iPod, Apple's iconic audio player, and broadcasting) lets both professionals and amateurs produce audio files that people can download and listen to.

It is tempting, but wrong, for the traditional mainstream media (which includes The Economist) to belittle this sort of thing. It is true, for instance, that the vast majority of blogs are not worth reading and, in fact, are not read (although the same is true of much in traditional newspapers). On the other hand, bloggers play an increasingly prominent part in the wider media drama--witness their role in America's presidential election last year. The most popular bloggers now get as much traffic individually as the opinion pages of most newspapers. Many bloggers are

windbags, but some are world experts in their field. Matthew Hindman, a political scientist at Arizona State University, found that the top bloggers are more likely than top newspaper columnists to have gone to a top university, and far more likely to have an advanced degree, such as a doctorate.

Another dangerous cliché is to consider bloggers intrinsically parasitic on (and thus, ultimately, no threat to) the traditional news business. True, many thrive on debunking, contradicting or analysing stories that originate in the old media. In this sense, the blogosphere is, so far, mostly an expanded op-ed medium. But there is nothing to suggest that bloggers cannot also do original reporting. Glenn Reynolds, whose political blog, Instapundit.com, counts 250,000 readers on a good day, often includes eyewitness accounts from people in Afghanistan or Shanghai, whom he considers "correspondents" in the original sense of the word.

"The basic notion is that if people have the tools to create their own content, they will do that, and that this will result in an emerging global conversation," says Dan Gillmor, founder of Grassroots Media in San Francisco, and the author of "We the Media" (O'Reilly, 2004), a book about, well, grassroots journalism. Take, for instance, OhmyNews in South Korea. Its "main concept is that every citizen can be a reporter," says Oh Yeon Ho, the boss and founder. Five years old, OhmyNews already has 2m readers and over 33,000 "citizen reporters", all of them volunteers who contribute stories that are edited and fact-checked by some 50 permanent staff.

With so many new kinds of journalists joining the old kinds, it is also likely that new business models will arise to challenge existing ones. Some bloggers are allowing Google to place advertising links next to their postings, and thus get paid every time a reader of their blog clicks on them. Other bloggers, just like existing providers of specialist content, may ask for subscriptions to all, or part, of their content. Tip-jar systems, where readers click to make small payments to their favourite writers, are catching on. In one case last year, an OhmyNews article attacking an unpopular court verdict reaped \$30,000 in tips from readers, though most of the site's revenues come from advertising.

The tone in these new media is radically different. For today's digital natives, says Mr Gillmor, it is anathema to be lectured at. Instead, they expect to be informed as part of an online dialogue. They are at once less likely to write a traditional letter to the editor, and more likely to post a response on the web-- and then to carry on the discussion. A letters page pre-selected by an editor makes no sense to them; spotting the best responses using the spontaneous voting systems of the internet does.

Even if established media groups--such as Mr Murdoch's--start to respond better to these changes, can they profit from them? Mr Murdoch says that some media firms, at least, will be able to navigate the transition as advertising revenue switches from print-based to electronic media. Indeed, this is one area where news providers can use technology to their advantage, by providing more targeted audiences for advertisers, both by interest group and location. He also thinks that video clips, which his firm can conveniently provide, will be crucial ingredients of online news.

But it remains uncertain what mix of advertising revenue, tips and subscriptions will fund the news providers of the future, and how large a role today's providers will have. What is clear is that the control of news--what constitutes it, how to prioritise it and what is fact--is shifting subtly from being the sole purview of the news provider to the audience itself. Newspapers, Mr Murdoch implies, must learn to understand their role as providers of news independent of the old medium of distribution, the paper.

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