

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 22, 2011 (MICHAEL CASTENGERA)

[Message from Michael -- FCC Media Report - Part Two - June 22, 2011](#)

Okay, help me pick a lead for my story on the Federal Communications Commission report on the news media. Here are the choices:

1. A report on the news media by the Federal Communications Commission finds that there is a shortage of local, professional accountability reporting.
2. The Federal Communications Commission report on the news media is like the story of two men whose plane crash lands in the desert. While one works on the plane, the other scouts the area, returning several hours later with good news and bad news. The bad news – the only thing to eat is camel dung. The good news – there's lots of it. Well, the current media landscape is sort of like that desert, according to the report.
3. Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free. The Biblical admonition could easily be the motto for journalism organizations, except for one problem. As the recently released Federal Communications Commission report on the media notes, while information may want to be free, labor wants to be paid. And that is the challenge facing news groups.
4. Despite all the financial problems facing the media, people are actually paying more for media and information now than ever before. But the money is not going to the ones who create the content. Instead it is going to those who distribute it. And that, according to a Federal Communications Commission report, is a problem.
5. A wide-ranging series of recommendations by a special Federal Communications Commission group, designed to help improve news media, have been described as disappointing by so-called liberals and conservatives alike.

Okay, here are my thoughts:

Lead #1. It is probably the main point the study authors want to make, but it's a line straight out of the report. And that's not reporting. What few news organizations that covered the report have used the same line, so it's old. Anyway, I wouldn't let my journalism students use it, or at least not without very clear attribution, so why would I?

As I say, it is the main point that the authors want to make. Much further down in the report, they make the point much more strongly, saying, "To be clear the shortage is not in news or information but a very specific kind of journalism: labor-intensive reporting on civically important topics." It's what you sometimes hear referred to as Big J Journalism.

To back that up, here are some factoids from the report: Membership in the Investigative Reporters and Editors' association has dropped a fourth, from 5,391 in 2003 to 4,000 in 2010. And submissions to the Pulitzer Prize investigative awards has dropped by nearly a half (43%) in that time. A study by the Annenberg School of Communication, cited in the report, says that only a little more than one minute of the average 30 minute newscast in LA was devoted to education, health or government. The same study found local government was the lead on local LA newscasts only 2.5% of the time and the state's budget crisis was the lead only once in a hundred newscasts. Another 'old fact' from previous Messages, but also still worth noting is that one out of six people (17%) have gone 'newsless', meaning they didn't use any news media the before before. The percentage is almost double (31%) that in the 18 – 24 demographic. The Independent News Network produces newscasts out of Iowa that are used for 'local' newscasts in a dozen markets around the country.

Lead #2. Good start. Different. Kind of folksy, but maybe trying a little too hard to be clever. As I tell my students, clever is hard to pull off. Jon Stewart might get away with it, but not many of us can.

The report makes the point that there is a polarization in news viewing with people watching what news programs that corresponds to their views, raising the question --

Does that make it harder for "less-opinionated news" to reach the scale to become a successful business model. The report also makes the point that there is a 'power shift' in news coverage from the media to government because, it says, the demands on journalists are such that many news releases and statements from governmental agencies are getting on air or on line or in print unedited, un-reviewed, 'as is.'

The report notes that the ratio of public relations professionals to reporters is four to one; compared to a one to one ratio 30 years ago. Then there are the national efforts to develop hyperlocal websites. Examiner.com, for example, has operations in 233 cities "employing" – yes, that word is deliberately in quotes – 67,000 'examiners.' AOL's Patch has started news websites in 800 communities with a paid editor-reporter in each site. The report – rightfully or wrongfully – gives short shrift to these efforts saying, they "add tremendously to the media ecosystem, but they also leave many crucial gaps unfilled."

Oddly (to me at least), the report had nothing about "content farms" which generate so-called content in the guise of news and information but aimed purely at driving search engine results. The report authors do acknowledge the issue obliquely, noting that advertisers are finding ways to reach consumers directly without using content creation sites. The report also says little about the growing practice of deciding what stories to cover, based on their click rates or popularity. It does make a big point about so-called "pay for play" in which video news releases are used in news stories – a practice that is questionable, but what is also questionable is just how widespread it is.

As a counter to this, the report cites a study by James Hamilton of Duke University who contends that a web user in the U.S. today has more 'raw data' on foreign cities available to him or her now than a network news producer had ten years ago.

#3. Another effort that may be too 'cutesy.' We used to call this a 'drop lead.' It has the advantage of not being the obvious, over-used lead, and it is 'different' although different in what may be an off putting way. It does though hit one of the key points made by the lengthy report in a kind of pithy way, although it should be noted that shareholders also want to get paid.

The study says it would take between \$265 Million and \$1.6 Billion to "bridge the gaps we now see in the provision of civically important information." If you're like me, you probably just went... wwwhhhaattt???? Okay, here's how they calculated it.... At the height of local journalism in the 1990's, about 20% of reporters were on beats – so-called accountability reporting, as they call it. Based on current staffing, coming from Burrelle's Media Director, news media would need 5,000 reporters at \$265 Million. Yes, if you do the math, that's about \$53,000 per person. Or if you want to go whole hog and get 30,000 reporter positions, that would be \$1.6 Billion.

#4. Like this one. It is more of a straight lead. Gets right to the point. What I would normally tell my students to do – when in doubt, play it straight. But actually it's intriguing and interesting as well. And it is probably the standout factoid in the report, in my view.

Personally I found this factoid incredibly interesting -- From 2003 to 2008 the average annual spending per person on media and information rose from approximately \$740 to \$882, an increase of 19%. The average for consumer spending was 9.8%. But the report says most of the increases went to Cable and Internet Service providers.

The report notes that cable providers are supposed to provide 15% of their channel capacity to independent programming. In reality it's less than one percent and in one of the few strong statements in the recommendations, the authors say this so called lease capacity is 'grossly ineffective.' Similarly, satellite providers are supposed to allot 4% of their capacity to PEG (Public, Education, Government) programming but complain they can't because of carriage capacity challenges. Oddly the report makes a strong recommendation about the FCC looking at the 'leased access' rule for cable providers but waffles about the set aside rule for satellite providers. I will resist the temptation to say anything about the dozens of paid programming and shopping channels on satellite.

#5. Probably too much of a reaction lead, and not the report itself, although the argument could be made that the media's coverage is the point of the report. It also would provide a segue into the recommendations themselves, which have been the focus of coverage.

The report does make some clear recommendations – for example, recommending terminating the localism initiative because it says it contains "unworkable or burdensome rules" and recommending against reinstating the Fairness Doctrine. But in an interview with the Columbia Journalism Review, primary author Steve Waldman admitted the main complaint was the recommendations were too "restrained." Here's an example of their 'restraint.' Talking about the question of cross-ownership, the report authors say they could see how tv newspaper mergers could help localism but also could see how it would just help the bottomline and not local news. Then they add, "we are not persuaded that relaxing the ownership rules would inevitably lead to more local news, information or reporting or that it would inevitably lead to less." Okay, commentary on my part, but it says NOTHING.

Also, in the line of commentary, the authors hardly ever say "do" in the recommendations. Instead they say "consider" as in the commission should consider this, or 'policymakers' should consider that. In fact, the words consider or consideration appear 41 times in the report. Their other favorite word is "hope," as in the authors "hope" foundations will spend more money on media; they "hope" that support will be non-partisan and non-ideological. Makes you want to introduce them to Jedi warrior/philosopher Yoda whose famous quote is, "There is no 'try.' There is only 'do.'" Except in the FCC report.

Probably worth noting at this juncture is a factoid from the report that only one-tenth of one percent of total foundation spending goes to support media efforts. But, gee, "if" foundations were to spend 5% and "if" philanthropists were to donate 5% and "if" 1% of Americans charitable giving went to non-profit media groups.... Well, that would be a lot of money and wouldn't that be nice.

Much of the report focuses on partnerships – between for-profit and non-profits, commercial and public, professional journalists and citizen journalists, ending on the note, "if the strengths of the new and old media economies can be combined, Americans will have the best local media system they have ever had." And, no, that didn't figure into any of my leads, although, I think, for obvious reasons. But then again maybe it should have. The fact is the report – despite my caveats – is very comprehensive, and there are any number of potential leads in it. So, yeah, if you have a better lead idea, let me know, because the next big question is – will anything come of the report or will it sit on a shelf collecting dust.