

June 14, 2011 (Michael Castengera)

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT VERSUS THE MEDIA ON THE MEDIA

The Federal Communications Commission has just released a lengthy report on the state of journalism, but if you want to understand the state of journalism, take a look at how the report itself was covered. Or not covered. An informal survey of news websites (by yours truly) found many media outlets had nothing on it. Or at least nothing I could find. And the ones that did have something, mainly relied on the Associated Press' Technology Writer Joelle Tessler. Even in those news operations that didn't use her actual story, you could still see the main theme of her story running throughout their story.

That may be explained, in part, because of the report itself. For starters it's 475 pages long. For another thing, you remember that news cliché – the key word in NEWS is 'new.' Well... here's how some of the other reporters say it. Reporters Jeremy W. Peters and Brian Stelter of the New York Times say while some things in the report were "alarming," many of the report's findings were "often self evident"... Rem Reider, Editor and senior vice president of American Journalism Review says it was "packed with useful if not staggeringly surprising information"... Megan Garber of Nieman Labs says that while the report is "perhaps the most substantial and comprehensive look at the state of the news media that's been so far produced... much of it is a summary of what we already know." It's worth noting here that much of the report relied on the Pew Center's annual State of the News Media report, which has been covered in previous Messages.

The main theme – as pronounced by Tessler and re-pronounced by other media outlets – is that there is a lack of so-called "accountability reporting" – in-depth, local journalism needed to hold government agencies, schools and businesses accountable. "Professional reporting." Yes, there are many, many more news sources, or news platforms, or news delivery systems, but there isn't any more real reporting. The report doesn't say this, but it's implied – it's regurgitated news. Sort of like the report itself. A concurrent problem that arises out of this, and the more critical one in my view, is that the 'spin-meisters' in government and business are setting the news agenda because, in the rush to feed the news hole, their news releases and statements are being published and broadcast almost intact, with very limited editorial review.

Those media outlets that just re-posted the AP story include the Huffington Post which prides itself on its political and media coverage. But not on this story. The Washington Post which apparently couldn't afford to send its own reporter a few blocks down the road to cover a national story in its own backyard. ABC News and NBC News/ MSNBC also used the AP story. Fox News had its own report by Shannon Bream on the study focusing on the recommendation that the FCC repeal the Fairness Doctrine. But several major news organization websites didn't have anything, or at least anything I could find. It may be a fault of my online search abilities, but I could find no mention on CBS News' website, USA Today, or for that matter, The St. Petersburg Times or the Atlanta Journal Constitution. The Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune had pieces written by their columnists. And both were good. The LA Times Joe Flint focused on the part of the report that talked about the newspapers investigation of Bell, California, town officials who padded their payrolls. The Trib's Phil Rosenthal had a cute line, talking about how a huge report like this used to land on your desk with a "thud" but now it's a "digital belch." Both columnists used Tessler's "shortage of local, professional, accountability reporting" point.

The report's primary author is Steve Waldman, former national editor for U.S. News and World report as well as a Wall Street Journal Columnist and co-founder of Beliefnet.com. That last part may explain the several mentions in the report of the role of religious broadcasters in the media market. It should be noted though that the National Religious Broadcasters' association says that 40% of their product is news and information. The religious broadcasters association probably also have the best quote in defining the role of the federal government, saying its job is just to "fertilize the conditions under which the media works." The report titled Information Needs of Communities also contains a disclaimer about a governmental agency looking at journalism because, "the media, after all, should be examining the government – and not vice versa."

As Nieman's Garber and AJR's Reider note, the report is packed with some interesting factoids, and you know how I love factoids. Here are just a few: Quoting former Google CEO Eric Schmidt, the report says humans now create as much information in just two days as we did since the first appearance of home sapiens did through 2003. Facebook didn't even exist in 2003, but now it reaches more people than all the other major media outlets combined. And here's one of the more unusual factoids. Noting that Reuters originally started its service using carrier pigeons, the report says a pigeon today could carry a 256-gigabyte flash disc which is the equivalent of eight million times the amount of information one of the original pigeons could carry. The report gives a 'shout-out' to Time Warner and Cablevision for their regional cable news operations while at the same time noting that only 25% to 30% of TV homes have access to such operations. The federal government spends roughly \$1 Billion on advertising everything from military recruitment to public health messages – money which the report authors recommend should be directed to local media.

Newspaper ad revenue dropped by half (48%) from 2005 to 2010. In 1920, nine out of ten newspapers were independent; eighty years later, only one in four newspapers is independent. Just about as many people subscribe to newspapers now as did in 1945... But, the population in the meantime has more than tripled. Online ad revenue at newspapers has risen a

Billion dollars in five years, from 2005 to 2010... But, losses in print advertising have risen to \$24.6 Billion. That is why the report says each 'print dollar' is replaced by four digital pennies. More than 47 Million people visit Craigslist every month in the U.S. Aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes links to more than 200,000 movie reviews.

The transformative event which changed radio from a one-to-one to a one-to-many service was the boxing match between Jack Dempsey and Frenchman George Carpentier which was transmitted to town halls in 61 cities using a 600 foot antenna strung between a clock tower and an office building. While newspapers saw their ad revenue drop by nearly half (from \$800 Million to \$450 Million) during the Great Depression, radio saw its ad revenue double, from \$40 Million to \$80 Million. In 1933 newspaper and radio owners reached an agreement called the Biltmore Agreement in which radio agreed not to do news gathering, to air only five minutes of news at a time and not to air morning news only after 9:30 am., and evening news only after 9 p.m. so as not to impact the newspapers. The agreement only lasted a few years. There are 185 self-defined all-news public radio stations. The number of news/ talk public radio stations has risen to 681 from 595 from 2005 to 2009. Only 15% of public radio stations have more than three reporters. A quarter (23%) of Americans have downloaded a podcast, but only four percent have downloaded a 'news' podcast. In November, 2010, there were 1,110 news podcasts, compared to 2,991 business podcasts, 10,524 music podcasts and 48,984 general podcasts.

The U.S. began licensing "experimental" television stations in 1937. No advertising was allowed during that time. After WWII, the FCC was hit with 158 new applications for licenses, many from newspaper and radio groups trying to stave off the competition. Using data from the National Association of Broadcasters, the report says the average local TV station cash flow is 23%. And you know that experiment by the Houston station to introduce anchor-less news, that was tried in the mid 1950's by another Texas station, WBAP.

So, at this point, the smart readers are saying, 'hey, Michael, you're as guilty as those media groups you criticize, for not saying anything about the report recommendations.' Got me. Well, not really. That's going to be in part two of this report... coming soon to a newsletter and website near you.