

Beth Knobel, **The Watchdog Still Barks: How Accountability Reporting Evolved for the Digital Age** (Olivier Sylvain, ed.), New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018, 160 pp., \$25.00 (paperback).

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Beth Knobel's ***The Watchdog Still Barks: How Accountability Reporting Evolved for the Digital Age*** provides valuable insight on the evolution of accountability reporting in the United States during the last three decades. Knobel defines accountability reporting as journalism that serves both as a fourth estate of government and as a check and balance mechanism for monitoring and holding politicians accountable for the abuse of power (p. 3). Knobel places the threat to journalism's watchdog role in the context of political events, most notably Donald Trump's presidential election. Trump's hostility toward critical media exacerbated the decline of citizens' confidence toward the press and their reporting. These developments bring attention to threats to the First Amendment and the functioning of a free press as the watchdog for society.



The Watchdog Still Barks comprises an introduction followed by three chapters covering the analysis of nine newspapers according to volume and audience reach. The book concludes with a list of hands-on recommendations for aspiring journalists, teachers, and idealists. Knobel, an Emmy-winning producer, builds on her TV, radio, print, and Internet reporting experience with interviews and a quantitative content analysis. She interviewed editors from *The Washington Post*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *Albany Times Union*. The extensive content analysis examined 5,571 front-page articles, printed in April, over five years (1991, 1996 and 2001, 2006, 2011). The sample of US newspapers was grouped into national papers (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*), four medium-sized metropolitan dailies (*Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *Denver Post*, *The Albany Times Union*), and two smaller local newspapers (*Brandenton Herald* (Florida), *Lewiston Tribune* (Idaho)). Respectively, these three newspaper groupings also represented the three chapters of this book: "Bigger Means Better," "The Workhorse of the Watchdogs" and "America's Most Vulnerable" (p. VII). The analysis distinguishes between in-depth accountability reporting and simple enterprise stories, defined as covering surface level issues such as election results. Knobel evaluates the extent to which these nine newspapers covered accountability reporting.

The large national papers published more investigative stories in absolute and relative terms that targeted distinct audiences. Knobel especially commends *The Wall Street Journal* as the only publication that undertook a deep analysis of wrongdoings from the private sector, focusing on stories like the "Amoco drilling rigs" in Alaska, in which the inspection documents were falsified and a leaking pipeline nearly led to a natural disaster. Professor Knobel urges the metropolitan papers to shift their focus to cover more business-oriented accountability reporting. With the exception of the *Albany Times*, the metropolitan papers experienced the largest increase in the volume of investigative reporting. The *Albany Times*, lagged, perhaps as a result of falling numbers of stories brought on by staff cuts. In Minneapolis, two of the four metropolitan

newspapers felt pressured by the rise of digital newspapers such as *MinnPost*, one of the most successful municipal news sites in the country (p. 79). The two smallest papers published 80% fewer accountability journalism pieces. Each paper published only three pieces of deep investigative journalism during the duration of the study. The low numbers may be a result of the sharp decline of rural communities and the free accessibility to online news. Consequently, financial pressures and limited resources restricted the ability of local newspapers to conduct investigations in the field of public policy.

Even the US government seemed to “agree that there is too little accountability reporting on the local level” (p. 81). For seven of the nine newspapers, the proportion of front pages accountability stories increased. The watchdog role remained despite dwindling attention spans, tight money and limited human resources (p. 98). Knobel suggests that it is essential to (1) monitor the judicial branch of government, (2) prioritize accountability reporting instead of breaking news, and (3) encourage more newspapers to follow the steps of the *WSJ* and act as indirect regulators for the private sector.

As the author mostly acknowledges, her study is limited in several ways. It was published in 2018, but the data only covers samples till 2011. More information is now available, and a paradigm shift in politics and society is underway, propelled by Donald Trump’s election, growing right-wing politics, rising polarization, and an aging population. Some of the newspapers showed a greater subjectivity bias in their analysis, and the sample may not have accurately represented the population. Another challenge was the limited availability of newspaper archives for smaller papers, especially for 1991 and 1996, before the Internet became ubiquitous.

This short volume makes practical recommendations for journalists on how to uphold their position as political watchdogs. Conventional wisdom suggests that newspapers mainly focus on breaking news. Knobel disagrees, showing that many newspapers published more investigations to uncover falsehoods, corruption, wrongdoings, and crimes in the private and the public sectors. Three reasons for this stand out: (1) the economic incentive for newspapers to produce quality content, (2) their audiences’ growing demand for the truth (i.e., repudiation of fake news), and (3) the availability and accessibility of data through the Internet. To survive in the digital age, newspapers and their editors should shift their resources toward a “new business based on volume instead of value” (p. 106). This recommendation and Knobel’s priority of “making deep accountability reporting for your particular audience a priority” (p. 103), lacks sufficient concrete details for news organizations to put into practice. Given the decline in readership, American newspapers need to find a balance between quantity and quality in reporting, if they are to survive and act as reliable watchdogs in the fight against the growing abuses of political power.

On the national level, the large newspapers, which enjoy greater access to financial and human resources, should be the driving force behind watchdog journalism. It is equally important that small local newspapers are struggling to survive financially. Knobel offers limited discussion on the digital side of newspapers and how their traditional business models have changed so far and need to change going forward. As digital subscriptions rise exponentially for the more established newspapers, local newspapers need to follow suit in order to attract new customers to offset falling advertising revenues. Taken together, Knobel’s recommendations are comprehensive but lack historical references and the specificity needed to put them into practice.

In conclusion, Knobel's findings challenge conventional wisdom and any tendency to be complacent. No single solution exists. The press needs to work hard to unravel the systematic problems engrained between the relationship of the media and politics. One encouraging trend, which deserves greater attention, is the area of citizen journalism. Bottom-up citizen journalism could help local newspapers by cutting costs and attracting readership. Still, overall, *The Watchdog Still Barks: How Accountability Reporting Evolved for the Digital Age* is a significant contribution toward placing the role of accountability reporting in the context of traditional newspapers of different sizes and objectives.