

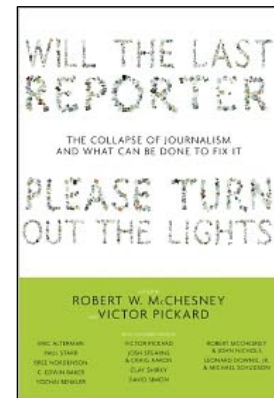
Journalism's Future: "Collapse" Versus "Transformation"

Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard (Eds.), **Will The Last Reporter Please Turn Out The Lights? The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done To Fix It.**, New York: The New Press, 2011, 384 pp., \$13.20 (paperback).

Elliot King, **Free for All: The Internet's Transformation of Journalism (Medill Visions of the American Press)**, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010, 344 pp., \$15.18 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Katherine Fink
Columbia University

The stunning exodus of readers and advertising revenue from print newspapers has inspired countless books and essays on what led to the problem and where to go from here. In their edited volume, *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights? The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done To Fix It*, Robert McChesney and Victor Pickard characterize what is happening as a journalistic "collapse." Their collection of essays is a call to action—specifically, for the government to act immediately to prevent irreparable damage to the practice of journalism. Elliot King, meanwhile, is reluctant to sound such an alarm in his *Free For All: The Internet's Transformation of Journalism*. He calls the changes to journalism a "transformation," and his book describes rather than prescribes. King's main message is that journalism changes as technology changes, and the emergence of online news is only the latest example of a larger historic trend.



Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights? is divided into three parts. "The Crisis Unfolds" (Part I) includes well-known essays by Paul Starr and Clay Shirky as well as "The Reconstruction of American Journalism" by Leonard Downie and Michael Schudson. For anyone who's been following the news industry over the last few years, the material is depressingly familiar. Recurring themes are: advertisers don't need newspapers anymore to reach their target audiences, readers don't want to pay for news, and journalists are losing their jobs, or finding that their work is becoming less about being watch dogs and more about winning the game of search engine optimization. Despite the discouraging themes, the collection shows the remarkable extent to which scholars concur about the enormity of the problems and the need for government intervention. What's also striking is how recently all of these essays were penned; with all the changes to the industry, it's easy to forget that the oldest of these essays dates only to 2008.

"The American Traditions" (Part II) includes historical accounts of what McChesney terms prior "critical junctures" in journalism and describes how decisions that were made then contributed to the predicament in which the industry finds itself today. For example, he writes of a backlash against

sensationalist commercial media during the Progressive Era and a subsequent wave of professionalization as journalists attempted to repair their reputations. A few essays in this section also serve as a reality check for those who decry the loss of a mythical Golden Age of Journalism. Juan Gonzalez and Joseph Torres, for example, note that nonwhites remain embarrassingly underrepresented in newsrooms, especially at the management level, and surveys indicate the problem has only been getting worse. Access to online news is also a problem. Even though the Internet theoretically lowers barriers for anyone who wants to distribute content online, Gonzalez and Torres note that "it is far from certain that people of color will share equally in these opportunities, or that the depictions of race in America will move substantially beyond repackaged stereotypes from prior eras" (p. 193).

"The Way Forward" (Part III) is full of ideas of what should be done. The trouble is that most of these ideas require government action in some way, which means they are probably doomed. Bruce Ackerman, for instance, proposes an "Internet News Voucher" (p. 299) that would direct federal tax dollars to news organizations proportionate to the number of votes their articles receive from online readers. Other recommendations include revisions to copyright and property rights laws, as well as taking a cue from several Western European countries that, per capita, far outspend the United States on public media. Rodney Benson, one supporter of increased government spending on public media, acknowledges that it's a tough sell, even to journalists "blinded" by an "absolutist interpretation of the First Amendment" (p. 317) that leads them to believe government funding will lead to censorship. A few recommendations require no government involvement: Jessica Clark and Tracy Van Slyke, for example, urge news organizations "to rethink their core functions and shift from just producing content to building communities that join and foster online conversations whenever they can" (p. 243).

Overall, *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights?* brings together a rich collection from scholars and journalists increasingly concerned about the ability of news organizations to inform the public and keep political and corporate power in check. Understandably, you won't find much disagreement with McChesney and Pickard in this volume. None of the essays argue that the federal government should stop funding the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, for instance, or that investigative journalism might survive without further government intervention. One mildly dissenting essay comes from *Reason* magazine Editor-in-Chief Matt Welch, who suggests that the future of journalism seems so bleak because the people writing about it are the ones who are losing their jobs—that, in effect, history is being written by the "losers." He also argues that lower barriers to creating content online can empower citizen journalists and small start-ups, potentially increasing the diversity of voices in news.

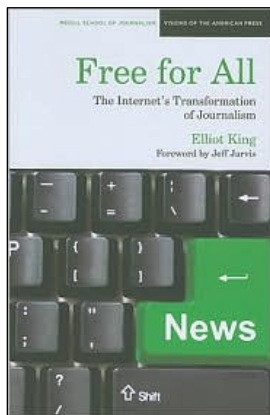
McChesney and Pickard's collection leaves little doubt about where the editors stand on possible remedies for the precarious financial state of journalism. The message is not so clear in *Free For All*. King's main message is that "the emergence of online journalism requires an understanding of the online world in general" (p. 6). To foster that understanding, he provides a thorough history of the development of computing, from its earliest applications as a military number-crunching tool to its evolution into an information-sharing network, to its present-day uses as, among other things, a platform for journalism.

King clearly shows the connections between computing-related regulations and the emergence of online journalism. He describes the FCC's early attempts to regulate "enhanced services," or data

processing applications like e-mail and voicemail that were beginning to be layered on top of existing communications networks in the 1960s and 1970s. While AT&T dominated the heavily regulated basic services market at the time, the FCC's Computer I, II and III decisions left enhanced services largely unregulated. King argues that those decisions laid the foundation for a "free for all" approach to all online communications, one that sharply deviated from earlier media regulation:

It was as though the FCC required television stations and television networks to maintain their broadcast function but did not allow them to develop their own programming. Instead, broadcasters, whose fees and services were regulated by the federal government, would have to open their facilities to others who would provide the programming and could operate without regulation. (p. 82)

King then describes the subsequent proliferation of online content in the form of blogs and message boards, some of which began to compete with news organizations for their readers' attention.



This free flow of information online left traditional news organizations with a problem: how to generate revenue to support their content. News organizations were not altogether caught unawares by the rise of online communication, King suggests—they just approached it cautiously because they couldn't come up with an answer to the revenue question. As early as 1980, however, newspapers were providing online news content to the information networking service CompuServe. Around the same time, the Knight-Ridder and McClatchy newspaper chains attempted to collaborate on a videotext news service called Viewtron, modeled after similar systems in France and the UK. But unlike the two European countries, the United States lacked a regulated telecommunications monopoly, which King maintains is a significant reason that early attempts at online news in the United States failed.

A former technology reporter, King dives deep into the history of computing. The level of detail he includes may lose some readers who are not as inclined technically as they are journalistically. For example, in his description of pre-Internet networks, King thoroughly explains the difference between circuit-switching and packet-switching systems. This explanation ultimately illuminates how computers were able to begin to move information increasingly faster and more reliably. The change also ensured that if one part of the information network went down, the rest of it could still function.

While *Free For All* describes many aspects of computer-mediated communication in great depth, others are unexplored. King focuses largely on the delivery of news, but the production of news also changed as computers became more powerful and affordable. For his part, King prepares us for this when he explains in Chapter 1 that he takes a "different approach" from other books that focus on technological changes in news production. Still, if we must understand "the online world in general" to understand online news, production certainly seems to be part of this world. Production changes included the emergence of political polling operations in newsrooms, as journalists grew wary of political polls produced by partisan organizations. Articles from newspapers around the world became accessible via the Nexis database beginning in 1979. Reporters began doing online research to find sources and add context to

their stories. The news cycle grew ever shorter, changing the demands on reporters' time and work. King rarely references these kinds of developments.

It's hard to argue with King's main point—that journalism practices have been shaped by technology. Readers who get this point, but are still left wondering "Okay, so what now?" are probably better off searching for answers in McChesney and Pickard's collection. King is less definitive about what should happen next. Still, his attempt to situate online news within the histories of both computing and journalism suggests that what's happening now is not completely new, and thus, perhaps, the future is not altogether hopeless.