



"The problem," writes Madelaine Drohan, "is not too little journalistic output but too much, and the seeming impossibility of being able to sort through it all." Dreamstime image

Reports of the Death of Journalism Have Been Greatly Exaggerated

Madelaine Drohan

Despite media fragmentation, the proliferation of cat videos and the shrinking of human attention spans, there is still a demand for the type of journalism that informs public policy in a digital world. How it is delivered and who consumes it is changing. The difficulties that traditional media organizations are experiencing in the digital world should not be conflated with appetite for in-depth, forward-looking news.

You could almost hear the collective groan from journalists across North America last April when news broke that Rob Kuznia, winner of a 2015 Pulitzer Prize for local reporting, left journalism for public relations because he couldn't pay his rent. Kuznia's story stood out against the flood of bad news about closures and layoffs at once dominant media organizations in the US and Canada. If someone with enough talent to win such a prestigious prize could not make a living wage in journalism, what hope was there for anyone?

Anyone with an interest in good public policy and the belief that an informed electorate is essential to a strong democracy should sit up and take notice. If Kuznia's career choice sounds the death knell on the type of journalism that informs public policy, we are all in trouble.

Fortunately, the headlines do not tell the whole story. They focus on the bad news of traditional media organizations struggling and sometimes failing to find a successful business model in an increasingly digital world; on the viral spread of celebrity stories, cat videos and sensationalist news; or on the possibility that consuming digital content is diminishing the traditional audience for such content. Douglas Coupland, a writer, artist and thinker, says the digital world has given rise to omniscience fatigue (the ability to find the answer to almost any question makes information boring). A recent Microsoft report said goldfish now have longer attention spans than the average human being.

For readers, viewers or listeners of serious journalism, it is a time of plenty. Never before have they had access to such a cornucopia of stories, videos, documentaries and analyses on every conceivable topic from anywhere in the world. The problem is not too little journalistic output but too much and the seeming impossibility of being able to sort through it all.

This fragmentation of the news has its downside. It threatens to shrink the common pool of information we share. The risk of rising partisanship among groups who gravitate to like-minded sources may be overblown. Research by the American Press Institute indicates it exists more among older people than the young, whose wide circle of friends in the digital world exposes them to alternate views. Still, sharing common pool knowledge is essential to inform and provide a frame for healthy democratic debate. Fragmentation of the news means a less all-encompassing national conversation about issues, if indeed that ever existed.

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The waning clout of traditional media organizations has also upended the relationship between policymakers and the media. Traditional media organizations were gatekeepers, sorting through the news of the day and presenting what editors deemed important on the front page of the newspaper or in the top items on radio and television broadcasts. As gatekeepers they had a role in the policymaking process, although there is some argument about how large a role they played. Still, media organizations identified problems, encouraged public debate, searched for evidence and critiqued finished policy. They informed engaged citizens.

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This ability to set the agenda for a national conversation has not completely disappeared. At a roundtable convened by the Public Policy Forum in May to discuss the future of serious journalism, participants agreed that the front page of *The Globe and Mail* or the *Toronto Star* was still important real estate. But it's no longer the

only game in town. News no longer waits for the morning newspaper, the nightly broadcast, or sometimes even for journalists. When Prime Minister Stephen Harper shuffled his cabinet in July 2013, he announced the changes first on his Twitter account.

Social media have given politicians the ability to talk over the heads of journalists directly to their intended audience. They are not alone. Companies, advocacy groups, think tanks, academics—just about anyone can use social media to tell their story the way they want it to be told. In the digital world, journalists no longer have a quasi-monopoly on information. This was inevitable, although few saw it coming. The Internet has allowed upstarts in other industries—think Airbnb with accommodation or Uber with taxis—to cut out the middleman. Why should journalism be any different?

Senior civil servants, once the traditional source of policy advice to ministers, have also seen their role as gatekeepers diminished in the digital world. This is partly because of the deluge of information. And it is partly because policymaking itself has undergone a radical shift in the last decade or so, which may also be related to changes in the media.

Policymaking in Canada was once a much more deliberative process, where royal commissions were given mandates to dig into a particularly thorny problem, examine the evidence, research potential policy solutions and come up with recommen-

dations for government. The media played a role, sometimes sparking the commission but also reporting on the hearings, the final report and government follow-up or lack thereof. That era has ended. The last royal commission, an investigation led by Supreme Court Justice John Major into the bombing of Air India Flight 182, reported in 2010. The current government has fiercely resisted calls to set up a commission to investigate missing and murdered aboriginal women. The closest we have come recently to in-depth study of a public issue is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was set up as part of the settlement of a class-action lawsuit.

Policy now appears to arrive ready-formed from the top without the underlying thinking and framework used in more deliberative policymaking. The media role in this new method of policy delivery is almost purely reactive. Journalists inform the public after the fact. Public debate is curtailed and sometimes non-existent. This trend began in the waning years of the last Liberal government and has reached full flower under the Conservative regime. A 2011 assessment by Don Drummond of Queen's University found that the policy shops of various government departments had been pared to the bone during the budget cuts of the 1990s and only partially restored.

Critics suggest policy now reflects the preoccupations of ministers and is based more on political considerations than on policy concerns. A case in point is the Conservative government's focus on crime legislation—more than 30 crime bills have been passed since 2006—at a time when crime rates are falling.

Yet the media are partly responsible for this state of affairs. The advent of the 24-hour news cycle means it is not just journalists going without sleep and having to respond to events on the fly. One participant at the roundtable spoke of the need for political staff to respond almost

instantly to news, even if it broke at 11pm, for fear it would “grow tentacles” overnight.

There is little room in this world for thoughtful examination of problems and long-term policy research. “The 24-hour news cycle has dramatically altered the willingness of politicians and their staff to engage in a slower process,” says David Dodge, former governor of the Bank of Canada and a former deputy minister of finance. The constant need to respond to the issues of the day also means traditional policymakers have less time to devote to longer-term thinking.

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But just as there are many more sources of “news” there are also more sources of policy ideas. Think tanks and policy schools at universities have stepped into the gap left by government, doing longer-term research and producing recommendations for policy change. For example, two papers on potash taxation from the School of Public Policy at the University of Calgary prompted the Saskatchewan government to review its rules.

Business interests, either alone or as part of an association, are also actively involved. We caught a glimpse of this when Finance Minister Joe Oliver told a parliamentary com-

mittee that his decision to include a job credit for small businesses in the 2014 fall budget update was based not on departmental analysis, but on research done by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business.

Lobbyists are hardly a new phenomenon, but they may have more clout in the changed policymaking environment. For journalists, they represent an important audience and a source of news.

What of the general public? Research done by the American Press Institute shows the stories with the longest online life, which keep bringing viewers back to a site, are those that involve original ideas, show evidence of enterprise in the reporting, and have value for the reader. Having a story that no one else has thought of and that answers a question important to the reader is the most important thing media organizations can do to drive their engagement with customers, says Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the institute.

If original content showing enterprise alone were the answer, Rob Kuznia, the Pulitzer Prize winner, would still be reporting for the Daily Breeze in Torrance, California. Yet the difficulties his former employer and other traditional media organizations are experiencing in the digital world should not be conflated with a diminishing appetite for serious journalism. The demand is still there. Journalists and their employers just need to find their niche in the digital world and figure out how to make it pay. That's not an easy task. But neither is it impossible. **P**

Madelaine Drohan is the 2015 recipient of the Prime Ministers of Canada Fellowship given by the Public Policy Forum. The Fellowship is supported by the RBC Foundation. She is also the Canada correspondent for The Economist and a regular contributor to the Economist Intelligence Unit.