

George Brock, **Out of Print: Newspapers, Journalism and the Business of News in the Digital Age**, Philadelphia, PA, and London, UK: Kogan Page, 2013, 242 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

Review by
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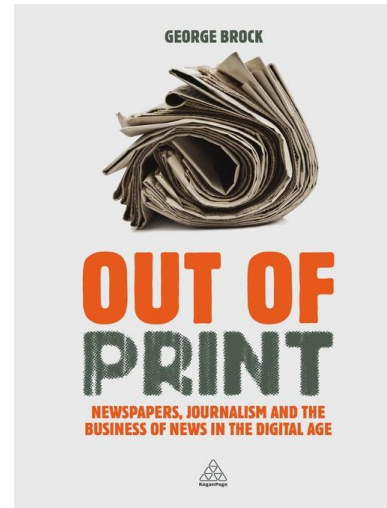
Out of Print does what “think books” about contemporary journalism do best: It addresses a larger public who might not know about the problems facing journalism but also offers an academic discussion rooted in a conversation about the past, present, and future of journalism. Significantly, the work offers a taste of British and continental flair that is much needed in this conversation, as well as an excellent and clear roundup of some of the most on-point concerns facing journalism.

And as one of the first post-Leveson Inquiry offerings, the tension between profit, ethics, and the “crisis” in journalism is most welcome. Author George Brock, a former foreign editor at *The Times* of London, uses his position at the City University in London and his professional expertise to effectively marry the two perspectives of practice and the academy.

Brock does an efficient job of laying out his definitions and assumptions of the book early on. He takes complete responsibility for asserting the vital role of technology in his work. In fact, he asserts that he has no qualms about using technology as the most significant explanatory factor for talking about journalism and change. This is refreshing, at least to the author of this review, given the current focus to so readily deemphasize technology at the favor of other social factors and context, instead of acknowledging the ready changes that remain so visible.

Yet Brock does technodeterminism correctly. This is not a tale of gee whiz but a story that indeed traces an arc in the development of journalism. For instance, he argues that the crisis of journalism has existed for quite a while, at least since the 1930s. Brock does not root the “end” of newspapers in the 1920s with the rise of radio, but rather points to some trends in the rise of the firms that dominated markets. He argues that this prompted news organizations to get lazy, and the desire to innovate and experiment then shrunk (p. 51). He furthermore points to a Royal Commission that met in 1947 to 1949 and argued that the golden era of print had ended.

Out of Print also sticks to a consistent definition of journalism. From the beginning, a clear definition of journalism is also offered: “the systematic, independent attempt to establish the truth of events and issues that matter to society in a timely way” (p. 8). While we may disagree, add to, or feel that this does not adequately speak to the larger history of journalism, Brock at least offers a starting point for discussion, as well as a cornerstone to narrow his conversation.



The first half of the book is dedicated to a historical perspective. Though much of this history is recycled and can be found elsewhere (most notably through Schudson's [2003] and Starr's [2005] work), this presentation is concise and readable. One significant and unique point is the emphasis placed on the early importance of industrialization. Brock notes that even in the late 1880s, the easy entry into the journalism market seen during the penny press and earlier colonial period was no longer possible. Instead, the massive expense of purchasing rotary presses suggested that "newspaper publishing, no longer an add-on to the printing industry, was becoming capital-intensive, but it was also profitable if the formula was right" (p. 43).

This industrial explanation seems to fit the difficulties of the news industry historically and today. Brock comes up with some interesting statistical evidence from the early part of the century. He notes that, in 1933, four popular newspapers in Britain were estimated to have spent 50,000 to 60,000 (pounds) to "buy" readers. To enter the market of news, one had to be able to compete with capital—both with the technology and with the money—to be able to gather large audiences and participate in the commercial market.

Brock attempts to provide a clear outline of what's changed with the advent of the web and why the traditional news media has struggled to adapt. He argues—perhaps more fervently than others—that the economics of chain journalism led to a false sense of stability. He also raises the questions of the scale of information, a failure to understand nodes and networks, the impermanent nature of the web, the rise of pull (vs. push) media, search, and splintering the conversation.

Of these explanations, he may be riding a bit of the Internet utopianism too far as an explanation for journalism's withering. It's misguided to say that the networked nodes of the web call for a demise of news, because there are a) more sites, b) so much more information, and c) more peer-to-peer sharing (pp. 84–86). Rather, we are seeing increasing evidence that these traffic patterns online are simply not the case. As Hindman (2011) documents, traffic patterns, especially from local websites, are pitiful. Big sites stay big, and the explanation that news organizations don't understand the networked structure of the web doesn't work, simply because the networked structure of the Web simply isn't a reality anymore.

Brock does a stand-up job trying to determine what makes Google News both so powerful and so unbreakable. What we know about Google News' search algorithm suggests us that speed online, usage patterns, human opinion of the news source, staff size of the news organization, and original named entities in a story help increase ranking (p. 120). Though Brock doesn't begin discussing local news—perhaps because the majority of prominent British newspapers with which he has had experience have been national ones— one can see the difficulty of smaller newsrooms trying to fit in the Google News game. With staff shrinking, limited ability to do original reporting, and perhaps a decline in human opinion—not to mention speed issues because of older content management systems—local metropolitan (and regional, in the case of the UK) newspapers are imperiled.

One difficulty in the book is the simplification of the discussion of news demand. Brock points to the 2005 Marcus Prior study and makes the dubious claim that this is the "only academic study" that finds a rise in online reading and a decline in the use of traditional media, as well as the reliance of heavy users

on more sources. Using sophisticated sampling and survey techniques year over year, Pew has done significant work charting offline and online news patterns with populations; while not specifically academic, the rigor and quality of the work is generally accepted as such. Similarly, there is a rise of research focused on news consumption patterns, most notably with the publication of Boczkowski and Mitchelstein's (2013) work on the news gap, or on the clear differences in choices between news organizations and readers in story selection.

One of the most useful, though perhaps foreign to a non- British reader, is the discussion of the Leveson Inquiry in depth. One chapter begins with a joke from a British sitcom that will go far over the head of anyone not invested in British pop culture. But the chapter brings together the historical consciousness of the Leveson report, the difficulties of the crisis of journalism as perhaps a root of the phone hacking scandals, and the reasons behind the legal thinking about establishing a privacy law in UK journalism. What the reader learns is that the UK versions of rights may well be a rights-and-obligations model, a good reminder when we think more broadly about democratic freedoms of the press. The Leveson work helps bring to life a difficult report and an ongoing effort at press reform while simultaneously giving adequate context for a non-Anglo understanding.

Brock's work makes a significant contribution in the field of journalism studies work on the future of journalism. *Out of Print: Newspapers, Journalism and the Business of News in the Digital Age* offers a solid grounding for those looking for a quick brush-up with some current concerns facing the press, as well as a clear grounding in the newspaper crisis that arguably begins back in the 1920s or even 1880s. The compelling argument about industrialization and decline is particularly unique, and the merits of finally having a clear and approachable Leveson breakdown for a global audience is most welcome.

References

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