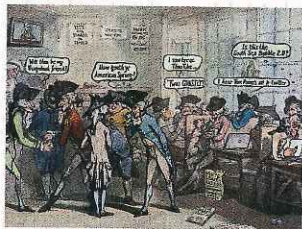


# Back to the coffee house

The internet is taking the news industry back to the conversational culture of the era before mass media



THREE hundred years ago news travelled by word of mouth or letter, and circulated in taverns and coffee houses in the form of pamphlets, newsletters and broadsides. "The Coffee houses particularly are very commodious for a free Conversation, and for reading at an easie Rate all manner of printed News," noted one observer. Everything changed in 1833 when the first mass-audience newspaper, the *New York Sun*, pioneered the use of advertising to reduce the cost of news, thus giving advertisers access to a wider audience. At the time of the launch America's bestselling paper sold just 4,500 copies a day; the *Sun*, with its steam press, soon reached 15,000. The penny press, followed by radio and television, turned news from a two-way conversation into a one-way broadcast, with a relatively small number of firms controlling the media.

Now, as our special report explains, the news industry is returning to something closer to the coffee house. The internet is making news more participatory, social, diverse and partisan, reviving the discursive ethos of the era before mass media. That will have profound effects on society and politics.

## Going West

In much of the world, the mass media are flourishing. Newspaper circulation rose globally by 6% between 2005 and 2009, helped by particularly strong demand in places like India, where 110m papers are now sold daily. But those global figures mask a sharp decline in readership in rich countries.

Over the past decade, throughout the Western world, people have been giving up newspapers and TV news and keeping up with events in profoundly different ways. Most strikingly, ordinary people are increasingly involved in compiling, sharing, filtering, discussing and distributing news. Twitter lets people anywhere report what they are seeing. Classified documents are published in their thousands online. Mobile-phone footage of Arab uprisings and American tornadoes is posted on social-networking sites and shown on television newscasts. An amateur video taken during the Japanese earthquake has been watched 15m times on YouTube. "Crowdsourcing" projects bring readers and journalists together to sift through troves of documents, from the expense claims of British politicians to Sarah Palin's e-mails. Social-networking sites help people find, discuss and share news with their friends.

And it is not just readers who are challenging the media elite. Technology firms including Google, Facebook and Twitter have become important (some say too important) conduits of news. Celebrities and world leaders, including Barack Obama and Hugo Chávez, publish updates directly via social networks; many countries now make raw data available through "open government" initiatives. The internet lets people read newspapers or watch television channels from around the world: the *Guardian*, a British newspaper, now has more online readers abroad than at home. The web has allowed new providers of news, from individual bloggers to

sites such as the *Huffington Post*, to rise to prominence in a very short space of time. And it has made possible entirely new approaches to journalism, such as that practised by WikiLeaks, which provides an anonymous way for whistleblowers to publish documents. The news agenda is no longer controlled by a few press barons and state outlets, like the BBC.

## We contort, you deride

In principle, every liberal should celebrate this. A more participatory and social news environment, with a remarkable diversity and range of news sources, is a good thing. A Texan who once had to rely on the *Houston Chronicle* to interpret the world can now collect information from myriad different sources. Authoritarian rulers everywhere have more to fear. So what, many will say, if journalists have less stable careers? All the same, two areas of concern stand out.

The first worry is the loss of "accountability journalism", which holds the powerful to account. Shrinking revenues have reduced the amount and quality of investigative and local political reporting in the print press.

But old-style journalism was never quite as morally upstanding as journalists like to think. Indeed, the *News of the World*, a British newspaper which has been caught hacking into people's mobile phones, is a very traditional sort of scandal sheet (see accompanying leader). Meantime, the internet is spawning new forms of accountability. A growing band of non-profit outfits such as ProPublica, the Sunlight Foundation and WikiLeaks are helping to fill the gap left by the decline of watchdog media. This is still a work in progress, but the degree of activity and experimentation provides cause for optimism.

The second concern has to do with partisanship. In the mass-media era local monopolies often had to be relatively impartial to maximise their appeal to readers and advertisers. In a more competitive world the money seems to be in creating an echo chamber for people's prejudices: thus Fox News, a conservative American cable-news channel, makes more profits than its less strident rivals, CNN and MSNBC, combined.

In one way the increasing availability of partisan news is to be welcomed. In the past many people—especially right-wing Americans, since most American television was left-leaning—had nothing to watch that reflected their views. But as news is becoming more opinionated, both politics and the facts are suffering: witness some American conservatives' insistence that Barack Obama was born outside America, and others' refusal to accept that taxes must rise (see page 13).

What is to be done? At a societal level, not much. The transformation of the news business is unstoppable, and attempts to reverse it are doomed to failure. But there are steps individuals can take to mitigate these worries. As producers of new journalism, they can be scrupulous with facts and transparent with their sources. As consumers, they can be catholic in their tastes and demanding in their standards. And although this transformation does raise concerns, there is much to celebrate in the noisy, diverse, vociferous, argumentative and stridently alive environment of the news business in the age of the internet. The coffee house is back. Enjoy it. ■