

Research Paper

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Opportunities and Challenges for Journalism in the Digital Age: Asian and European Perspectives



Konrad
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Summary

- While the ‘death of newspapers’ has been long predicted, the internet and social media provide the industry with significant challenges; traditional models are rapidly being made redundant. In particular, newspapers are no longer ‘gatekeepers’ of access to news.
- Although newspapers were among the first industries to recognize the internet’s importance, they have performed poorly at monetizing readership in the digital age. Instead, many revenue streams have been diverted from newspapers to IT companies and news aggregators.
- Some newspapers and journalists have sought funding from foundations, or through crowd-sourcing for particular investigations, though there are clear concerns about the sustainability and impartiality of such models.
- Usage of social media as a source of news is increasing. However, in divided societies the dissemination of false ‘news’ through social media can threaten community cohesion. Some organizations have therefore started validating social media stories.
- Although the challenges facing the media are global, there are regional and country-specific issues. The combination of European technology and Asia’s growing markets suggests there is potential for greater engagement between journalists in Europe and Asia. Already, many Asian newspapers run articles by European newspapers. On the other hand, the rising international prominence of Asian powers such as China means that European newspapers are also likely to devote more attention to Asia.
- Globalization means that the traditional method whereby a journalist gets a scoop for an individual newspaper is likely to be replaced by institutionalized collaboration between different news outfits with input from ‘citizen journalists’.

Introduction

This paper explores the challenges facing the newspaper industry in Asia and Europe, and is based on the 7th ASEF Editors' Roundtable¹ organized by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), and held in conjunction with the 10th Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM10)² Summit in Milan, Italy, in October 2014.

The news industry faces unprecedented uncertainty and upheaval. The rise of the internet – alongside developments in news aggregation, online search and social media – has transformed how news is produced, distributed and accessed. It has had a profound impact on the economics of the industry. Advertising revenue for European newspapers has declined dramatically in recent years, and in Asia a similar downturn seems likely soon.

The 'death of newspapers' has long been predicted. Although consumption of news from television had affected sales prior to the internet, the advent of digital media has taken this trend to new dimensions. In 2012 the Center for the Digital Future at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism predicted that within five years only the largest and smallest newspapers would survive. Later that year, Rupert Murdoch predicted that there might be no more newspapers within a decade. Such gloomy prophecies have been common for years, but there are simply too many factors involved to make any credible predictions. Moreover, for all the industry's much-publicized challenges, newspapers remain a pillar of global news consumption. Every day, 2.5 billion newspapers are read in print and 800 million digitally.³

Still, there is no doubt that the rise of social media and the ubiquity of online news and opinion pose an existential challenge to the traditional newspaper model in which professional journalists act as guardians and privileged distributors of (scarce) information. The pace and reach of non-organized digital coverage of major news over the past decade or so – such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the Hudson River plane crash in January 2009 and the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan in 2011 – demonstrate the growing power of social media. In the digital age, members of the public act as eyewitnesses, publishers, authors and, increasingly, the breakers of news stories.

This shift is challenging accepted journalistic notions of factual reporting, accuracy and balance. The so-called 'news' provided by social media may not present the full picture. It may give a partial, partisan or deliberately distorted view of an event. The insistence on the factual 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where' and 'why' of any story – which traditionally underpinned reported journalism – is being eroded. The irony of the situation is that the proliferation of free news demonstrates the continued need for journalists of integrity, but also threatens the very revenue streams needed to support their work.

¹ The ASEF Editors' Roundtable is a knowledge-exchange and networking biennial media event held in conjunction with the ASEM Summit, <http://www.asef.org/projects/programmes/513-asia-europe-editors-roundtable>.

² The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is an intergovernmental forum for dialogue and cooperation which fosters political dialogue, reinforces economic cooperation and promotes cooperation in other areas. <http://www.aseminfoboard.org>.

³ WAN-IFRA, *World Press Trends 2014*, <http://www.wan-ifra.org/reports/2014/10/07/world-press-trends-report-2014>.

The challenges facing newspapers

Today's news providers operate in one of the most volatile environments any industry has faced in 100 years. While newspaper circulation in some countries in Europe has been in decline since the 1950s, as consumers have increasingly relied on television, rising advertising revenue long compensated for this and allowed print news media to continue to flourish. Between 1950 and 2000 advertising revenues in Europe grew by 300 per cent in real terms. However, the rise of the internet and digital/social media in the past 15 years has changed the picture: since 2000 newspaper advertising sales in Europe have fallen across the board.

The decline in advertising revenue has lagged the decline in circulation, but since 2000 advertising revenues in Europe have also slumped as advertisers themselves have shifted to new media and personalized marketing; the latter now accounts for 75 per cent of advertising spend. While advertising revenue remains important in Asia, here too it is likely to plateau as internet connectivity increases and advertisers follow trends in Europe and the United States. In Thailand and other Asian countries, vernacular language has given some protection to local news organizations, but the trend seems inevitable. While the long-predicted demise of newspapers has not yet occurred in Asia, no one could state with confidence what the news media landscape in the region will look like in 20 years.

The rise of new media has given advertisers the chance to personalize their messages and target specific audiences. But the challenge for news media is not simply one of revenue. It is that news organizations' relevance as gatekeepers of access to information is under threat. Whereas the media used to decide what was newsworthy, social media now enables consumers to define what counts as news and to distribute information and photos of events in their daily lives. Major news organizations such as the BBC in the United Kingdom and NHK in Japan actively encourage this.

Social media is also disrupting the news industry by allowing consumers to disaggregate their preferences. Newspapers have long acted as aggregators, combining general news with coverage of sports, business, entertainment and so forth. Now, the aggregating role is increasingly being taken over by services such as Yahoo and Google. The news-related profits of Google, Facebook and so on could compensate for declining revenues in newspapers. But if the future is in aggregated data, where will the content come from? Investigative journalism, in particular, would appear to face a challenging future.

While many newspapers were among the first to see the potential of the internet, few have been truly innovative in their reaction to the latter's triumph. While many newspapers are reaching more readers than ever before online, they have struggled to monetize these audiences. Instead, innovation has generally been driven by technology companies, both large and small. For news organizations, if 15 per cent of revenue comes from digital products, they are performing well; few receive as much as 20 per cent of their revenue from digital. It seems clear that revenues from subscriptions and advertising, along with current print revenues, will not approach that from print revenues pre-2000. Given the fact that news organizations are competing for advertising with an ever-increasing number of digital news and information providers, this should not come as a surprise.

Thus, the present revenue stream for news does not work, at least not for print outlets trying to maintain existing business models. Pre-internet, journalists would find and write the news; newspapers would aggregate this and earn income from circulation and advertising. Now, much of the digital revenue in the news sector appears to have shifted to online portals, which aggregate content from traditional newspapers and journalists for free.

Is today's news environment really that different?

For all the change that the internet has brought to journalism, in some ways today's challenges are simply a reiteration of a familiar theme: consumers are reluctant to pay for news alone. Newspapers have traditionally dealt with this by supplementing news with sports coverage, gossip columns and so forth – in effect, subsidizing the provision of news with other offerings.

None the less, there remains demand for real news. In this respect, digital news consumption is not dissimilar from earlier consumption patterns. In the past, consumers interested in sport turned first to the back pages of their newspaper – but they still received (and perhaps read) the whole paper. Now, they access their preferred sections online. Internet media providers, like newspapers, still provide access to news. And the consumers still choose – as with a newspaper – to read or watch what they like. But given the nature of the internet, the sports fan with little interest in current affairs can now more easily bypass news entirely. Previously, when a reader opened a newspaper, he or she knew roughly how long it would take to read. There was a beginning and an end. Now, the internet is infinite. A reader can stay online for minutes or hours. The amount of potentially accessible information is unlimited.

There are potentially far-reaching implications for the media's role in critically challenging establishment positions and holding the powerful to account. For example, while newspapers still aggregate a range of content of varying political orientations, the internet's ability to target news to individuals' political views (and biases) risks creating an 'echo chamber' wherein consumers access only the material that reinforces their existing beliefs and worldviews. Given the many sources of political tension and instability in Asia, this development could entrench conflicting positions and impede resolution of difficult issues – for example, if Indians generally read pro-Indian interpretations of South Asian events (and have their views validated by friends who are reading the same material), while Pakistanis read pro-Pakistan interpretations (similarly validated), then the possibility for mutual understanding or compromise over the many thorny bilateral issues in the India–Pakistan relationship could be diminished. The risk is all the greater because of the difficulty, in the digital environment, of distinguishing between news and opinion or judging the reliability of information.

But is this situation so different from that of traditional print newspapers? Right-wing readers who read right-wing newspapers find their positions validated. Equally, left-wing readers rarely change their opinions after reading right-wing newspapers; instead, they too find their opinions confirmed.

When everyone is an eyewitness, what is a journalist?

The declining trend in newspaper circulation seems set to continue. The associated, though lagging, decline in advertising revenue is already taking place in Europe. Advertising revenues for French newspapers fell by around 35 per cent between 2008 and 2014; advertising revenues in the United Kingdom roughly halved in the same period. While newspapers are growing in emerging Asian markets such as India and China, and circulation rates remain high in Japan, over the next decade advertising revenue in Asia (particularly in more developed markets) seems set to fall. Similarly, subscriptions to television services are likely to fall as consumers access programming differently.

Newspapers were among the first sectors to realize the potential of digital media. Most now have an online presence. The most commercially successful embraced a 'portfolio' strategy of distributing content on a wide variety of platforms and offering subscribers bundled packages. However, many newspapers would benefit from better engaging with or adopting ideas and business models from technology companies; technology companies have been far better at seizing control of content and digital distribution channels and creating attractive formats.

Newspapers need to become more innovative. They are trying many approaches, but while a number of possible pathways present themselves, it is unclear which will succeed. As far as the workflow of newsrooms is concerned, many newspapers have adopted 'digital first' strategies, which involve concentrating on digital rather than print output. The main target has been to remain on top of rapidly breaking news on social media networks and to maximize viewer 'footfall', even though most revenue still comes from print.

While there is widespread agreement that the 'digital first' approach presents the best model currently available, it is unclear whether it is universally applicable, or indeed sustainable. Pioneers such as Schibsted, a Scandinavian publisher, may generate more than half its revenue from digital, but for most news media organizations 5–10 per cent is a more common figure.

Thus, while charging for content is vital to news media, users are hesitant to pay for it. Converting internet traffic into cash is the challenge. Potentially, if print sales continue to decline, many traditional newspapers will either consolidate or close. In the longer term, those that survive may eventually find that they have greater access to sources of revenue.

Consumers access news on digital platforms differently in different countries. For instance, in the United Kingdom and Spain, news is primarily accessed through known brands – the *Guardian* or *Telegraph*, *EL MUNDO* or *EL PAÍS*. In Germany, Italy and Japan, in contrast, search engines are now the primary sources of news. The general trend is a shift in preference towards briefer news articles and the use of phone-based technology (such as KakaoTalk in South Korea or Sina Weibo in China). However, there are exceptions. In Denmark, for instance, news organizations are finding demand for longer, in-depth discussions. And in Thailand, South Korea and Indonesia, some traditional print media are moving into television in an attempt to diversify revenue streams. Moreover, everywhere there are examples of media organizations shifting into other related businesses – video, television, internet and so forth. The classical boundaries of the sector have vanished.

These trends reflect cultural differences, the composition of the media and the relative strength of traditional brands in different countries. Consequently, solutions are likely to be country-specific. For newspapers, countries in which search engines are the primary source of news present a particular challenge. Instead of searching for news horizontally (by brand), consumers are searching by topic and reading stories from a range of providers.

In the longer view, the period from 1950 to 2000, when newspapers boomed on the back of both sales and advertising revenue, may come to be seen as something of a blip. In the 19th century, journalists ran printing shops, travel agencies and bookshops to subsidize news-gathering. Now, as in the past, newspapers will need to rely on a much broader range of revenue streams. Non-advertising digital revenues from promotions, services and transactions are important and growing faster than advertising (where advertising revenues are still growing). Newspapers may need to sell financial services, sell memberships to lifestyle websites or clubs, or seek grants from foundations or through crowdfunding to finance investigations.

The future is digital. Consequently, news organizations will need to manage tensions between traditional journalism and new approaches, emphasizing speed of output. Clearly newspapers need to adapt their digital products. Definitions of what even constitutes ‘content’ are changing. In the past, content used to refer to news, but now includes advertising, marketing material, games or almost anything seen as appealing to the consumer. News media companies could focus on their core strengths, reflecting the uniqueness of their product and becoming the reference source on given topics. Yet evidence suggests that increasing news offerings alone may not generate sufficient revenue for long-term success.

The internet requires new approaches to advertising revenues. With the internet, adverts can be directly connected to content (although, of course, print newspapers have also long linked advertising to content – whether cars, property or travel). While boosting website traffic is commercially important, acquiring larger numbers of targeted consumers as site users/subscribers may become a priority. The changes in media consumption patterns among younger people may also require a change of approach: instead of waiting for people to demand news, news may need to be delivered to them.

Technology provides new opportunities: local newspapers have long relied on advertising revenue from local companies. Awareness of geographic location provides opportunities for news organizations to target advertising – even from very small companies. But to fully benefit from digitalization, news organizations will have to use technology more effectively. Otherwise, as has been the case with news aggregation, they will be crowded out by tech-first companies.

New approaches for journalism

Who pays for journalism, if revenue streams are being eroded? What seems clear is that combined revenues from print and digital media (whether from website subscriptions, advertising revenue or apps) will be lower than in the pre-internet era. New models are emerging, such as crowdsourcing, free distribution licences, and foundation-funded journalism. While some of these ideas will work, others are likely to fail.

Social media provides new ways to crowdsource reporting – although journalism in some sense has always crowdsourced to the extent that it has involved seeking witnesses to confirm details of events. The online era simply requires new practices, particularly when ‘sources’ are not first-hand. Citizen journalism played an important role in the Arab Spring, for example, but the credibility of stories was often uncertain given that sources lacked professional accreditation and may have served partisan agendas.

Contextualizing an event can be difficult if a ‘citizen journalist’ is not impartial. For instance, many of the news stories circulating about Islamic State of Iraq and Syria are being aggregated in Lebanon, but are frequently compiled by Kurds. Similarly, stories from Iran are frequently compiled by Iranians in exile. In the Asian context, many stories about North Korea come from South Korean sources. Assessing the veracity of such stories remains difficult.

A further issue concerns the exchange and aggregation of news in the digital world. This is challenging established copyright regimes. It is becoming the norm for online publishers to partly or fully use content from other news sites, and to link to external sites. National copyright laws may not be effective in respect of the internet, because of varying levels of protection for news and the difficulty of enforcing copyrights internationally. Existing licensing and syndication processes are often unable to compete with digital channels of distribution and redistribution of information.

One emerging alternative is Creative Commons licensing, in which conditions for attribution and derivative uses are predetermined by the content creators and made available as machine-readable tags attached to content. This model is designed to speed up the licencing process, as it provides for usage of content without the need for additional licences.

Some commercial companies and not-for-profit journalistic outlets already use these models; Al Jazeera was one of the first major news organizations to use Creative Commons. Another example is GroundReport.com, a citizen journalism site that publishes stories itself and through syndication agreements with other news aggregators. Its reporters receive 50 per cent of the advertising revenue associated with the unique traffic to their posts.

To the extent that traditional media are becoming comfortable with sponsorship, the use of foundation-funded journalism is also increasing, particularly for specific issues such as healthcare or the environment. However, this presents some challenges. The first is that foundations are not always neutral and may seek to define or influence coverage of funded stories. The second challenge is that foundations’ priorities may change, raising the question of sustainability. Third, organizations that adopt the foundation-funded model can face significant governance challenges. They may struggle to grow, and their failure rate is significant.

The use of community fundraising in journalism is rarer. One example is Spot.us, which from 2011 to 2015 allowed members of the public to pay independently for on-demand reporting on a specific story. In the event that a media outlet purchased publishing rights for such work once it had been produced, money was repaid to those who had initially commissioned the reporting. All unpurchased content was made available via Creative Commons.

Social media: a role for verification

Social media is also redefining the journalistic landscape through the creation of virtual communities. Organizations such as Plus Social Good use social media to share knowledge and unite communities. Traditional news organizations cannot continue treating publishing on social media as a subordinate activity to their core reporting. Instead, they need to integrate news coverage into their social media to enhance its impact. In this way, newspapers become more like meeting places instead of top-down distributors of information. Furthermore, many people now consider trends on social media to be as much genuine news as ‘external’ events – this means that the very definition of what constitutes news is changing. News organizations may need to draw in younger audiences through viral videos, or take advantage of the eagerness of advertisers and brands to capitalize on social media.

As with citizen journalism, however, one of the problems with social media is that stories are often not verified. After recent flooding in China, newspapers used photographs from social media which turned out to have been taken a decade earlier. Instances of newspapers or news agencies relying on social media sources that subsequently prove to be false are growing in number.

Social media is also susceptible to deliberate manipulation by partisan interests. In several recent conflicts, such as in Ukraine, examples of social media providing reliable ‘citizen journalism’ have been limited. Instead, information published on such forums has frequently turned out to be false. In the absence of journalists to debunk rumours or challenge propaganda, social media can destabilize political situations by contributing to misinformation and scaremongering. More generally, countries in which information – or misinformation – is tightly controlled by the government demonstrate the limits of social media as an alternative to journalism.

That said, social media can be an important democratizing influence and a force against censorship. For example, it played a significant role in disseminating information about recent anti-government protests in Hong Kong. However, the successful dissemination of information through social media in this context was made possible, among other factors, by journalists’ ability to verify and corroborate information. This demonstrates that there remains a role for journalistic skills in checking information, validating stories and preventing citizen journalism from getting out of control.

Future journalists will need to accept that they cannot always break stories in the traditional sense. This goes against the ‘scoop’ mentality, and the proprietorial attitude towards news that has often accompanied it in the past. Nowadays, news will often appear first on social media. To an extent, this changes the role of formal journalism, which will increasingly be to check, package and contextualize such information.

Another important potential role for journalism in the digital age will be to filter useful news from the vast array of online information. Every minute, 100 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube. Storyful, based in Ireland, has established a successful business model that works to verify (or debunk) social media stories. The company mines Twitter, YouTube and similar sites, building lists of stories by topic or theme; it looks for stories emanating from a particular location, traces the origin of the stories, and, if they are confirmed as genuine, acquires the rights to provide content to

newsrooms and brands. The model recognizes that each event creates a virtual community, brought together through shared hashtags. In this context the role for journalists is to turn these isolated units of social content into compelling stories.

The scope for collaboration

The digital revolution is forcing some media organizations to reassess their relationships with competitors. An increasing number of companies have started to cooperate on non-content issues, such as sharing studios or film crews. Cooperation on content is also increasing. Newspapers in Asia frequently run stories from European newspapers – although the reverse is less common (often because European newspapers are unaware of the availability of material in their language; or because, lacking knowledge of the region and experience with Asian news outlets, they are uncertain about material's credibility).

Within Asia, an example of cooperation can be found in the form of the Asia News Network. Established in 1999, it comprises 21 media groups from across the region and is intended to provide an avenue for cooperation to optimize news coverage.⁴ The organization allows members to publish news stories from other network members. In return, each member commits to contributing at least five stories daily. Newspapers that use stories from other members give credit to the original publisher. They also commit to helping members of the network, for instance through sharing facilities. This enables them to share research resources, cut costs and increase the volume of content they publish.

Other initiatives are more overtly political. *Aman ki Asha* (Destination Peace) is a peacebuilding initiative between the Jang Group (from Pakistan) and the *Times of India*. While the movement has struggled to influence the policies of the Pakistani and Indian governments, it has improved the visibility of elements in both countries striving to improve the bilateral relationship.

Despite gloomy predictions, newspapers are far from dead. While the digital age poses a variety of serious challenges to the forms and finances of journalistic reporting, there is much potential for enhanced collaboration between Asian and European media organizations. European organizations have technology but need growth, while Asia has markets – 800 million internet users in China alone – but lacks technology. The fastest-growing market for news in Asia is likely to be in mobile phones. Furthermore, while European publics may lack awareness of Asian issues, the growing economic power of Asian countries suggests that European demand for coverage of Asia is likely to increase. In the future, stories – in particular truly international stories – will be broken through formal or informal collaborations.

⁴ See Asia News Network, <http://www.asianewsnet.net/about-ann.html>.

About the author

Gareth Price is a senior research fellow at Chatham House leading research on South Asia. He was previously an analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit, focusing on India, Pakistan and Afghanistan; and before that the South Asia analyst at Control Risks Group. His current research interests include India's foreign policy, regional relations within South Asia and the politics of water. He has advised a range of governments and corporates on strategies of engagement with South Asia.

Roundtable participants

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Mr Flemming YTZEN, Editor, *Politiken Weekly*, Denmark
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About the 7th ASEF Editors' Roundtable

The ASEF Editors' Roundtable is one of the oldest programmes of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), which was first launched in 1997 in Luxembourg. The roundtable is ASEF's top media programme, gathering senior editors of major print or broadcast media to exchange perspectives on current affairs pertinent to Asia and Europe. The event is often organized on the sidelines of ASEM summits. Its agenda focuses on salient issues which may also be discussed under the summit agenda. For more information, please visit www.asef.org.

The 7th ASEF Editors' Roundtable, 'Asian and European Media in the Digital Age', gathered editors-in-chief from ASEM countries to share how their agencies are experiencing the changing face of the media, as well as adapting to it. In addition to providing a learning opportunity, this roundtable sought to identify possible improved linkages between Asian and European media to conquer new territories and reach out to more audiences in this open and, at the same time, increasingly closely knit digital world.

The roundtable on which this paper is based took place on 15–17 October 2014 in Milan, Italy, on the sidelines of the 10th Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Summit.

Previous roundtable editions:

6th Asia-Europe Editors' Roundtable

Multiple currencies for a multi-polar world
13 October 2012, Bangkok, Thailand

5th Asia-Europe Editors' Roundtable

Asia and Europe: engaging for a post-crisis world
3 October 2010, Brussels, Belgium

4th Asia-Europe Editors' Roundtable

Session 1: Globalized media: The unification/fragmentation paradox
Session 2: The media's role in promoting environmental awareness: A global role for the media
23 October 2008, Beijing, China

3rd Asia-Europe Editors' Roundtable

Session 1: Dialogue among cultures, and civilization's need for socially responsible journalism
Session 2: Shared responsibility in sustainable development and resource management
9 September 2006, Helsinki, Finland

2nd ASEF Editors' Roundtable

Session 1: The media's impact on public opinion and foreign policy
Session 2: The media's role in shaping attitudes in Asia and Europe
18 October 2000, Seoul, Korea

1st ASEF Meeting of Editors

Building bridges with images
26 October 1997, Luxembourg

About the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is an intergovernmental forum for dialogue and cooperation established in 1996 to deepen relations between Asia and Europe. It addresses political, economic and socio-cultural issues of common concern.

ASEM brings together 53 members (21 Asian and 30 European countries, the ASEAN Secretariat, and the European Union).

The ASEM Summit is a biennial meeting between the heads of state and government, the president of the European Council, the president of the European Commission and the secretary-general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

For more information, please visit www.aseminfoboard.org.

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