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Chris Peck: Journalism morphing in digital age

By Chris Peck
Posted December 6, 2009 at 12:06 a.m.

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Someone anonymously e-mailed me a story a few days ago that began with this headline: "Why Journalists Deserve Low Pay."

Not a holiday message that bolsters good cheer in my workplace. Who would argue that journalists aren't doing God's work and should be paid accordingly?

In this case, the author of "Why Journalists Deserve Low Pay" is a Swedish college professor in media economics named Robert Picard. His essay, reprinted in the now digital-only Christian Science Monitor, reflects a point of view he routinely makes in his classroom lectures. Here's the one-sentence summary, or nut graf as journalists call it, of Picard's argument: We don't need to pay journalists very much because if you want information these days you can just Google it.

So much for doing God's work. In essence, Picard says that the growth of the Internet and social media like Twitter and Facebook means most human beings with a computer and smart phone can now do the work formerly performed by journalists. For decades, Picard argues, journalists did have high value because they had access to information and sources that most people couldn't conveniently develop. And the companies journalists worked for owned presses and TV towers that could disseminate this information in ways that the public couldn't match.

No more. Ask most college kids today what they do to stay informed and a majority will say they rely on their Facebook pages, their online news outlets and word of mouth. They pick up the gist of the news from simply living in a media-saturated environment. If they want to learn more, they might tune in a 24-hour cable news channel, or catch a headline in the paper. But more likely than not, they will just

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Google it.

But wait. I did my own Google search of some media-related news events from just this past week and found that the good professor's "Just Google It" substitution for journalism might not be as simple as it seems.

In Washington, the Federal Trade Commission held a two-day workshop to consider the health and value of journalism. At the workshop, FTC chairman Jon Leibowitz said this: "News is a public good and we should be willing to take action if necessary to preserve the news that is vital to democracy."

The "Just Google It" argument took some punches at the FTC hearing too. Rupert Murdoch, owner of Fox News and The Wall Street Journal, said that giving news consumers what they want on any platform from print to cell phone to e-reader will be essential in the future -- but consumers will have to begin to pay for high-quality news and information. "Good journalism is an expensive commodity," he said. Then Murdoch announced that he is looking for a way to keep the work of his News Corp. journalists off of Google.

This worries Google. While its aggregation and distribution concept has made it the biggest success story in American business this last decade, Google depends upon the news-gathering work of 25,000 other news outlets around the world. Google doesn't employ a single journalist. Anything that appears on Google News or Google Web searches comes from somebody else. When the largest news producer in the world, Rupert Murdoch, says he wants to find a way out of Google, well, it's worth noting.

Google did just that. In an official post on the Google corporate blog a few days ago, the company announced that it will cooperate with news organizations that have content on paid Web sites (like Murdoch's Wall Street Journal) to allow these sites to still be included in the results of all Google searches, but limit people to only five free articles per day from such paid content sites. Google seems to recognize something Picard glosses over -- namely, that quality information needs a meter attached to it to help defray the costs of gathering it in the first place. A huge first step.

The recent FTC hearings led to one more bit of insight related to moving past the notion that all good information simply must be free. The FTC issued a set of guidelines governing endorsements by bloggers and other digital media. The nut graf here: Consumers need to be protected from false and misleading claims made by bloggers and social network sites.

Amy Howell, founder of Howell Marketing Strategies in Memphis, explains these new consumer guidelines in a story today in the Business section of The Commercial Appeal. She explains how blogs that incessantly beat the drum in support of a particular product or service can be deemed as advertisements or endorsements, and thereby could be subject to consumer protection laws designed to damp down unsubstantiated claims and outright lies.

Howell believes in the power of social media. She thinks Google, bloggers and sites like Facebook have changed forever the channels used by the public to gather news and information. But it's not the end of journalism. "The key for journalists," she said, "is to understand that their role is now to identify real news, ensure balance, verify

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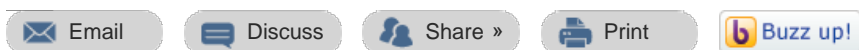
facts and present well-written well-rounded stories with accurate and appropriate sources. Because that is often left out of some of the blogging out there."

The nut graf here: Journalism, if it is to survive, simply must do better work. The future isn't just about simply quoting others and stringing together stats. It isn't going to survive just by covering small local events. The public itself can do all that. So let them. Open up some space in newspapers and Web sites for user-generated content and call it good. Then, focus the work of the professional journalists up the food chain to higher-value reporting with deeper research and data analysis.

The four largest newspapers in Tennessee, including The Commercial Appeal, will begin to make that move in 2010. The Knoxville News Sentinel, The Tennessean in Nashville and the Chattanooga Times Free Press will work with this newspaper to do higher-level reporting on the governor's race. The papers will share resources so that together they can dig deeper into campaign promises, finances and the records of the candidates. The combined effort, operated under the banner of the Tennessee Newspaper Network, is one way legacy media can increase their value in the digital age.

That's the window of opportunity open for the journalists. The place where they can prove Professor Picard wrong.

Chris Peck is editor of The Commercial Appeal. Contact him at 529-2390 or at peck@commercialappeal.com.



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December 6, 2009
7:11 a.m.

[yossarian](#) writes:

Absolutely fascinating.

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"Who would argue that journalists aren't doing God's work..."
Although religious, I'm not a Biblical scholar; perhaps someone explain how, exactly, journalism is "God's work"?

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"...and should be paid accordingly?"

What is the going pay rate for doing God's work? I might want to consider a career change if the pay is good.

What we have here, folks, is an attempt to justify what surely is coming soon; a cry for federal bailouts/subsidies for print journalism. Note the quote by FTC chairman Jon Leibowitz: "News is a public good and we should be willing to take action if necessary to preserve the news that is vital to democracy."

Whereas the banks and auto manufacturers were only 'too big to fail', democracy itself will fail without us taking action to preserve those in the news