

Abstract

There are several key areas that the Federal Trade Commission should look at during their workshops and roundtables “From Town Crier to Bloggers: How Will Journalism Survive the Internet Age?” on December 1st and 2nd in Washington, DC. These include the roles of Media Education, Media Consolidation, Stimulating the Journalism Economy, and Better Governmental Data Access.

Media Education: Journalism and Media Literacy

First and foremost we need much more media education in our schools. We need to be teaching students how to be journalists. From this, they will develop a great appreciation of what is involved in good journalism and why it needs to be supported. Related to this, we need much more education in our schools about media literacy. How do students understand what is being said and unsaid by news organizations, advertisements, websites and so on? How do they determine truth from fiction?

One suggestion that has been floating around has been various forms of ‘Write for America’, where newly minted journalists would write in underserved areas, similar to how ‘Teach for America’ works. This seems like a good idea. There are many ways that this could take place, such as forgiveness of student loans for those who take jobs reporting in underserved areas up through a twenty first century WPA producing a new generation of great literature.

Yet with this, the government must be careful not to get further into determining who is or isn’t a credentialed journalist. We need to promote journalistic competition and diversity. Credentialing processes often have the opposite effect.

Reverse Media Consolidation

In theory, it would seem, media consolidation would be a good thing for news organizations. Overhead could be reduced and synergies found. However, in practice it appears that media consolidation has resulted in increased debt loads that news organizations have had to carry, as well as a loss of good local reporting. This has decreased the value of many news organizations’ products. In addition, it appears to have resulted in advertising being driven by larger corporate organizations that have less contact with local businesses. This in turn drives down the advertising dollars received.

One aspect of this is the FCC’s rules on over the air television and radio stations. In looking at whether or not to grant a license, a renewal, or permission to consolidate, the FCC used to look more at the public needs. As we are seeing, a key part of the public need is quality local journalism, and this should be much more carefully considered for all spectrum requests.

Not only should the FCC be concerned about this when it relates to the public airwaves, but the FTC should be concerned on how it affects competition. Local and State governments providing franchise agreements for companies that use the public right of way to deliver television and telecommunications should be concerned about this.

All spectrum and franchise agreements should carefully consider how much they promote diversity of local coverage in the agreements. Included in this should be strong support for public, educational and governmental access television channels and support for low power FM radio stations.

Beyond this, the government should be very careful about any tax breaks or other financial incentives they provide so that they do not unfairly benefit larger news organizations at the expense of smaller news organizations.

Stimulating the Journalism Economy

Beyond a new WPA or Write for America project, tax incentives and spectrum offerings, there are many other ways that journalism is directly or indirectly funded by the government. One large existing package is the paid public notices that local governments are required to put in local papers. There is a continuing battle over whether these public notices should or could be better served by online news organizations.

Here in Connecticut, we have the public funding of State elections. Some of the funding from this goes to advertising, and some of that may go to advertising with local news organizations. Two other states have public funding of elections, at least two more State Legislatures are considering similar legislation and there is a bill in Congress to consider public funding of Congressional campaigns. It might be beneficial to designate some portion of such public funding to go to advertising to local news organizations.

Beyond that, other stimulus packages may have had some effect. One cannot help but wonder how many advertisements were bought from local news outlets promoting new cars as part of the cash for clunkers program, or how much real estate advertising has been created as a result of the first time homebuyers' credit. As legislators draft stimulus packages, they should consider not only how the package affects Main Street, but also how it affects the journalist coverage of Main Street.

To the extent that media consolidation can be reversed and we can return news organizations to being small businesses providing local coverage, it may be beneficial to look at how the Small Business Administration can help news organizations similar to how they help other small businesses. The FTC and other organizations might also want to work more closely with marketing and advertising firms to help make advances in digital advertising more accessible to smaller organizations.

Better Governmental Data Access

Most of the previous comments have been on the business side of journalism. However, there is another very important trend that needs to be considered. Slowly, more and more government information is becoming easily available via the Internet. This helps out reporters get the information that they need. All levels of government from the local up to the national, should be encourage to make more data easier to access. This should include the ability to subscribe via email, feeds like RSS, and

increasingly via real time data feeds. Governments should include the ability to retrieve raw data in structured formats so that reporters can better analyze the data. Finally, governments should provide training in accessing this data to reporters and citizens a like.

Conclusion

There are many ways in which the government can promote better journalism in the Internet age. Clear goals of quality and diverse reporting need to be considered and the methods for achieve these goals needs to be explored very careful to minimize unintended consequences.