The financial crisis gripping the traditional media, especially newspapers, has put fear into the hearts of people who hold that a vibrant democracy depends on an informed citizenry and that the news function played by the media is therefore vital. In the United States, the past few years have been disastrous for newspapers, bringing closures, shifts to Internet-only publishing, and massive layoffs of journalists. The worst of the storm happened in 2008 and 2009, but the situation has continued to deteriorate, although at a slower pace (see www.newspaperlayoffs.com). Meanwhile, we have been inundated with studies, reports, conferences, and blogs on the decline of the press and its political consequences.

In his evocatively titled book *Losing the News: The Future of the News That Feeds Democracy*, Alex S. Jones, director of the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard University, explains that what we risk losing is not freedom of expression or opinion, which is in fact flourishing on the Web; rather, we face “a dearth of reliable, traditional news.” For it is news rather than commentary that shapes opinion. In a chapter titled “Newspapers on the Brink,” Jones summarizes the situation in the United States in one terse sentence: “Panic is not too strong a word for the collective mind of the newspaper industry.”
Even though the level of anxiety is not as high in Canada, the situation is just as worrisome. Many journalists have been laid off, in print and television alike, and the working conditions of the survivors have, in many cases, deteriorated. In English Canada, severe job cuts (six hundred, or 10 percent of the workforce) were announced at the end of 2008 at the Sun Media newspaper chain, owned by Montréal-based media giant Quebecor. Significant buyouts and layoffs, along with retraining of reporters for the digital age, have also occurred at the Postmedia newspapers, including the flagship National Post, since this newly formed company acquired Canwest’s newspapers in 2010. (The Canwest group had entered bankruptcy protection in 2009.) More layoffs and buyouts were announced in the fall of 2011 by Postmedia and Torstar, owner of the Toronto Star. In Montréal, La Presse management threatened to close the newspaper in December 2009 if the employees did not accept major changes to their collective agreement, and in January 2009 the Journal de Montréal, published by Quebecor, decreed a lockout, which lasted more than two years, until February 2011. Ultimately, three-quarter’s of the newspaper’s employees lost their jobs, and the newsroom staff was reduced by half.\(^2\)

My topic is the future of the news, but I shall discuss, above all, newspapers because their fates are intertwined. Newspapers play a dominant role in the gathering and dissemination of the news. Their newsrooms are far better staffed than those of the other media, and each day, in most of the communities they serve, they cover more events than their competitors do, and often in greater depth. In the United States, a study of Baltimore’s news “ecosystem” by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism did a fine job of demonstrating the preponderant role of newspapers. Even though the news sources available to the public have proliferated in recent years, especially on the Internet, we tend to find the same news everywhere. The study showed that 95 percent of the articles and reports that contained original information came from traditional media—most of them newspapers.\(^3\)

The situation is somewhat different in Canada because of the presence of the public broadcaster, especially in French Canada, where it claims an outsized share of journalistic manpower. A survey conducted in 1996 showed that 31 percent of the journalists working for the country’s French-language media were employed by Radio-Canada and that almost a fifth (19 percent) of all Canadian journalists were employed by CBC/Radio-Canada.\(^4\) It is probably safe to assume that this situation has not changed much. Even so, newspapers
also play a vital role in the country. If the other media didn’t have newspapers to draw on, their news menu would often be meagre indeed. If newspapers stopped publishing, radio hosts who comment on the news would have trouble finding topics, and bloggers would have precious few events to discuss. In large part, newspapers set the public affairs agenda. If the crisis gripping newspapers worsens, it will affect all media and therefore the news system that nourishes democratic life.

Moreover, many studies point out that the print media foster an informed citizenry (Henry Milner provides an exhaustive review in Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work). Newspaper readers, especially those who read the broadsheets, are better informed than non-readers and are more likely to be involved in the political and democratic life of their country. On the contrary, people who watch a great deal of television, especially commercial TV, are less informed about public affairs. The adage “words fly away but writings remain” appears to be true.

This brings me to the financial crisis, which is accompanied, in my opinion, by a crisis that is just as profound: namely, that of a style of journalism that is slightly dated and has difficulty adapting to technological leaps and to the behaviour of a fragmented, diversified public. In this chapter, I shall try to explain the roots and consequences of both crises.

A MULTIFACETED CRISIS

The financial crisis that the print media is experiencing is twofold: in economic parlance, it is both cyclical and structural. The recession (the cyclical aspect) and the falling advertising revenues that go hand in hand with it have accelerated the slow decline that newspapers have been experiencing for years, suddenly turning it into a freefall. But the difficulties will not magically disappear as the economy recovers. The roots of the crisis go deeper. To understand the changes that are occurring, we must look at a broader framework: that of the decline of the mass media as we knew them in the twentieth century and the rise of niche media based on digital technology. This phenomenon is similar to the decline of the department store, which offers everything for everyone, and the triumph of the specialized store, which enables shoppers to satisfy a specific need or a particular passion. Just as generalist television has seen a portion of its audience and revenues migrate to TSN and other specialty
channels, daily newspapers are coming under attack from websites of every kind imaginable.

That being said, the problems that newspapers are experiencing were foreseeable long before the advent of the Internet. For decades, newspaper circulation has been out of sync with population growth and increases in the number of households (see figure 1.1). Even so, newspapers still had enough readers to continue to attract advertisers, and their profits caused owners to turn a blind eye to the public’s declining interest in their product. But more recent consumer behaviour—especially that of young people, who rarely buy newspapers—as much as advertiser behaviour, has caused newspaper owners to sound the alarm.

**Figure 1.1** Total daily newspaper paid circulation in Canada, 1950–2008 (percentage of households)

![Graph showing total daily newspaper paid circulation in Canada, 1950–2008.](source)


It is often said that in United States, each newspaper reader who dies leaves no heir, which is not far from reality. In 2007, according to figures provided by the Newspaper Association of America, one-third of young adults (namely people aged eighteen to thirty-four) regularly read a newspaper, as opposed to two-thirds of people aged fifty-five and over. The proportions are about the same in Canada (see table 1.1). Most young adults go elsewhere for the news. Unlike their parents, they are not loyal to one newspaper or newscast; instead, they nibble away at the news, whenever and wherever they feel like it. They prefer frequent news snacks to regular full meals. They take the news,
shape it, comment on it, and exchange it with their “friends” on Facebook or via Twitter. Their relationship with the media is characterized by the desire for interactivity, the need for a mobile medium, and the attraction of the freebie—not to mention a dose of mistrust toward the large press groups.  

Table 1.1 Regular readers of a daily newspaper, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–34</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–49</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Calculated by the Centre d’études sur les médias on the basis of NADbank data.

The freebie culture that has developed among young Internet users plays a determining role in their overall news-consumption behaviour. They willingly read a newspaper if they don’t have to pay for it. In Montréal, the free newspapers Métro and 24 heures are very popular with young people, so perhaps we should take their supposed rejection of printed newspapers with a grain of salt (see table 1.2). But that doesn’t solve the financial problems of the traditional media. Who will pay for news gathering if the customers of tomorrow won’t and if advertisers are ever more reluctant to do so? It appears that the business model is broken, and efforts to find a new model have thus far been unsuccessful.

At the same time, we must not exaggerate the current scope of the changes. Even though Canada’s newspapers and other traditional media are a bit short of breath, they are by no means on their last legs. The situation is evolving slowly. Over the past twenty years, I have, on dozens of occasions, cited Vannevar Bush, a former science advisor to US President Franklin D. Roosevelt: he said we tend to exaggerate the short-term impacts of new technologies while minimizing their long-term impacts. Television isn’t dead, and printed newspapers won’t all disappear next year. But the general trend shows that profound changes are taking place.

Canadians are increasingly using the Internet to stay informed, but television is still the preferred media platform of the majority. In Québec, two surveys by the Centre d’études sur les médias, carried out two years apart and
involving the same group of people, show that the new media’s share of the
time spent consuming the news increased by 3.4 percent from 2007 to 2009,
rising from 12.6 percent to 16 percent of total time, but that the traditional
media were still dominant. The 2009 survey obviously indicates that younger
people are using the new media much more to track the news, but television
remains, for them as for their elders, the main news source. Another study,
 focusing on heavy users of information technology, yielded additional reveal-
ing findings. Many respondents identified a combination of media (especially
television and the Internet) as their main news source. Newspapers played
almost no role as a news source for heavy users of the new media. This study
confirms that the general trend does not bode well for printed newspapers
over the long term.7

Table 1.2 Regular readers of Montréal daily newspapers (Monday to Friday)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Le Journal de Montréal</td>
<td>642,000</td>
<td>612,500</td>
<td>- 29,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Presse</td>
<td>459,200</td>
<td>384,600</td>
<td>- 75,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gazette</td>
<td>358,100</td>
<td>267,300</td>
<td>- 90,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Métro</td>
<td>260,500</td>
<td>337,300</td>
<td>76,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 heures</td>
<td>152,500</td>
<td>267,600</td>
<td>115,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Devoir</td>
<td>77,000</td>
<td>54,300</td>
<td>- 22,700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: In Montréal, the free newspapers Métro and 24 heures, which, as the table shows, have the wind in their sails, are especially popular with the 18 to 34 age group. Regular readers of Métro are on average ten years younger than readers of the broadsheet La
Presse (39 and 49 years of age, respectively). In Toronto, readers of paid newspapers are also older than readers of free newspapers. Readers of the Toronto Star are on average 51 years old, and those of the Globe and Mail are 50. Readers of the free newspapers Metro and 24 Hours have an average age of 40 and 43. These data pertain to the print editions
of the newspapers in question.

SOURCE: Calculated by the Centre d’études sur les médias, on the basis of NADbank data.
In North America, advertising has traditionally provided the lion’s share of newspaper revenues—from 75 to 80 percent. Montréal’s *Le Devoir* is an exception: it obtains half of its revenues from newspaper sales and has therefore fared better in the difficult economic climate of recent years.

Newspapers as a group suffered the first blow when classified advertising sites appeared on the Web. Classified advertising traditionally provided about a third of the advertising revenues of Canadian newspapers. In the United States, newspapers have been hit harder by the migration of classifieds to the Internet, but the phenomenon is also prevalent in Canada, where classified ad revenues fell an estimated 25 percent from 2005 to 2009.

In 1964, Marshall McLuhan wrote in his celebrated book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, “Classified ads (and stock-market quotations) are the bedrock of the press. Should an alternative source of easy access to such diverse daily information be found, the press will fold.” This other source of information—easy to access, faster, and more practical—exists today, not only for classified ads and stock-market quotations but also for other news of the day. Not all print newspapers will die, but they are all stricken.

Advertisers follow consumers wherever they go. If consumers switch to the Internet and to niche media, advertisers will follow, in part because specialized media enable them to target more easily and for less money consumers who are potentially interested in a given product. It is more costly to advertise in the mass media, which attract consumers with diversified interests and profiles, many of them indifferent to a given advertiser’s goods. For instance, when owners of car dealerships saw that customers were showing up on their lots after spending hours on websites dedicated to cars, they realized the time had come to allocate a portion of their advertising budgets to the new media, and newspapers sustained another blow. Table 1.3 shows that printed newspapers’ share of advertising spending has been dropping since the start of the decade.

A newspaper is a package of content (such as comics, political news, weather forecasts, and, of course, advertising) that consumers read for different reasons: some are interested in current events, others in the sports scores, and still others in current movies and arts events. Today, large portions of this content are migrating to the Internet, along with their audiences and revenues. Until only recently, classified advertising revenues may have paid the salaries
of journalists assigned to Parliament Hill, and ads placed by car dealerships may have financed costly public affairs investigations. Content bundling and the inter-financing that it enabled are breaking down. As the Canadian Media Research Consortium notes in its 2009 report on the state of the media in Canada, “For the past 100 years, journalism has lived within a bundled product called media, and that bundle now is beginning to unravel.” The impact on civic life is obvious.

Table 1.3 Advertising revenues by medium

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Revenue (in millions)</th>
<th>% growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>$2,370</td>
<td>$3,393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>$1,629</td>
<td>$1,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>$953</td>
<td>$1,547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>$460</td>
<td>$692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor</td>
<td>$243</td>
<td>$463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>$50</td>
<td>$1,142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$5,705</td>
<td>$8,917</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Between 1999 and 2008, advertising revenues rose for all media, although the growth was far less substantial for newspapers. But the economic downturn in 2008 affected all media except the Internet; print media (newspapers and magazines) were hit especially hard. Advertising revenues for newspapers were much lower in 2009 than they had been a decade earlier, or even in the previous year.

SOURCE: Calculated by the Centre d’études sur les médias on the basis of data published by the Television Bureau of Canada in Net Advertising Volume, 2009. Revenues for newspapers and the Internet do not include classified ads.

Newspapers may find themselves without enough resources to continue the news gathering they are now doing—a development that could have dramatic results: fewer journalists in the field, less investigative reporting, and a dearth of original, in-depth news. Those who disagree with this analysis will argue that newspapers are just as present on the Internet, to which advertising is shifting, and that they can benefit from the shift—but that is only partially true. The websites of large newspapers receive only a portion of the advertising that is
migrating to the Internet. You can find advertising everywhere: on Google, on social-networking sites, and on every other kind of site. In the short term, Internet-only publishing would spell disaster for printed newspapers. For example, the revenues from the online version of the New York Times cover only 20 percent of the cost of the current editorial department. Of course, things are changing, but slowly. One day, newspapers will perhaps be able to generate from their digital editions alone enough revenue to offer content comparable to that of today’s print versions. But when will that day come?

Today, newspapers are pinning their hopes on mobile devices such as smart phones and reading tablets, which are quickly developing and expanding. The most optimistic publishers believe that electronic tablets, especially the iPad, can change people’s news-consumption habits, just as the iPod has changed the way people consume music. And why not? Whether readers get their news from the printed page of a newspaper or from an electronic tablet doesn’t really matter. What counts is the content.

Some see this development as the opportunity to correct the mistake made by newspapers, which, by offering their content free of charge on the Web, have helped create the prevailing freebie culture. “It’s not much of a revolution yet,” writes Curtis Brainard, “but what is increasingly apparent is that mobile devices have the potential to offer the journalism business that rare and beautiful thing: a second chance—another shot at monetizing digital content and ensuring future profitability that was missed during the advent of web 1.0.” Does the future of the news depend on smart phones and electronic tablets? If so, salvation won’t be arriving tomorrow. The period of transition during which revenues from print editions continue to fall while those from digital publishing rise, but not enough to make up the difference, may continue for some time, with predictable consequences.

**The State, Philanthropists, and Who Else?**

Let’s get back to the question I raised earlier: Who will pay for news gathering and distribution if customers and advertisers won’t continue to do so? The state? South of the border, fears that some large cities, such as Boston and San Francisco, could find themselves without a major newspaper sparked a quick reaction from various political and administrative authorities. The US Senate held hearings and analyzed various ways of helping the press. Certain
proposals deserve to be examined, such as possible joint projects by publishers and journalists to convert their newspapers into non-profit corporations to secure more favourable tax treatment.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the public sector has always subsidized the press in the United States, albeit indirectly, but this support is declining and could be reduced further. Many states, for example, are expected to shift to the Internet their mandatory publication of public notices, which in 2000 represented 5 to 10 percent of the revenues of certain local newspapers. This development couldn’t come at a worse time.13

Is government support for newspapers the answer? For decades, the French government has been spending a fortune (€900 million in 2010 alone) on all sorts of assistance for the print media to ensure diversity and pluralism. It is true that without government assistance, some journals of opinion—such as l’Humanité, a newspaper with communist leanings—would have ceased to exist long ago. Even so, as French media expert Jean-Marie Charon points out, the system has not been able to prevent the disappearance of many publications or to prevent struggling symbols of journalism’s independence, such as Le Monde and Libération, from passing into the hands of financiers or large media groups.14 It is therefore entirely legitimate to ponder, as some analysts do, whether we need to help news gathering rather than specific media.

A report that was commissioned by the journalism school at Columbia University and received a great deal of coverage in late 2009 suggests that what we must protect is independent reporting. The authors of the report, published under the challenging title “The Reconstruction of American Journalism,” clearly explain that they do not recommend “a government bail-out of newspapers, nor any of the various direct subsidies” found in European countries. They add: “Our recommendations are intended to support independent, original and credible news reporting, especially local and accountability reporting, across all media in communities throughout the United States.” Each sizeable community should have a range of diverse sources of news reporting, commercial as well as non-profit, which “should be adapting traditional journalism forms to the multimedia, interactive, real-time capabilities of digital communication, sharing the reporting and distribution of news with citizens, bloggers and aggregators.”15 In this spirit, various journalism experiments, including investigative journalism projects, have been carried out by our neighbours to the south with the assistance of foundations,
philanthropists, and other similar sources of funding. But such foreign experiments are not necessarily compatible with Canada’s traditions and its social and political environments. Generally speaking, in Canada, especially in Québec, the philanthropist approach does not have the same historical base as in the United States. In the best-case scenario, it would represent only a partial solution to the media’s difficulties. We also see that, in the United States, some foundations tend to emphasize specific areas, such as health coverage, and the press does not always find that such patronage offers the independence and freedom of choice that are vital to fulfill its role. There is no single answer to the difficulties of the press. The solutions will depend on the traditions and circumstances in each country.

Who will pay for news gathering and distribution in the future? No doubt, we must limit the scope of the question. We don’t have to find support for all the news but only the news that feeds democracy, to use Alex Jones’s expression. But a question remains unanswered: Is there a sizeable public for this type of journalism? I believe so. There will always be a role, and a demand, for journalism that tries to make sense of the news of the day, that presents the “day’s events in a context which gives them meaning.” How can we guarantee the future of free and independent news gathering in a digital world where facts and rumours intermingle, where lies are found alongside well-founded opinions, where manipulation is widespread? In a world where citizens inform one another and often place greater trust in their “friends” on social networks than they do in the major media? What purpose do journalists serve in this universe of information overload? What is their niche? It is up to the media and journalists to demonstrate their relevance.

JOURNALISM IN CRISIS

In my opinion, it isn’t just the mass media that are in a state of crisis. Journalism is too. The economist Robert Picard, who is one of the most astute observers of the print media and journalism, questions the very essence of the work done by journalists. He believes that what today’s journalists produce is often of little value. In a world where we had only a few newspapers and radio stations, and only one or two TV channels, information and news were scarce commodities. Digital technology has changed all that.
In today’s world of abundance, the news is covered by everyone with the same techniques, is written in the same style, is endlessly recycled from one medium to another and is remarkably similar. That is why it no longer has value. This kind of journalism, which is ubiquitous, will persist. Some people are satisfied with it, as long as it is free of charge. Those who are more demanding will be prepared to pay, provided they are offered something different. Picard stresses innovation: “Journalism must innovate and create new means of gathering, processing and distributing information so it provides content and services that readers, listeners, and viewers cannot receive elsewhere. And these must provide sufficient value so audiences and users are willing to pay a reasonable price.”

Standardized, formatted journalistic prose often reads like a coded message. The traditional model is based on the “lead” and the inverted-pyramid writing technique, which gives the facts in descending order of importance; this technique came about as a result of the constraints imposed by old technologies, such as the telegraph and printing, and is poorly adapted to the expectations of an audience accustomed to the new media’s capabilities. Young people, especially, do not quite know what to make of a language from another era—that of the journalist often cast in the role of a quasi-oracle who selects each day from on high the facts that the public ought to know. Journalism, previously a lecture, has now become a seminar or a conversation. In this new world, shaped by the Internet and interactivity, the journalist must have a dialogue with the public, for better or for worse.

Old-fogey journalism is dead. Long live neo-journalism! So wrote Christophe Barbier, the managing editor of the French magazine L’Express, a tad excessively. In an editorial stressing the need for radical change, he wrote that journalism no longer involves the vertical soliloquy of an expert addressing the ignorant: nowadays, readers are more knowledgeable and skepticism is widespread. According to Barbier, neo-journalism is modest. It accepts and even solicits contradiction. It animates the agora without monopolizing it.

Journalists have no choice but to adapt to the new hand they have been dealt. They must rethink their role and clarify their distinctiveness and their ways of doing things in this world of interactivity and overabundance of news. They must hold fast to the ideal of public service, which continues to be the purpose of their métier, but avoid nostalgia for a mythical golden age. They must respect tradition but also be able to innovate.
The “reconstruction” of journalism involves not only a profound re-examination of its practice but also, according to Picard, sustained co-operation between journalists and management. Journalists cannot be passive witnesses to the changes in progress. They need to acquire entrepreneurial and innovation skills that make it “possible for them to lead change rather than merely respond to it.” That also means profound changes in mindsets, the culture of journalism, and the training of future journalists. Some schools of journalism have already created courses designed to develop students’ entrepreneurship and to prepare them for becoming independent suppliers of the news.

In the years to come, journalism will be practiced and financed in many ways, which could contribute to the diversity of information and opinion, and thus strengthen democracy. But the ultimate solution to the problems plaguing the print media may require an introspective effort rather than merely a quest for a magical new business model.

A KIND OF EPILOGUE

Thirty years ago, the Royal Commission on Newspapers (also called the Kent Commission, after its chairman, Tom Kent) was “born out of shock and trauma” in a context of newspaper closures and takeovers. At the time, it was the concentration of newspaper ownership in the hands of large groups and the disappearance of independent newspapers that was causing concern. The decrease in competition was creating fear that the diversity of news and opinion would be jeopardized: this was the dominant concern in the commission’s report—and rightly so. It is also what retained the attention of the media’s commentators at the time, but it overshadowed a fascinating portion of the report.

In a chapter titled “An Industry in Transition,” the commission devoted several prescient pages to the “convergence” (don’t forget that this was almost thirty years ago) of the telecommunications sector, the computer sector, and broadcasting; to the two-way nature of what was then called telematics; and to the consequences of these technological innovations for the print media. The report stressed the possible impact on the print media of the explosion of new electronic media that coveted newspaper readers’ time and attention as well as advertisers’ dollars.
Newspaper owners and journalists would have done well to pay close attention to this other aspect of the commision’s report. The new forms of electronic media “clearly have the potential to affect newspapers, starting in the second half of this decade,” wrote the commissioners. “The effect could become critical in the 1990s.” The shakeup came about ten years later than they predicted, but today we are starting to feel its full impact.

I would like to thank Marilyn Thomson for her help with the translation and editing of the text.

NOTES

4 David Pritchard and Florian Sauvageau, Les journalistes canadiens: Un portrait de fin de siècle (Québec City: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1999), 64.
6 Claire Boily, The 18–24 Age Group and the News (Québec City: Centre d’études sur les médias and Institut national de la recherche scientifique, and Vancouver: Canadian Media Research Consortium, 2006).
7 See How Quebecers Consume the News (Québec City: Centre d’études sur les médias, and Vancouver: Canadian Media Research Consortium, 2010).
8 Calculated by the Centre d’études sur les médias on the basis of data furnished by the Television Bureau of Canada, Net Advertising Volume, 2009.
10 Ibid.