

Opinion: How News Media Woes Could Damage Democracy

Declining numbers of professional reporters in newspaper and TV newsrooms are an almost daily fact of life in American journalism. *The Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* newspaper group in western Pennsylvania announced 153 layoffs Wednesday, with an additional 91 job losses possible should the firm not sell two of its smaller properties.

On Thursday, Chicago-based Tribune Publishing announced it has approved buyouts for approximately 7 percent of its 7,000-person workforce. The firm is the newspaper-owning part of the former Tribune Corp. and owns the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Baltimore Sun* and eight other major daily newspapers.

While such numbers are bad news for the workers involved, is there a deeper message in the downsizing of America’s newsrooms? Could the loss of journalism jobs damage democracy?

In a new study released by the Brookings Institution, researchers Elaine C. Kamarck, a senior fellow, and Ashley Gabriele, a senior research assistant, released a study this month in which they note a “list of seven things we know to be true of old and new media.” They said:

1. Print newspapers are dinosaurs 2. Hard news is in danger 3. Television is still important 4. And so is radio	5. News is now digital 6. Social media allows news (and “news”) to go viral 7. For the younger generation, news is delivered through comedy
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The “dinosaur” status of print newspapers can often be seen by an early morning walk through many a suburban neighborhood. Where it was once common for every driveway or doorstep to have a plastic-wrapped copy of a daily newspaper waiting for the occupant, such home deliveries have plummeted along with newspaper circulation. We may consume parts of what used to be the daily newspaper via our smartphones or tablets, but that’s different from everyone reading the same paper every day.

“As circulation has plummeted, so has the number of newspapers,” Kamarck and Gabriele write. “There were 1,749 American newspapers in 1945 and by the end of 2014, the number had shrunk to 1,331. Once again, when these numbers are converted to per capita numbers, the trend is even more dramatic. We now have many fewer papers serving a much bigger population.”

While there’s little doubt that television and radio are important news delivery media, how that news is being delivered—and by whom—is another concern. In 1978, 43,000 Americans worked in newspaper newsrooms. Today, the number is 32,900, according to the American Society for Newspaper Editors.

According to Kamarck and Gabriele, “Is the media’s traditional role as a check on government power eroded because fewer people are engaged in collecting hard news? And second, in an era when everyone has the ability to express their opinion and to repeat so-called ‘facts’ (whether or not they are true), how can citizens know what to believe and how to react?”

What’s more, the pair writes later in the report, in “2012, most young people (here defined as aged 18–29) reported getting their news from two comedy shows, ‘The Colbert Report’ and ‘The Daily Show,’ both of which have left-wing tendencies and are not the neutral sources for news that were associated with network news programs years ago.”

While there have been periods of good journalism and bad journalism in America, a decline in the number of dedicated journalists who are given the time and ability to ferret out hard-to-find stories does not bode well for democracy, which depends on an informed electorate. That more young adults consider comedian Trevor Noah, who now hosts *The Daily Show*, as their generation's Walter Cronkite should be of great concern to us all.