

# H-Net Reviews

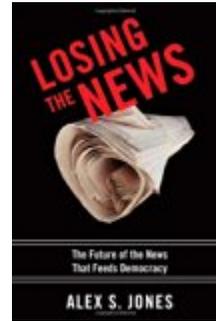
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alex S. Jones. *Losing the News: The Future of the News That Feeds Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xix + 234 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-518123-4.

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## Losing More Than the News

Though the title of Alex S. Jones's new book, *Losing the News*, implies the passing of a singular social category—namely, “the news”—the book itself deals with five different, though intricately interrelated, types of loss. First, and most obviously, there is the potential loss of the news as a regularly circulating social good. Such a loss is typically presented as a dystopic possibility in the not-too-distant future: someday, American society will cease to receive news, or at least not receive it at the scale or quality previously known. Second, there is the loss of the commercial model that has traditionally supported the production of news. The questions that direct our thinking toward this sort of loss most frequently include: Where is the business model for news? Who will pay for it? Third, there is the increasingly real possibility of losing the organizations that have traditionally provided the bulk of news. With the shuttering of several daily newspapers over the past year and the curtailed production schedule of several more, this loss orients our attention toward questions regarding where, institutionally speaking, the bulk of our news will come from. Anxiety regarding the ambiguity of such an answer can often be seen in reactions against the prospects of citizen journalism, which is seen as too sporadic and inconsistent to be relied upon. Fourth, there is the loss of the audience for news. As several book-length studies have shown—David Mindich's *Tuned Out: Why Americans under 40 Don't Follow the News* (2005) and Tom Patterson's *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty* (2002)—long-term trends suggest that the habit of consuming news on a daily basis is on the decline, per-

haps permanently. The final, but in no way least significant, concern is the bearing this social good called “the news” has on the capacity of a society to function as the self-governing democracy envisioned by its founders.

Jones intertwines these five types of loss into the central conceptual claim of the book: that traditional journalism, particularly the work done at newspapers, constitutes an “iron core,” the “dense, heavy ball” that is the “total mass of each day's reported news” (pp. 12-13). Such a core is the centripetal element of all other journalism as well as the backbone of any strong democracy. The claim is not exactly novel, though the explanation of its existence and the argument for its continuation are simultaneously eloquent and problematic. Unlike many who write about the future of news, Jones exhibits a historical sensitivity to how such a core came into being. “Until recently,” he writes, “iron core reporting in all of its forms has been artificially protected and subsidized because of an American bargain in which public service was harnessed to voracious capitalism as news spawned as a business” (pp. 12-13). Thus, his argument is that of neither an unknowing Pollyanna nor a pessimistic Jeremiah.

Though he understands the production of the iron core to be a historical outcome of a contingent relationship between journalism and business, Jones is less attentive to the fact that the contents of the iron core are themselves not natural or inevitable. Interwoven throughout the discussion of the core's importance is a discussion of media bias, which he calls a “second-tier problem,” be-

cause bias is either unusual in its occurrence or committed largely by poor practitioners of the craft (p. 26). But such a view of media bias as personal and idiosyncratic disregards the basic claim of what the best scholarly research about media bias tells us: that mainstream journalism tends systematically to constrain the diversity of perspectives and voices in its coverage, thereby maintaining and reproducing the power relations of society rather than challenging it (see, for example, Todd Gitlin's *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media and the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* [2003] and D. Hallin's *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* [1986]).

One can agree with Jones's point about the need to protect the existence of the iron core while also pushing to change and broaden that core's composition. Jones's aim is to defend the iron core and to discuss the different types of loss (economic, organizational, audience, democratic) stemming from its threatened disappearance. Throughout the book, there is an oddly recurrent reference to Jones's experience with his family's newspaper, the *Greenville Sun*. On one level, such references make sense as a rhetorical device to persuade readers of the author's bona fides not only as a former journalist but also as someone acculturated in the business of newspapers. Yet as the book's argument unfolds, the reference assumes additional significance: as a family-owned newspaper, the *Greenville Sun* is the sort of newspaper that needs to be saved. Why? In Jones's words: "I fear that newspapers are trending toward becoming businesses built overwhelming around what people want, and all but abandon anything that does not make money or draw eyeballs" (pp. 153-54). Jones is thus pointing attention to two distinct forms of newspaper ownership, one (family owned) that tends to pay more attention to its public service mission and another (publicly owned corporations) that tends to be subservient to market dy-

namics. One might ask, though, whether it truly makes sense to leave the public service mission of news up to a relatively small class of family publishers.

The book is somewhat oddly structured. After an anecdotal introduction, the first chapter presents the concept of the iron core, which leads nicely into a second chapter discussion of the relationship between media and democracy. The three chapters that follow this discussion could reasonably be categorized as conceptual applications of the iron core model, as the reader is led through a discussion of its relationship to the First Amendment and law more generally (chapter 3) and then professional norms, especially objectivity, and ethics. The remainder of the book is roughly historical. Chapter 6 provides Jones's view of the long duree of journalism history, while subsequent chapters bring the historical narrative up to its twenty-first-century context through discussions about the precarious situation of newspapers and the promises and limits of so-called new media. The book closes with Jones's own vision of what is entailed in "saving the news." To a large degree, the solution is to ask for little change from the producers of news and much change from its consumers. He writes: "Journalists must hold fast and persevere. Owners must do the right thing. And citizens and news consumers must notice and demand the news that they need" (p. 221). The suggestion disappoints, not only because it asks for change only on the part of consumers and citizens, but also because it fails to adequately interpolate the five different types of loss into a clear-headed analysis of how to move forward.

If we believe that the first type of loss—the loss of a social good called news—is linked with the fifth—the loss of a self-governing democracy—then we need to take seriously the intervening variables (organizational, commercial, and consumer) that have historically permitted a connection, however faulty, between the two.

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