New Tasks for Online Journalism

Technology is one of the key elements that both motivates and forces journalism to change. The Internet is only the latest of the major technological shifts that communication media have faced. Since this period of transformation has not yet come to an end, the best thing to do is to try to understand what this shift means on a practical level. Jake Batsell’s *Engaged Journalism: Connecting with Digitally Empowered News Audiences* employs a broad concept of journalism, one that is not restricted solely to information sharing. Journalistic practice, he writes, must also aim to make journalism viable; in other words, he defines “engaged journalism” as “the degree to which a news organization actively considers and interacts with its audience in furtherance of its journalistic and financial mission” (p. 7). The Internet transforms journalism by enabling the media to “empower the audience with interactive news products” (p. 9).

Engagement, Batsell explains, is the result of a new business model that is based on subscribers. Since traditional advertisements are not as likely to appear online, Internet media have focused on capturing subscribers from among their own potential audiences. Audience is now the key to generating revenue. Until now, on the one hand, advertisers—as a primary source of funding for the media—had also been believed to be a primary source of influence on the content of the media. “Accountability journalism,” on the other hand, becomes more plausible when supported by subscribers rather than by private advertisers. For Batsell, quality journalism is the key to generating revenue, and he focuses on “mining niche communities” as one of the most successful strategies for online media to follow (p. 79). Professionally oriented audiences both expect and demand high-level online information, a product that can only be supported by experienced and business-savvy journalists. Batsell is also aware that audience-driven strategies risk sensationalism, to the detriment of quality journalism, but nonetheless, the former can be used as a financial source for the latter. To reach and engage a large audience, traditional online strategies (such as involving readers in news conversations, allowing comments on news reports, etc.) are promoted, even when offline relationships, like face-to-face events, are still highly successful.

The nonprofit Investigative News Network has ranked the various levels of journalistic engagement, from lowest to highest: site visitors, brand recognition, social media followers, e-mail subscribers, commenters, content contributors, and financial contributors and subscribers as the most important. Nonetheless, Batsell reminds us that advertisers still focus on the total number of site visitors as the key variable that informs their marketing decisions. In other words, advertisers want media that target the largest audiences. In this regard, social media have emerged as important benchmarks of audience outreach. What this means is that the interests of advertisers undermines the effectiveness of the media because they encourage a form of non-engagement for the...
sake of marketing their products. Recently, the Financial Times has shown its interest in "metrics beyond page views."[1]

Batsell highlights the many new engagement strategies that have been attempted by online media in the United States and United Kingdom. One shortcoming of his book is that he does not analyze alternative business models that similarly prioritize their outreach to mass-based audiences, such as those financed through crowdfunding campaigns in order to make their content public to everyone. For this book, Batsell interviewed over a hundred journalists and editors; these interviews are excerpted throughout his well-structured narrative that includes helpful summaries at the end of each chapter.

Note


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