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Jordan Colbert
College of DuPage

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Rebirth of Media: Online Journalism

by Jordan Colbert

(Honors English 1102)

The advent of the internet has brought rapid change to many careers. New advances in journalism opportunities have proven to be examples of this many times over. Neglecting close inspection of the specifics allows one to associate all types of journalism with one another, but there are certainly differences between the various positions. With technology creeping into daily life, careers that did not exist even one year ago are now being pursued by young adults and workforce veterans alike. Online journalism sort of falls into this category, as it was nowhere near a viable career path until the late 1990s. Activities such as blogging or posting updates to online-exclusive news sources were unheard of before this point. However, as of 2012, online journalism has certainly become a true career. Fact-seeking and relating information to others has become easier than ever thanks to the lightning-fast capabilities of the internet. Respectable salaries are being offered to writers online as more and more of the general public uses the internet for news or other written content. Print media is still viable though, and tends to go hand-in-hand with online media. In this way, media on the internet is possibly at a disadvantage, since the public needs a reason to pay for content online when print media is still a preferable option. Even though there are some struggles associated with being a journalist who specializes in online content, the benefits appear to outweigh them, making it a very inviting and flexible career.

Online journalism involves many tactics employed in standard print journalism. The same basic idea applies; the journalist gathers information on a certain subject from primary sources and presents it back to the public in a less-complicated manner. Catchy headlines and standout images are an absolute must, just as with a newspaper. Online articles tend to be very short in length, giving the very basics of the incident or subject. This can potentially give online journalists less leeway in terms of development of the ideas. It can be argued, however, that keeping information concise is a skill in itself. Online articles also are subject to more apparent scrutiny by readers. Comments are allowed on many online news reports, giving various people around the world a voice of criticism. The audience for online content may be different than readers of print media, so the journalist must keep the tone of the article in mind as well. For example, a journalist may find themselves writing for a website specializing on a certain topic, such as music. It is apparent that there are more specialty websites than newspapers, meaning that the tone must be considered depending on what the focus of the site is. Overall, online journalism is similar to print journalism, but the differences are large enough to be noticeable.

The fine, specific details regarding the career, such as salary, hours, and education requirements, tend to be variable. Steffen Konrath of *Liquid News Room*, a news-devoted blog, states that the typical starting salary for a journalist who writes online alone wavers around \$50,000 depending on the publication. Professor Cathy Stablein of College of DuPage gives a slightly gloomier estimate of about \$30,000. The Illinois Department of Employment Security reports that the median salary for all types of journalists is approximately \$73,400 in the Chicago-land area. The higher demand the publication or blog has, the higher the salary tends to be just as with any field involving supply and demand. As a journalist rises up in position for the publication, the salary will continue to rise. Another confirmation, also stated by Stablein, comes in the fact that companies are beginning to "grow again to build online content to generate more revenue." With news organizations relying on online content for revenue, salaries for writers may end up rising depending on the success

and what positions are created; a great feat considering the recession that the United States is involved in.

The requirements of an online journalist in terms of education and training are not agreed upon by many sources, but a bachelor's degree is typically necessary in order to rise to higher positions. According to Professor Stablein, "Freelance writers don't require any education, but it's a good idea to have one so you gain experience and learn writing skills. Many news reporters and editors are getting master's degrees now," this trend illustrates how the necessary education varies depending on the position that the journalist would be seeking. Knowledge in using computer programs is also quickly becoming necessary. Mark Briggs, author of *Journalism Next*, gives helpful suggestions, such as harnessing RSS, a format designed for constantly updating online content such as blogs or developing stories. Utilizing HTML, a format for developing websites or blogs is considered a must for making news reports look interesting. Enticing visuals and well thought out designs naturally can help a journalist draw in readers, and it is certainly a plus if a writer is knowledgeable in this when applying for a job. Briggs laments that "[w]eb sites without images are boring; even the most basic Web design should include photos, logos, or other graphics" (30). Outside of these forms of training, there are simple yet effective opportunities in learning through a professional. Internships, just like in any other field, also provide valuable experience, as does writing for smaller publications when just starting out.

Long hours and tough situations may plague an online journalist as well and are noteworthy for anyone pursuing the career. News stories are constant and the journalist must be able to keep up with the various opportunities. Professor Stablein mentions that "news is 24-hour operation so you can be called in if there's a breaking story." Competition is likely seeking out stories as frequently as anyone else would be, making the career a matter of survival of the fittest. According to the Illinois Department of Employment Security, reporters "[s]ometimes have to change their work hours to meet deadlines or follow late-breaking news stories." A journalist's schedule is never set in stone and they must be prepared to work their lives around the career. In addition, it is only natural that an online journalist should be ready to keep an eye on a publication like a blog. Issues with coding or other technicalities could strike at any time. An online journalist must keep a sharp eye on their work especially if it is being produced by themselves. One heading into the field should expect busy, long hours most of the time.

Online journalism is poised to continue growing as time goes on. Professor Stablein reports that "[n]ews is not going away," meaning that most journalism careers will survive as long as the public wants news reports. According to Mark Briggs, author of *Journalism Next*, future journalism should be "bigger and better than it's ever been before" (8). Print and online media currently thrive together, with online media beginning to steal a little bit of the attention. This disruption appears to be a very good opportunity for younger journalists to invest in both formats in order to reap more benefits. Publications such as *The New York Times* frequently offer online content alongside their print content to appease both audiences, giving writers plenty of opportunities to dabble in both worlds.

"Pay walls," or fees for online content being put in place also point towards the expansion of the career. Pay walls can be put in place by a company to make a profit from online journalism. *The New York Times* is one of few large media sources who put fees in place for their online readers. As stated by Jeremy Peters of the newspaper in question, "No American news organization as large as *The Times* has tried to put its content behind a pay wall after allowing unrestricted access," and it can be assumed that more organizations will follow this pattern, thus helping turn online journalism into a more profitable career in the future. Pay walls can, however, result in issues for corporations in terms of simple logic. Payment is almost certainly a deterrent for a casual reader, especially considering that free competition exists. For internet services, payment can be a deciding factor for the general public. For this reason, growth in the form of pay walls can end up becoming a "double-

edged sword.” Regardless of the apparent risk, online journalism certainly has the potential to develop into a lucrative career.

Growth in the career can also be observed in the number of people who visit online websites. As of 2010, a report by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development claims that “[a]bout 5% of all Internet visits are related to reading news online, which is a conservative estimate” (OECD 13). The percentage can only increase as time goes on; more and more people will utilize the internet for news as more people connect to the web. As accessibility rises, it can be assumed that readership will rise as well. More statistics show that “newspaper websites have seen strong growth in their own pages, with large newspapers reporting several million unique visitors to their pages per month, including increasingly readers from abroad, a radical shift from newspapers” (13). The OECD concludes that “[i]nformation and news are much more accessible than in the past” (19). In regards to the pay walls once again, the revenue can certainly help the career blossom. These signs all point towards online journalism enjoying a healthy growth as time goes on.

However, as with any career, there are certainly noteworthy hazards and complications with online journalism. Blogging, the practice of posting thoughts or happenings onto a frequently updated website, can strike a reader as unprofessional at times. Blogs may not have the same level of content control that a full-fledged, highly funded online publication may have. Janet Paskin of *The Columbia Journalism Review* gives the notion that among writers, it is believed that blogging sites “would publish a seven-year-old’s report card if it could be turned into a slide show and illustrated with puppies” (11). Even if blogs are representative of a corporation, the sloppy designs and stream-of-consciousness writing can still appear. While, according to Benjamin Carlson of *The Atlantic*, “the free-wheeling fraternal spirit of blogging has become increasingly subject to market disciplines,” unprofessional behavior in blogs can run rampant, even in widely-known publications. This can be a difficult trend to break for a young writer attempting to appeal to the masses even if it is not true.

For this reason and various others, bloggers may or may not receive the higher salary of traditional journalists. According to Paskin, online exclusive content may receive “fifty bucks, give or take” as opposed to “\$2-\$3 a word” for work featured in a “mainstream magazine” (11). A remark by professional blogger Will Sullivan of the popular writing blog *Journerdism* indicates that blogging for a professional company “may pay \$45,000” on average. Proving oneself with well-written material is very important in order to break out of the stereotype given to online writers. The Society of Professional Journalism currently accepts members interested in only blogging or partaking in online journalism into its ranks, and appears to be helping professional bloggers make a strong name for themselves.

In addition to unprofessionalism, producing online articles behind pay walls when competing print articles are available creates an enormous problem for a company hiring online journalists. Consumers appear to be hesitant on subscribing to online-only content when it can be found in similar news reports. Peters elaborates on this issue by suggesting that “[i]f enough readers balk at paying, *The Times* risks losing its status as the most-visited newspaper Web site in the country — an important distinction with many advertisers.” If print sources and online sources of news are available for approximately the same price, there may be a slight advantage towards print media. Customers would be getting a hard copy of the material for the same amount of money, possibly making print versions of news sources more attractive. Larry Kramer of the *American Journalism Review* makes it clear that companies must “learn to make paying for content something that is in a consumers’ best interest” (47). Kramer gives the analogy of the iPod; by paying for music legally, one gets the benefit of simplicity and a stylish piece of technology. Considering the fact that this is a relatively new process, specific examples are rare. However, *The New York Times* does offer comprehensive deals that allow subscribers who pay for the higher priced plan to “have free and unlimited access across all Times digital platforms except, for now, e-readers like the Amazon Kindle and the Barnes & Noble Nook” (Peters). Until the waters have been tested, it is unclear

whether or not pay walls are a viable method of balancing financial obligation with consumer satisfaction.

Besides competition with print media, online media also tends to fight with itself. Kramer explains the process of “cannibalizing” among online-exclusive news organizations as a typical survival-of-the-fittest condition in any sort of business, but this does not mean that there are no consequences. Considering that websites such as *Yahoo* or *MSN* offer free news updates, it would not be very logical for a consumer to pay for an online publication that may provide similar service. In order to make a substantial profit, online journalism companies would have to give some sort of incentive towards readers to subscribe for paid content, just as in the case of print media versus online media mentioned earlier. The difficulty in satisfying this need can provide a problem for an online journalist, who may suffer from the hardships of the company. Although, logically, this could be avoided by writers who are freelance, it still leaves its mark on the entire industry. One method of making news hidden behind pay walls competitive is to ease the customer into the payments. Ryan Nakashima of *Associated Press* suggests that “publishers give away enough free page views so that only the heaviest users are asked to pay.” This way, light users of online content will not be forced to obey the pay wall. As time goes on, publishers of online content must learn to utilize pay walls in a way that does not drive away the consumer. Until a middle ground can be reached, the process of online content attacking one another will continue to cause problems for companies and journalists alike.

One major concern among experts in the field of journalism is the idea that online journalism will force the industry to create a new “all-purpose business model” (Kramer 45). The traditional business model of the news industry was simple. Newspapers cost a certain amount of money, which was taken by the companies to recoup capital spent to produce the paper. Advertising typically covered everything else. This outdated model cannot exist anymore with the hesitance consumers have to subscribe to digital content with pay walls. Free content will more than likely be flooded with advertisements, but these alone cannot possibly cover all of the expenses online journalists and their superiors must spend. In this sense, journalists may feel apprehension or even frustration towards the evolution of media. Alissa Quart of the *Columbia Journalism Review* refers to the old model as relying on “lost media,” or print media, while online media is “found media.” She illustrates the discontent among workers invested in the “lost media” by saying “we had become like the people at the ashram after the guru has died” (28). William Hachten, author of *The Troubles of Journalism*, summarizes the lost media's gripes by stating that “[m]orale of reporters and editors on many newspapers is clearly low--a sense that working for a newspaper is no longer an exciting and respected calling” (92). Whether or not conclusions are being drawn too early, the controversy still exists among writers. Journalists who established their careers with traditional magazines or newspapers may hold doubts towards online journalism, which can help to keep the medium from truly taking root in the entire industry. Writers also tend to believe that seeing one’s “name—and work—in print carries special satisfaction” (Paskin 11). In this sense, the supposed transfer of power taking place in writing mediums appears to be variable, depending on the situation.

Another related concern lies in confidence among those who would start new publications, online or print. Blogs appear to be taking less of a low-key stance in terms of presentation. According to Carlson, “Of the top 50 blogs, 21 are owned by such familiar names as *CNN*, the *New York Times*, *ABC*, and *AOL*. And many blogs that began as solo operations are developing into full-fledged publications.” This makes it clear that new, independent blogs are becoming rare. Carlson’s report illustrates the lack of confidence among new upstarts in the writing industry. With conglomerates being the main providers of blogs, there must be little faith among writers who could have started a new blog full of opportunities for writers. The sinking morale in this case applies to print news media as well; confidence escapes newspapers as well. Hachten maintains that “[t]his crisis of confidence may be caused by a number of factors: the declining number of independently owned papers; the

slow but steady drop for some papers in readership and advertising revenue; less interest by the public in serious news; and competition from the 'new media'”(93). This explanation as to why new publications are rare makes sense considering the established preconceptions of the journalism industry. Breaking the trend may prove to be a difficult feat for those seeking immediate profit by starting up a new publication.

Besides these issues, there are a few physical and social drawbacks with journalism. An obvious consequence of the career would be carpal-tunnel syndrome, a condition caused by repetitive motions of the wrist. An online writer at a computer would be especially susceptible to this, so caution and moderation must be observed. Another possible risk could be that of freedom of speech, depending on where the reporting will be taking place. Though the United States allows freedom of press, in certain countries, the government may be apt to take down a blog or other publication that could be considered a problem. For example, a recent article by Stephanie Medeiros of *The Digital Journal* claims that "[t]hree Vietnamese bloggers have been charged in a case of using their blogs to spread 'anti-government propaganda.' The claims have alleged evidence of over 400 posted articles." Countries such as Vietnam may not approve of published work depending on whether or not it is positive. Even if this appears to be a far cry from American policies, the danger is still there, especially for a reporter who travels overseas. Jail sentences may fall upon someone who commits a wrong-doing in terms of reporting just as it unfairly was given to the Vietnamese bloggers. However, Professor Stablein admits that outside of these issues, there are "no particular hazards unless you're a war correspondent," a reporter covering wars and conflicts abroad. Though there are issues in becoming an online journalist, true misfortune is rare among those involved in the industry.

Online journalism, with its strong bond with everyday life, is growing constantly. The career will only become more prominent as news continues to shift towards the internet. Without online journalists, popular blogs and news websites would not exist and the industry would be stagnated. Technology has given writers new opportunities to leave their mark on the world right from their computer chairs, or even from their Apple iPad. With print journalism helping keep the online content afloat thanks to publications attached to web-based content, the career manages to balance old methods with new business tactics. This push-pull factor can only help the career prosper and pave the future of news.

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