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THE MEDIA EQUATION

After a Year of Ruin, Some Hope

By DAVID CARR Published: December 20, 2009

The current state of the media reminds me of the time I was taking down the rigging on my pal's catamaran with my friend Ed. While I busied myself with the main sail, Ed, who was not much of a sailor, went to take down the small sail in the front of the boat. Instead, he pulled the pin that kept the mast standing, and everything — a mass of steel, rope and canvas — came crashing down around us.

As we stood there covered in the colossal mess, Ed said quietly, "So what's the next step?"

So what is the next step? Not to go all Mary Poppins, but with a little bit of pluck, I think the media industry can work from here. Let's start by counting our blessings in 2009.

Mainstream media have been accused of pathologizing the African-American male, but — let's face it — three men who happened to be black moved a lot of units this year. Just try to imagine this past year in media without President Obama, Michael Jackson and Tiger Woods. And lest you think it was all pathology and politics, it is worth noting that on Twitter, the elections in Iran outranked Michael Jackson, who came in second, according to What the Trend?, a site that ranked topics in 2009 (whatthetrend.com/zeitgeist). In an age that is ridiculed as chronically unserious, a life-and-death struggle for freedom on the other side of the world is the story that rang the bell on Twitter.

While we are on the subject of Twitter, we should point out that new generations of consumers are now guided to important news by the recommendations of trusted friends, and increasingly, they point to great reporting in sources that didn't exist just a few years ago.

Blogs and new-media sites are cartoonishly written off as places where people write up the soup they just ate, but in the past year, many sites have added muscle and resources to the pursuit of news. Everyone knows about the reporting assets and influence of Politico (Politico.com), but you know things have changed when Gawker (gawker.com), the attitudinous Manhattan media blog, is hiring the kind of reporters who pick up the phone.

The founder of Gawker, Nick Denton, told me in a note that The Huffington Post and TMZ have demonstrated that news scoops are the coin of the realm and that Gawker will be heading in that direction. He suggested that the Web was further atomizing into sites that create original content and break news, and others that alter photos, float wild speculation or just gin up any old thing that will draw traffic.

"If Gawker's bloggers are barbarian invaders, they're Visigoths, who might have sacked Rome, but were themselves refugees from the even more vicious Huns," he suggested, sounding almost quaintly old media (although don't look for them to start covering the Congressional subcommittee on health care any time soon).

Let's remember that news of the biggest media merger story of the year — Comcast-NBC Universal — arrived in The Wrap (www.thewrap.com), a Hollywood media site that is less than a year old. In my little corner of the kingdom, the increasingly converged media-tech space is often best followed by smart smaller sites, including Paid Content (paidcontent.org), Nieman Journalism Lab (www.niemanlab.org), and SearchEngineLand (searchengineland.com).

And just as new media have absorbed the enduring values of traditional media — developing sources, making phone calls — so more established players are adopting the tools of the insurgency. For instance, traditional media outlets are not waiting for the much-hyped Apple tablet to land next year before coming up with content that might soar on the device.

Captains of old-school magazine narrative like David Granger at Esquire and Terry McDonnell at Sports Illustrated are moving very aggressively to refashion their brands for a tablet world and rightly so. When the iPhone is put on steroids, consumers will again be able to touch, flip and navigate serendipitously across things they want to see or learn about. And if publishers are able to move out of the nomenclature of "subscriptions" for content and into the universe of "applications," there may be some gold in those hills.

Nobody had it worse than newspapers in 2009, but it all depends on whom you ask. After I wrote a column last week suggesting that The Wall Street Journal has tended to lean to the right since being bought by Rupert Murdoch, about 400 or so readers sent e-mail messages to remind me, among other things, that it can't be all bad that one of the most successful media moguls in the business continues to invest real money in serious journalism. (And the News Corporation struck gold globally this weekend in outer space with "Avatar," part of a strong finish for what could be a record year for the film industry, suggesting that people aren't ready to trade going to theaters for downloads any time soon.)

The much-feared atomization of the mass audience had some terrific side effects this year, creating an era of the mini-hit. AMC came up with a show, "Mad Men," that swamped the water cooler, "Glee" showed how a network could combine the competitive aesthetic of reality television with the conventions of drama and come up with a winner.

Even NBC, which was sold for parts as near as we could tell, put together a Thursday night that is actually a destination at our house — "Community," "Parks and Recreation," "The Office" and "30 Rock." That reminded us that a suite of shows, carefully threaded, can keep you planted all night, or at least until Leno comes on.

The long-in-the-tooth technologies still have plenty of life in them. While many folks think it's time for the legacy asset of print to get kicked to the curb, the writer Dave Eggers gathered a tribe of like minds in San Francisco to put out the glorious, 320-page one-shot Panorama, a newspaper with a wingspan almost of a condor (15 by 22 inches) and journalistic ambitions to match. The \$16 a copy Panorama sold out immediately, foretelling a time when a printed newspaper will be a luxury item, a mass-niche product that people will pay a great deal of money to get their hands on.

And even postprint, the constellation of local news sites put together by ex-newspaper folks include the big and well-financed like Texas Tribune (www.texastribune.org), the small and charming like Baltimore Brew (baltimorebrew.com) and some experiments that seem less tentative all the time, like MinnPost (www.minnpost.com) and Voice of San Diego (www.voiceofsandiego.org).

It's a reminder that journalists will do anything to avoid getting real jobs, including conjuring a new kind of workplace that doesn't include any of the legacy costs of trucks and printing presses. Meanwhile, journalism schools are no longer content just to teach the inverted pyramid. A few weeks ago, I was at CUNY's graduate school of journalism to help judge presentations from more than a dozen teams of young media entrepreneurs. There were some clunkers, as there always are, but there were also some scary good, real-world proposals from students who don't have to think out of the box because they were never in one to begin with.

I tried to be courteous and deferential, partly out of a small fear that I may work for one of them someday. There are worse places to end up.

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