

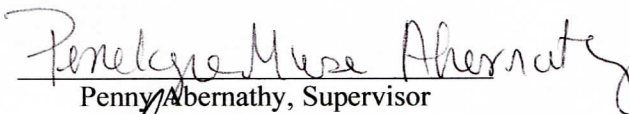
The Outlook for Independent College Media

by


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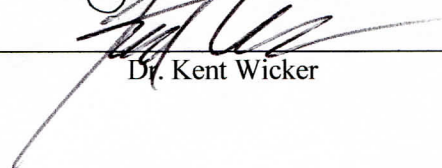
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The Outlook for Independent College Media

[College media] is a community builder. Like a football team, it provides an opportunity for a shared experience. It's also a source of information about issues affecting students, faculty and staff that just don't get consistently covered in community media. And, of course, it's the best opportunity around for students to learn how to find and use their voice. A college without a student-run media outlet isn't a true university in my mind. Over the years, all papers have evolved into independent voices of news and information about the campus they serve. A future without watchdog media changes the nature of college campuses irreparably – it, in effect, threatens the democratic balance in institutes of higher learning.

- Mark Goodman, Kent State University, formerly of Student Press Law Center

Given the rapid changes in the commercial news industry over the last decade the future of newspapers globally is unclear. College media may trail commercial newspapers in their loss of revenue, readers, and community impact, but they are certainly following that trend now. They have seen losses in national revenue, readership, classifieds, and subscriptions – though some have been able to maintain local advertising revenue by adding digital products. All college newspapers, regardless of the relationship to their campus (independent or not), are trying to cope with the changing readership habits of the modern student who is reading fewer print issues per week than a decade ago (Student Monitor). Though impacted less severely, the relevance of college media is also being called into question (as demonstrated by losses

in both readership and revenue) and begs the question: Is it important that college newspapers survive?

Most university newspapers were founded a century or more ago (depending on the campus) with an aim to amplify some communication need of their university – usually sports. For example, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill the *Daily Tar Heel* began as an athletic publication; in Duke University’s case, the *Chronicle* began as a literary mouthpiece. Over the years, many papers have evolved proudly into independent voices of news and information about the campuses they serve. A future without these papers performing their “watchdog” role changes the nature of college campuses. It can, in effect, threaten the democratic balance in institutes of higher learning, as Mark Goodman points out in the above quote.

Some argue that the current generation does not care about transparency and full disclosure, but that opinion potentially oversimplifies the disparities between generations. In fact, the current generation is often mislabeled and misunderstood by the generations that precede them. The reality that the current generation differs in how it wants to consume and interact with the news is indisputable (Student Monitor). To protect the integrity of institutions of higher learning, there needs to be a commitment to preserving the voice of a free and accurate student press to continue the dialogue on campuses in whatever form it takes – that could mean adapting to what this generation wants.

It is important to recognize that news media – including campus media - might evolve into other media formats. Completing a transition from a print-focused

newspaper with a website to a multimedia news company whose products include a great newspaper (or perhaps without an actual print newspaper) requires a number of significant short-term investments in categories such as editorial reorganization, technology and training. At the same time it is pragmatic to take the long view and build a financial base to make certain college media organizations can always provide their staff with the educational opportunities that build journalism and leadership skills, as well as strengthen their editorial products. The college papers researched in this paper are not giving up without a fight. The leaders of these Independent college media can survive, even thrive during this period of economic and technologic chaos and claim a leadership role in the next century of university life *if* they are willing to evolve and adapt their current business and editorial practices and products.

Methodology

Currently, I serve as general manager for the *Chronicle*, Duke's independent college news organization. Our struggle in recent years directly mirrors the majority of college media organizations throughout the country. I approached this project seeking to answer this question: Can college media thrive by borrowing the best practices from commercial media? In order to explore this question, I began by crafting a blog in September 2013 to interact with peer college media professionals across the country and engage them in conversation about their efforts to support innovation in our sector. (This blog consisted of thirteen posts, made every week from September through December 2013). Simultaneously, I enlisted the help of five general managers – a panel

of “experts” – who provided more detailed responses. During the same time period, I also surveyed the thirty-two general managers that are part of the Western Association of University Publication Managers (WAUPM) organization to get their views.

There are approximately 600 college newspapers in the United States and roughly 100 of those are considered dailies. Of those 100, approximately a quarter of the newspapers are independent from their university on some level, and most are separate nonprofit organizations (Schwartz). I focused my expert panel interviews with those organizations that are most similar to the *Chronicle* – independent daily news organizations.

This report begins by exploring the road that led to incorporation and independence of these papers, then evaluates the importance of college media in civic and academic life at universities. Finally, I synthesize the challenges and opportunities and conclude by articulating a strategic vision for how college media can evolve, adapt and thrive, even with dwindling revenue and increasing competition for attention in the news market.

Section 1: HISTORY & ROLE IN DEMOCRACY

History of Independence

It is important to note that the college newspapers that are independent from their universities do not necessarily maintain higher journalistic standards than the news organizations that remain financially attached to their university. But, independent newspapers do face different financial challenges in that their primary (or

perhaps sole) method of support is predicated on advertising sales. Further, Alex Jones, in his book *Losing the News – The Future of the News that Feeds Democracy*, clearly argues that news feeds democracy and that can easily be extrapolated to include all college media no matter their university connection (168).

The first college newspaper to file for independence was the Purdue *Exponent* back in 1969 over freedom of expression. The Vietnam War was sparking protests across campuses, and university administrators were battling for peace and control over their student bodies; at Purdue, that took the form of a campus dean removing the editor of the *Exponent* in an effort to control the campus voice (Ranzi). The primary issue was identified: “the issue boiled down to whether the publisher of the newspaper was the student staff, or the university administrators” (Ranzi).

Mark Goodman, currently Professor and Knight Chair in Scholastic Journalism at Kent State University, was at the helm of the organization that advises many college media organizations on legal matters during the early 1990s (Student Press Law Center) and therefore able to provide historical background on the second movement of college newspapers seeking independence from their universities. The movement began in the late 1980s and rapidly caught on in the 1990s. Goodman offered context on what precipitated the independence trend among college media: “At most schools, I think the motivation was interference, if not outright censorship, by university officials. In some cases, the push to independence came from the university itself so it would be under less pressure to intervene when the publication did something that

faculty/students/alumni/legislators didn't like" (Goodman). Goodman went on to define the primary reasons newspapers (or their universities) chose this route:

Despite the fact that the First Amendment was already a legal impediment to university interference, at least at public schools, I think that many administrators believed that as long as the publication was tied to the university through student activities or an academic unit, there would be the perception that they could and should control it. Independence through incorporation was seen as the best alternative. Some may also have perceived it as a way to protect the school from liability for lawsuits against the publication and similar financial obligations. (Goodman)

Kevin Schwartz, long-time general manager at the *Daily Tar Heel*, was the leader of the second wave of the college newspaper movement toward independence through incorporation. The *Daily Tar Heel's* primary goal was to sever ties with University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill student government because they felt there was no way to have a free press on campus while approaching student government annually for funding (Schwartz). But Schwartz focused the discussions with UNC on an issue that was already beginning to burden the university – tax liability. So this time the movement was focused on IRS tax liability; more specifically, unrelated business expenses that were falling under the university's tax umbrella (Schwartz). Other issues were also at play: receiving funding from student government or the university while objectively covering them, the lack of flexibility to staff advertising and business offices to mirror real-world counterparts, and, finally, legal issues.

The *Daily Tar Heel* incorporated in 1989, and managed to avoid major public relations debacles by appealing to UNC administrators' concerns; student government was strongly against their departure. According to Schwartz, "[UNC student

government] held on with talons — they wanted to hold funding over the paper’s head” (Schwartz). Virginia Tech, Colorado State, Duke University, among others, followed the *Daily Tar Heel’s* lead in the early 1990s. Duke’s student newspaper, the *Chronicle*, went independent in 1994, according to then university attorney A.P. Carlton. “The timing was perfect as the University was growing weary of handling threats of lawsuits in an ever-growing litigious society” (Carlton).

Schwartz estimates that a quarter of all daily college papers (approximately 100 today) are incorporated and enjoy some level of independence from their universities and he asserts that it is a “...huge advantage over dependent papers – offering more flexibility in all aspects of the publishing business” (Schwartz). Goodman cautions that, “[Incorporation] is not a cure-all. It is a tool that can support independence. But a bad board of directors for your corporation can be just as bad, if not worse, than university administrators who you can at least raise the First Amendment defense against a public school” (Goodman).

It is important to evaluate the college newspaper independence movement in light of its impact on the future viability of college media. In other words, do incorporated independent college news organizations have an advantage or disadvantage over their dependent (non-incorporated) counterparts? Schwartz and Goodman agreed that the answer depends on many factors but primarily on advertising revenue. Goodman, in his former role at Student Press Law Center, would advise financial independence for college media organizations if they could support themselves through their advertising revenues (there has been and continues to be a wide disparity

in how much revenue a newspaper receives from its university and how that contribution is calculated – i.e. “in kind” versus actual cash). Essentially, the advantages are clear – but only if an organization can afford the costs. Goodman sums it up as follows: “A news organization could avoid some university red tape, give added independence (both through public perception and reality) and potentially provide a more real-world experience” (Goodman).

But even though the advantages are apparent, incorporation is not feasible for all. College newspapers in communities without a strong local advertising base just cannot make it work (Goodman). Goodman noted that separation from an academic unit could also hurt a university’s journalism program by eliminating the place where students put what they learn into practice. And some student media organizations just do not have strong enough leadership to manage all of the things that go along with independence. This could include handling their own payroll, securing their own office space, and hiring and managing a professional staff.

Schwartz considers the move to independence a certain gain for the *Daily Tar Heel*, helping the paper to adapt and adjust as needed without red tape and unnecessary influence. Similarly, in my role as general manager at the *Chronicle*, I have found that independence has helped our organization maintain advertising sales and grow in a new economy that rewards agility over bureaucracy. The recent economic challenges have required constant organizational changes in the last eight years and most likely would have been hampered by the bureaucracies of a large university organization.

But as Goodman points out, both the *Daily Tar Heel* and the *Chronicle* moved to separate themselves from the universities at a more propitious time. “Today, I think the number of college media organizations that can survive without any university funding or student activity fee support is smaller than ever. My guess is that until the business model for multi-media news organizations gets figured out, we’re not going to see many move to incorporate because they just cannot afford it” (Goodman).

Role in Democracy

The panel of college newspaper experts, all from independent organizations, was asked to evaluate the role their campus media organizations serve in civic life. Is campus media important, even essential, to democracy on a local or national scale? More importantly, has that role changed in the most recent decade, or are there signs it may change in the near future?

Pat Kuhnle, publisher of the *Exponent* at Purdue University, thinks college news organizations provide the same resources in covering local and regional governmental agencies, but he also recognizes that staff and readers are generally not as interested as they were just ten years ago (Kuhnle). “Furthermore, I think there continues to be a disconnect between legislators in Washington, DC and our audience, except for the most politically active students” (Kuhnle).

Eric Jacobs, general manager of the *Daily Pennsylvanian* at the University of Pennsylvania, observes, “...my paper, and many college papers, do much less in covering government than we used to.” According to Jacobs, until recently most college dailies

ran wire content (Associated Press, Bloomberg, Washington Post) to fill readers in on state, national and even international news. "...Due to a combination of budget cutbacks and a change in how our readers get their news, many college papers eliminated syndicated content over the past decade" (Jacobs).

However, it is important to remember, that until the proliferation of smart phones, tablets and the like, the college newspaper was often the only news source for many students. In addition, many college newspapers made a conscious decision to stop providing a recap of national news and instead focus on what they do uniquely: provide local news and information (Jacobs).

The panel participants agreed that most college newspapers continue to provide the bread-and-butter journalism of the print era, focusing on covering student government and organizations, administrators, faculty, sports teams and coaches. However, Jacobs points out, "College newspapers have a smaller and less-devoted audience than they once did, so their coverage on these — and any — areas has less impact than it once did." Michael Fribush, general manager at the *Diamondback* at the University of Maryland, agrees that, unfortunately, not as many readers get their information from college newspapers as they did a decade ago; yet he asserts that the use of Twitter, Facebook and other social media are not a replacement for hard-news sources like the campus newspaper, website and mobile application. Data from an annual survey of thirty-two member schools in the Western Association of University Publication Managers supports that all newspapers in recent years have reported readership or circulation declines at some level in their print products (WAUPM). Jacobs

continues, “In print and online, we’re still the number one source of news and information on campus — but our reach isn’t as nearly as universal as it was a decade or two ago” (Jacobs).

Erica Perel, editorial advisor for the *Daily Tar Heel*, offers yet another take on the role campus media should play in civic life and democracy. She emphasizes the importance of this role and argues that this places even greater responsibility on the part of campus media not to pull resources back from covering campus issues. She concedes, however, that many campuses do not see this as their role and embrace it as they do in Chapel Hill. Perel adds, “I have seen many top college newspapers use public records and aggressive reporting over the last few years to hold the public officials who run their universities accountable.” Two recent examples of using the power of the campus press to bring to light important campus problems include the *Crimson White's* reporting on segregation in Greek life and the *Daily Tar Heel's* reporting and editorializing on campus sexual assault (Perel).

Phil Meyer, in his 2006 work *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age*, weighs in on the role of the press in democracy, albeit from a commercial newspaper perspective: “The decay of newspaper journalism creates problems not just for the business but also for society, [because] if we are no longer shining a light on the local stories [or doing so with decreasing frequency], there is literally no one paying attention” (5). He goes on to voice the real question plaguing journalists and concerned citizens alike – why don’t we care that there is less coverage or oversight? Meyer cautions, “Those of us who wish to preserve the social

responsibility function of the press by improving its quality need to stop nagging long enough to start looking at the integrated product and not just the portion that is manufactured from paper and ink” (221). My panel agrees with Meyer that many students just do not see the media as an important watchdog and civil rights champion, but they all attribute that to generational differences that impact all media and not just college media specifically (Schwartz, Jacobs, Kuhlne).

The panel points out some interesting and important differences between commercial and campus media with respect to democracy – namely, some of the financial constraints that hinder a commercial newspaper from covering city hall do not apply on college campuses. Since college newspaper staffs are primarily volunteer – or paid considerably less than their professional counterparts – there is no reason to cutback investigative reporting or coverage due to revenue declines (Fribush). Further, a few panelists noted that many national media outlets seem forced to rely on opinion (Twitter feeds, Facebook posts, citizen journalism) in lieu of actual reporting because they cannot afford to pay for that type of coverage anymore.

Arvli Ward, director of student media at the University of California at Los Angeles, expressed his concern about the future of civic journalism – again, not because of resources, but because of generational differences. Ward commented, “In this environment whereby blogs, social media and opinion pieces are viewed as journalism, ‘truth’ will be an endangered commodity. Furthermore, there seems to be an increased indifference as to what happens with governmental agencies unless it happens to infringe upon personal finances” (Ward). Ward contends that the truly informed and

engaged students have been and will be in the minority on college campuses (others on the panel do not agree here) and the campus newspaper is just one of many important sources for this niche group (Ward).

Though the panelists disagree on the full impact their organizations have on democracy, they all agree that campus media has always had two roles — one, to serve a journalistic mission in our communities, the other to deliver a social and educational experience to their participants. Ward thinks that they will continue to affect civic life through both. On the issue of whether a goal of furthering a civic mission changed the interest-level in participating at the college media organization, the panel was on either side of the spectrum. Schwartz thinks technology has amplified generational differences to the point that current students are not that interested in being as engaged with the world around them as college newspapers still cover it; that carries over to students not as committed to the paper (Schwartz). At the *Daily Tar Heel*, according to Schwartz, the core group of dedicated students used to number forty or so students, now that number is closer to fifteen, though the total numbers of students participating is still high. Other panelists agree that they are maintaining high numbers of participation like the *Daily Tar Heel* but find that fewer students are willing to sacrifice the time that is required for a management position. Ward offers this assessment:

While it may be true that in a world where students can get information from lots of other sources may result in fewer students reading a campus newspaper, I'm not sure that is producing a marginalization that results in fewer students interested in the extracurricular activity of doing media. On the UCLA campus, students want to belong to something bigger than themselves, an impulse that may be foundational to civic-minded thinking. The campus media provide that. If campus media market

themselves right, then they can stay relevant on the participant level even as their audience market share declines. (Ward)

Ward's message is hopeful, though perhaps situational to a campus located in a large metro-area. But perhaps a possible takeaway is that participatory interest can be reversed if students find the work environment more entrepreneurial; that is already happening at commercial newspapers that have revitalized their newsrooms (Gyllenhaal and Moses).

Section 2: CHALLENGES

Industry, Finances, Generational Differences and Readership Declines

The challenges facing media companies are well known and well documented; in the last decade, the entire industry has been rocked by accelerated changes in technology and serious threats to revenue. It is impossible to talk about the challenges facing independent college media today without referring to the trends in commercial newspapers; a snapshot of their larger industry partners will help put college-level struggles in context. Certainly, a direct comparison is flawed on many levels, but it would be irresponsible not to look for possible impacts or trickle down effects from the larger media landscape. As it turns out, declining readership and generational differences are causing the most concerns at the college level.

Industry

Philip Meyer, a journalism professor emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, may be most commonly known for predicting the end of the print

newspaper (though his quote was taken out of context). Meyer wrote his book in an effort to save the industry from making disastrous errors selling out to investors; this, in fact, is the most important distinction to keep in mind when comparing commercial and campus media. Luckily, this lure was not available to college media, which avoided the precipitous downward revenue trend experienced by commercial media during the economic crisis of 2008.

The Pew Research Center's *The State of the New Media 2013* offers the most hopeful assessment of commercial newspapers since the recession began, pronouncing the industry as "stable but threatened" (Edmonds). Most news organizations are even having some modest success experimenting with new revenue. In addition, the improving economy is bringing back some of the lost revenue from the recent economic downturn (Edmonds, *State of News Media 2013*). The bottom line is that most papers are trying hard to shed legacy costs associated with the print era and move forward in this new economy.

The glass-half-full caution is that it might not be good enough or fast enough; print advertising in commercial newspapers is half of what it was in 2000 and fell for its sixth consecutive year – dropping 8.5% in 2012 (Edmonds, *State of News Media 2013*). The report goes on to underline the most worrisome financial news; "National advertising is a particular weakness, suggesting that corporations are shifting their advertising dollars to other platforms." Yet another view is that newspapers are really profitable, but just not as profitable as they used to be, an analyst from the Poynter Institute points out (Edmonds, *Six Trends*). A recent article in *News and Tech* predicts:

“By 2020, not every U.S. city will have a printed newspaper every day of the week and newspaper subscriptions will span both print and digital access in a single package” (Moozakis). The article goes on to predict that national newspapers like the *New York Times* and *USA Today* will survive but dailies in metros will struggle and may not make it. The good news for college media is that they most closely resemble community newspapers, a big step down from the metros – and they are faring better than their larger counterparts (Gyllenhaal and Moses).

There is a measure of hope in the industry: newspaper organizations have made progress in getting readers to pay a bigger share of costs by installing digital pay walls and they are beginning to turn their competencies into new revenue streams even as “print advertising continues to erode and digital advertising continues to underwhelm” (Edmonds, *State of News Media 2013*). While the industry has yet to break the decade-long cycle of doing less of what it does best due to dramatic cuts in editorial staff operations there is still a strong demand for reporting. “Doing that well on multiple platforms now seems in reach, making the rise of all things digital plausibly an opportunity, not just a threat” (Edmonds, *State of News Media 2013*).

Ken Doctor’s 2010 book thoroughly covers twelve trends that are (and will be) shaping commercial news. He includes some statistics that are also helpful for setting the college media stage: in 2009, Google had profits of \$1.4 billion compared to Gannet’s \$58 million, the last circulation increase in a major dailies was 1984 – that is literally a lifetime ago, and U.S. teens spend 600% more time online than their parents (4). Without a doubt, that is bleak news for print newspapers, but also strong proof that

digital is inevitable. And Doctor also offers this sobering assessment of the newspaper industry: the transformation of the news industry has really just begun and when it is over, print will be gone (4).

According to Doctor, local papers (the majority of papers in the U.S.) have been hit the hardest by online competition and then the recession (46). But their local focus is what will help them survive, too – because there is less competition for news and advertising dollars (47). Meanwhile, online news competitors are popping up in every city; some with big success. So, if you agree with Doctor’s analysis, the primary threat to college media is the prospect that a competing student news group will enter the market without the legacy costs associated with the print product.

The *Chronicle* is following the trend Doctor explains above and named the “Hybrid Age of Newspapers” (48). In this scenario, a news organization accelerates the move to digital by cutting a day or multiple days of publication. The hope is that the remaining days the paper is physically published still continue to attract readers and advertisers (new content or pricing can help). However, there is concern that in dropping publication days, newspapers prompt readers to abandon print even sooner. To combat this, Doctor calls on local papers to “remap and reload” (50).

“Remap” involves defining your market boundaries very clearly. In the *Chronicle’s* case, as in most college markets, the quick response is to say it is naturally defined by campus boundaries but this may or may not hold up to more targeted analysis. Doctor would encourage college media to ask whether your paper should focus less on the surrounding community and more on students - or perhaps, more on sports

and less on campus speakers? It is worth considering if a change or “remap” is needed. “Reload” is finding new ways to report the news (delivery on multiple platforms) and new ways to support it, which the *Chronicle* is in the process of doing, along with others, of course.

Ken Doctor is focusing on our commercial counterparts in his recent article, *10 Ways We'll Judge 2014*, but most of the trends he highlights also relate to college media. He labels 2013 as “sobering” for the news industry, and though the college media world was more stable last year, it was not a year of growth (WAUPM). Luckily, for most college news organizations, advertising revenue comes predominantly from local advertisers so the national advertising withdrawal from newspapers has not had a dramatic impact; commercial newspapers, by contrast, saw double-digit national advertising losses in 2013 alone. Here is Doctor’s most painful observation: The print advertising revenue decline is accelerating. Some analysts hoped the revived economy would slow down the decline and balance out the jump to digital (or social) (Doctor, *10 Ways*).

Doctor goes on to wonder what the Bezos effect will be in 2014 and beyond, in reference to Jeff Bezos’ purchase in 2013 of the *Washington Post*. Bezos, of Amazon fame, could create a new model for the news world. This begs reflection for their college counterparts: what potential talent are they missing on their own campuses – professors or graduate students with projects that could impact the industry, or perhaps entrepreneurial student organizations with new ideas that could jump-start sales? Doctor goes on to note, “News companies worldwide report around a third of their

traffic is coming from smartphones and tablets” (Doctor, *10 Ways*). It will not take long for that to be 50 percent according to Doctor (Doctor, *10 Ways*). College papers need to worry beyond the move from news websites to news mobile sites and answer some difficult questions about how to monetize that platform and deliver news in that medium.

Logan Aimone, former executive director of the National Scholastic Press Association, which included oversight of the Associated Collegiate Press, said technology’s impact on college newspapers is hard to measure; “We [still] can’t quantify the impact of the changing times on college newspapers in the same way as community newspapers” (Hogan). Aimone concedes, “We know that advertisers aren’t pursuing college newspapers like they once did, yet print is still where the money is made” (Hogan). To prepare for the future, college newspapers need to prioritize digital advertising sales just like their commercial counterparts if they expect to thrive (Edmonds). The *State of the News Media* report from 2013 also suggests that all newspapers should consider hiring online-only sales staff and force reluctant local advertisers to try digital by including a component in every contract or purchase.

This trend suggests that regardless of size and economic setting, newspapers are losing print advertising dollars and gaining digital advertising dollars at a rate of seven to one (Edmonds). Some success has been experienced in growing new digital revenue categories, especially targeted digital advertising. But the bottom line is that a shift to digital will not maintain current revenue. A new study of advertising in news by the Pew Research Center finds that currently even the top news websites in the country have

had little success getting advertisers from traditional platforms to move online. In addition, online advertising revenue growth is down – having achieved a record high of \$17 billion in the first half of 2012 (Edmonds).

Revenue – College Media by the Numbers

The survey I conducted for this project of thirty college peer media organizations provides a snapshot of the revenue challenges in the college media industry. When the general managers and publishers were asked if they were budgeting for a revenue increase in any category this year, or forecasting for an increase in the next three years, all but two said yes. Not surprisingly, most said that the increase would come from digital advertising dollars, though a handful were optimistic about local or national spending rebounding slightly this year (Beck). Asked whether or not they were considering a cutback in print distribution in the next one to three years, 50 percent responded yes. Of those who said yes, the majority of college news organizations making a cut cite the loss of readership as the primary cause instead of cost savings (Beck).

The well-known legacy competitor for advertising revenue in college newspapers used to be the local community paper. That threat has diminished in the last five years, but many others have surfaced. Most managers' cite nontraditional threats from their universities – communications from athletic departments, on-campus promotions, campus email blasts – as their primary competitor today. As expected, social media came in a close second for revenue threats – including Facebook, mobile applications

and the like. In addition to the revenue concerns and declining commitment levels discussed in more detail to follow, a third of the managers surveyed were concerned about the quality of their products (Beck).

Generational Differences – Impacts on Work and Readership

How has this millennial generation affected recent strategic responses undertaken by college newspapers? The resounding answer from the expert panel is that their products have changed to correspond to those generational differences. Fribush was clear that generational differences have had a huge impact on the University of Maryland campus: “The current generation, for the most part, does not read newspapers. On our campus, each incoming freshman class has fewer and fewer students with a background in reading newspapers or even having the newspaper delivered to their parents' homes” (Fribush).

Kuhnle and Schwartz both agreed that the inquisitive nature of college media newsrooms has changed as well. Kuhnle put it simply: “Instinctually, newsroom staff members do not recognize news.” The panel agrees that students in campus newsrooms today have a difficult time determining what is newsworthy and, as a result, the news product produced today is less analytical and more socially dictated than it was a decade ago. They also all agreed that students today rely on their friends to tell them if a story is newsworthy or interesting, thus underscoring the importance of social media in driving traffic to the college news content. According to Kuhnle, there is one exception - breaking news remains the same as it has been. He goes on to explain: “If

there is a shooting, a natural disaster or a student death, consumers turn to us....but now they expect it to be delivered immediately to them via devices and secondarily to them in print” (Kuhnle).

Also students seem less interested in working primarily for the newspaper, which Schwartz and Ward noted above. In addition, when the survey respondents were asked to name their primary concern with newsroom operation, many in the survey expressed concern about declining student commitment level (Beck). Fribush elaborated on his response, “There used to be activity in our newsroom beginning about 12:00 p.m. forty-five years ago; nowadays, there might be a few staff members in around 5:00 p.m., but the real activity doesn't start until after 6:00 p.m. and there are less students involved in general” (Fribush).

And, finally, the panel noted that readership is also declining with this generation of students although the causes are intertwined with the technology revolution and almost impossible to parse out. Fribush has noticed a more dramatic shift in the last five years: “Unfortunately, due to declining readership, I would have to say that campus media are closer to inconsequential than integral in a student's education” (Fribush). Again, declining readership is cited as the primary reason for considering a cut in distribution (Beck).

The WAUPM data coordinator, Kelly Wolff, shared some overall statistics that shed light on the extent of the readership declines. First, return rates (the number of papers left over at the distribution points) for print editions have gone up by an average of 2% the last three school years. Second, the pages printed went down an average 6%

last school year. My survey of collegiate peers also supports this downward trend. Asked if their readers were as loyal today as they were a year or two ago, 75 percent said no (Beck). In addition, one manager noted that adding new readers every year is a time-consuming problem. Another paper noted that when surveying their own readers they found that 70 percent of students think their newspaper is important yet only 40 percent say they read it on a regular basis (Beck).

A national survey done by Student Monitor (*Lifestyle and Media 2013*) and presented to managers at the WAUPM conference in 2013 fills in the gaps of this picture. *Student Monitor Lifestyle and Media 2013* contains the results of over 1200 in-person interviews with current college students all across the country. They found that 52 percent (compared to 54 percent last year and 61 percent two years ago) read at least 1 of the last 5 issues of the print edition of their university's newspaper. Paradoxically, more than three times as many college students prefer the print edition as prefer the online edition, and only 18 percent read the online edition in the past month (though students demonstrate a clear preference for reading national news online). The numbers suggest that college newspaper online editions still appeal to alumni and prospective students more than currently enrolled students (Student Monitor).

Section 3: STRATEGIES Change, Planning and Leadership

Focusing on the numerous challenges can be downright depressing – even immobilizing. Understanding how current businesses thrive, newspaper or not, can inject some optimism and help guide a future path. It is critical for college media to

consider implementing changes since the old model is certainly not returning to its former health. That involves a commitment to strategic planning and a shift in leadership. This process can be stressful and complicated, but also absolutely necessary.

Change

Jim Collins offers advice and hope in his best-selling work of non-fiction, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*. One of the most reassuring lines in Collins' book follows: "Good to great companies were unaware of the magnitude of their transformation at the time; only later, did it become clear" (186). In other words, college newspapers in the throes of new content and revenue projects may feel overwhelmed and not realize they are really on to something transformative. Collins, perhaps indirectly, is saying those news organizations that are trying to reinvent their companies in order to thrive can do it.

And Collins offers a tactical approach all college media should consider: there is a clarifying advantage to simplicity. Instead of being involved in a multitude of new ventures, decide what is working and focus energy and resources there. Collins advises owning one brilliant concept and executing it with imagination and excellence – he coined this process the Hedgehog Principle (188). Collins consciously chose the phrase because "...hedgehogs are not stupid....they understand that the essence of profound insight is simplicity" (91).

Collins is saying that it is not just about having a strategy, it is making sure your company has the right one. The best companies have a simple, great concept to execute

that flows from a “deep understanding” about the intersection of the following three circles, or questions:

1. What can you be the best in the world at? (And worst)
2. What drives your economic engine?
3. What are you already deeply passionate about? (95)

If you make money but are doing things your media organization is not passionate about – and who has not slipped down that path in the scramble for replacement revenue from lost advertising sales – your company might be good, but never great.

To explain his concept more fully, I answered Collins’ questions based on the *Chronicle’s* current predicament.

1. Could become the best at covering the news of Duke (worst – covering local, state and national news).
2. Print advertising revenue.
3. Giving college students a meaningful experience in journalism.

Collins’ most important advice for college media may also be the hardest to accept for 100-year-old news organizations steeped in history and honored for tradition: Collins warns that just because something has been your core business for a long time does not mean it should be in the future. If you are not the best and do not have a plan to get there, you need to try to be the best at something else; you can keep the core business function but it can not be the primary driver (Collins 19). Obviously, this could mean relinquishing the actual print newspaper at some point, or a long-cherished side project.

Most of the companies Collins researched and deemed worthy of labeling great were not in “hot” industries. In fact, some were in aging or struggling industries; a bit

like the newspaper industry of the early twenty-first century. And here is the really good news: “Greatness is not a function of circumstance. Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice” (11).

The college news organizations surveyed all identified that they were focusing on change, or it was being forced on them by financial circumstances. Honestly, change is inevitable these days, but I was curious who was leading the change in my representative sample of media organizations. Of the twenty responses to this question, only two said students; twelve papers said some combination of students, staff, alumni, or university personnel (Beck). On the one hand, change by students is risky in that most student employees are not on staff long enough to take a long view or think beyond their most engaged year on staff. On the other hand, they are exactly the core market our products are trying to capture – what appeals to them should be scalable to your target market. Students really must be included at some level for sustained success.

Meyer also echoes Collins, through a commercial newspaper lens: “For a business that has been so successful for so many decades, new thinking is extremely difficult” (218). Almost by definition, college media organizations employ young and tech-savvy students, but they have found they hold on just as tightly to tradition as do some full time staff, alumni and board members (Beck). For example, it is not unusual to hear a reporter lament that their online-only story will not make it into print. The bottom line is that the entire college media community needs to get on board to innovate, and that can be accomplished with strategic planning or, simply, brainstorming sessions.

CASE STUDY

The *Chronicle* at Duke University

For a two-year span starting in 2009, the Duke Student Publishing Company (DSPC), the nonprofit company that runs the *Chronicle*, performed a first round of strategic planning with the primary goal of cutting expenses to match dramatically dwindling revenue experienced during the recent economic downturn. We enacted some drastic measures at the time: laid off three employees and left vacant two full time positions, reorganized the sales staff from professional employees to a student staff led by a sales manager and advertising director, and revised some editorial products. In addition, we started a multi-year process to design and build our own web site entirely crafted by Duke students to save us money and give us flexibility. Last but not least, we reaffirmed our mission, which is a commitment to be the best source of independent news about the Duke community and to develop outstanding leaders through journalism.

But as soon as the first wave of economic panic subsided, we began to fully appreciate that our new norm would be a state of constant change and development because technological advances were altering news consumption at a breathtaking pace. So in January 2012, DSPC set out to develop a strategic vision to guide the *Chronicle* to continued success in a media landscape upset by changing readership habits, the proliferation of media outlets and user-generated content, and advertisers' increasing options and declining budgets. The second wave of the planning process began with the sobering recognition that to thrive, tomorrow's *Chronicle* must cultivate

new readers and new revenue streams, master new ways to report and deliver the news, and impart new skills to students who want to build careers in journalism. Just as important, it must continue the paper's long tradition of paying its own way by generating new revenue sources.

As an organization, we began to recognize that news media – including campus media - might evolve to other media formats. Completing our transition from an award-winning newspaper with a website to a multimedia news company whose products include a great newspaper has required the *Chronicle* to make significant short-term investments in categories such as editorial reorganization, technology and training. At the same time we wanted to build a financial base to make certain we can always provide our staff with the educational opportunities that build journalism and leadership skills.

For the past year, we (our board of directors, professional staff, and advertising students) have focused on identifying and implementing a new business model for the *Chronicle*. Meanwhile, the editorial staff has turned their attention to the newsroom reorganization – specifically identifying workflows, platforms and products that will allow us to provide high quality content in print and on phones, laptops, tablets and any other devices our readers use to get news.

We spent over a year in research. We talked to numerous other peer institutions gathering best practices and data. We began to follow our industry leaders – Pew Research Center, Poynter Institute, Nieman Journalism Lab, among others. And we interviewed and surveyed our clients and readers trying to figure out what they needed

and wanted. Finally, we adopted a plan in June 2014 that called for the following: a swift move to digital without abandoning print, the development of new digital products, the purchase of an enhanced content management system, a revised organizational chart for editorial, the addition of a full time employee to grow and manage digital products for the advertising team, among other changes.

We recognized that implementing a new operating model would put the most significant burden on our editorial staff during the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years. Primarily to support their need for digital work time, we dropped one day of publication per week (it saves us very little in our operating budget, but it does help us gauge reader reaction to cuts in print). This year's top editors have started to reorganize their staff and redistribute the work flow to deliver new products and services in multiple digital formats – all while producing a print paper four days a week. They are working on plans to train recruits in multiple media, from print to blog to video. In addition, our alumni, who work professionally as journalists, have increased their commitment to providing mentorship and training. And during the critical first few years of the transformation, the *Chronicle* staff fundraised and hired a professional journalist to consult on site; we looked specifically for someone with expertise in the transition from a product that is primarily print to multiple products and services delivered in multiple digital formats.

The staff has provided check-ins at every board meeting to monitor progress and reevaluate our decisions. Our revenue adjustments this year will increase digital by at least 20% though that will just move the digital contribution to the overall revenue of the organization to 10 percent (Print advertising is 89 percent, the remaining 1 percent

is from solicited donations). The editorial staff is having a harder time adopting a new attitude than anticipated – the irony is that most of these students did not grow up with a print readership habit. It is too soon to fully evaluate our decisions but we certainly feel empowered by crafting our future instead of reacting to negative market impacts.

Strategic Planning

Along with the *Chronicle's* strategic plan (discussed in the sidebar above), I reviewed two other industry partners' plans for comparison - The *Daily Pennsylvanian* and The Oregon *Daily Emerald*. Ryan Frank, publisher at the *Daily Emerald*, strongly recommends radical change in the preamble to his plan: "We won't succeed in a digital age with an evolution; we need a revolution" (*Daily Emerald*). Eric Jacobs, from the *Daily Pennsylvanian*, described a more gradual change: "A nimble, more innovative *Daily Pennsylvanian* will be better positioned to deal with a changing media world" (*Daily Pennsylvanian*).

All three plans followed best practices in strategic planning: SWOT (strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats) analyses, brainstorming, research, and core mission/business confirmation. The *Daily Pennsylvanian's* plan recommended numerous changes to their editorial team to realign their workflow to be "nimbleness, more digital, and more entrepreneurial." The *Daily Emerald's* plan called for a decrease from five to two print newspapers weekly with topic-specific content and a tabloid-style layout. In addition, they expanded their digital presence and the marketing of all editorial products (primarily through social media). Both organizations' strategic plans

called for a revamped focus on generating revenue selling by digital advertising and adding outside projects such as book publishing and mobile application creation (*Daily Emerald, Daily Pennsylvanian*).

After reviewing these three case studies, I recommend other college media organizations consider following their lead by engaging students, board and staff in thoughtful strategic planning. Robert Simons tackles the strategic planning process in his book, *Seven Strategy Questions: A Simple Approach for Better Execution*, and cautions that you must test your strategy once conceived to make sure the thinking is on target (4). Essentially, he assumes you know your market well enough to formulate a plan that is customer-focused (4). To move beyond that step, Simons created seven questions over his career that test the following: have you built a strong foundation, are able to focus your company's attention to the plan, have done enough to facilitate success for your staff, and finally, is your focus on future-thinking (5). Like Collins, Simons' mantra is also "keep it simple."

The Strategy-Focused Organization by Robert Kaplan and David Norton uses a "balanced scorecard" approach (developed in a previous work and employ it again in this book) to make sure everyone on staff is focused on making strategy a continuous process – owned not just by top management but by everyone. They assert: "The ability to execute strategy can be more important than the strategy itself" (7). A company can become complacent once a strategy is conceived and think the solution will save them – but the real trick is to follow through and execute the plan or certainly fail (an estimated 70% of plans fail for this reason) (7). In college media, this involves getting acceptance

from all departments – editorial cannot change the product the advertising staff sells without potentially hurting a revenue source. On the other hand, advertising cannot enact new revenue streams in a vacuum – without editorial content that draws in readership traffic.

Kaplan and Norton also address nonprofits as a subset category – this is a group college media most closely resembles in the business world, due to their educational missions and funding structures. They quote Michael Porter’s admonition that “...strategy is not only what the organization intends to do, but also what it decides to do” (Kaplan, 133). This could relate to college media organizations that are making decisions such as whether or not news will be offered in a print format in the near future or whether they should refocus efforts only on campus and largely ignore the surrounding town.

Richard Foster and Sarah Kaplan wrote a book entitled *Creative Destruction: Why Companies That are Built to Last Underperform in the Market and How to Successfully Transform Them* that reinvestigates a business notion introduced decades ago – namely creative destruction, which generally means the birth of a new concept that kills or hurts an old one (9). The Internet is certainly hurting a portion of college media advertising dollars as well as diverting readers to a multitude of online sites. Supported by extensive research, Foster and Kaplan offer a clear direction for companies in danger – your company must change at the pace and scale of the market (161). In addition to increasing your pace, companies must also find ways to include all

voices and talents of their employees and loosen up the structures and controls to allow for creative, quick change (162).

Simons offers a caution: “Innovation occurs naturally in competitive markets. But it doesn’t occur naturally inside organizations” (113). He likens work routines to a mindless response – it is a habit, and hard to break (113). If ever there was a time to quickly step outside of your work comfort zone, it is now. Foster and Kaplan echo this caution, “To be successful, strategic planning must be designed to incorporate the principles of divergent thinking,” (212). The caution is stern: unless someone (or some group) in your college media organization leads innovation and strategic change, there is no real hope of continued survival at the legacy pace. Eric Jacobs stated in his strategic plan, “The *Daily Pennsylvanian* is not immune from the technology and revenue challenges that have buffeted the newspaper business and its failure to adjust imperils its twin roles as a vital service to the University community and a dynamic experience for its student participants.”

Leadership

John Kotter’s best-selling business book, *Leading Change*, offers advice easily adapted in the college media world. First, his notion that management and leadership are not the same concept resonates in a culture that has undergone very little change until the last decade; certainly an organization with lots of moving parts doing the relatively the same thing every year needs mostly management (20, 21). Kotter amplifies this thought; “Management tends to focus on structures and systems, while

leadership is more focused on culture and vision” (156). Whether or not general managers are the primary drivers of the changes in college media organizations, they are certainly in the perfect position to influence it. So the implication is this: if a leader spends too much of their time on day-to-day operations and not enough on the vision of the needed organizational changes, then what they are trying to craft will not succeed – that goes for general managers, ad directors and editors alike. This also obviously has implications for student leaders; the future goal should be finding ways to free up editors or other key staffers from tedious tasks to be more creative and forward thinking.

Kotter also thinks a good leader needs to spend some time engaged with the culture and vision of their organization. Most college media organizations have really strong, ingrained cultures built up over time and influenced, no doubt, by their universities’ cultures too. Kotter warns that culture is one of the most powerful influences on human behavior, and he acknowledges how tough it can be to enact change (196). Though a potentially very difficult to make organizational changes, you may need to start by changing the culture (196).

Last but not least, Kotter’s assessment of companies of the future is hopeful for college media organizations. Once the industry collectively recognizes the past is long gone and not likely coming back, it will be easier to move forward; that is, long periods of calm growth with minor periods of “hectic activity” will give way to a new model (170). This model requires a “...state in which complacency is virtually absent, in which

people are always looking for both problems and opportunities, and in which the norm is to move quickly” (170).

Kotter spends some time analyzing the differences between twentieth century and twenty-first century companies; here are a few that directly apply to college media (181):

<p>Culture: Not internally focused, externally. Must be more empowering. More risk tolerant. Quick to make decisions.</p> <p>Structure: Fewer rules and employees. Management must lead, not manage.</p>
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The changes in culture require vigilance and agility, and the structural changes suggest different management styles must be adopted. Some full-time employees may not be able to adjust to this type of culture; even though it may be the new norm in the general business world, the massive college institutions that college media organizations work alongside may be on a completely different agenda or timetable.

CONCLUSION

The move to offering news in a form audiences prefer will necessitate transitions in college media over the next decade – sooner rather than later. Meyer offers some good news for college press: “New technology usually gets its foothold by serving markets that have not been served before” (221). Every year a new crop of students enter our news communities and they will come primarily without a preference for

news in print; therefore they can potentially become loyal readers right away if they are offered a product that fits what they want. Of course, the problem of how to monetize that interaction, when independent college media budgets rely so heavily on print advertising dollars, still persists. As a result, any effort to gain a new audience requires a balanced approach that maintains print readers for as long as possible. Meyer concludes that, "People use the online product much differently than the print product; it is a utility" (221). People on college news websites are looking for quick access to information and a community that reflects their experiences – is that what they are getting?

College media needs to take cues from other industries and, in some instances, their commercial counterparts; the relative security of our operations on campus is no longer a certainty as the lack of funding and readership offer serious threats today. Sound advice for college media's future comes from Bloomberg Businessweek: "You must be willing to fail, fail, and fail again if you are going to win in today's competitive marketplace" (Hall). I have described how some college newspapers have recently adapted or have plans to start down their future paths – it is time for the rest of industry to follow suit. I believe strongly that college media organizations must move quickly or market pressures will force them to respond in survival mode.

It is essential to start with strategic planning; "Strategic planning cannot be a numbers exercise and must include real thinking" (Kaplan and Foster 212). The industry needs to find the energy to foster and demonstrate leadership instead of management. On top of that, college media organizations must find the courage to spark creativity

and give up the status quo when it is clearly no longer working. Finally, it will be vitally important to monitor two driving issues for future success: adaptation to technology and relevance in the marketplace.

Alex Jones answers the core question of whether news really needs saving in his book, *Losing the News – The Future of the News that Feeds Democracy* – and it is a resounding yes. The current news stories in college press of the last year or so – sexual assault on college campuses, racial discrimination in Greek life, athletic scandals – all point to Jones’ stance that news feeds our democracy, and that makes it vital to who we are as American citizens (198). Jones echoes Perel’s earlier assertion that far too much goes unwatched and unreported today, and certainly that trend must be reversed or, at the very least, stalled. Jones continues, “The act of saving the news should, in fact, include a goal and prod to news organizations to be more rigorous” (198).

Finally, Jones states the core message that I think independent college media should sharply focus on for the future: “Saving the media is about finding a commercial model that supports journalism focused on serious news,” (200). That may or may not mean print newspapers survive forever, but good journalism focused on deep reporting is what should survive in the new form. Newspapers must focus on quality (Jones 209).

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