

# Changing Times

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TOMORROW'S NEWSPAPER TODAY

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OCTOBER 18, 2020

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## EXCLUSIVE

# Delivering Tomorrow's Newspaper

**Richard Watson, Chief Futurist at Future Exploration Network and author of *Future Files: A History of the Next 50 Years* (Scribe 2007) looks at the future of fibre-based media.**

Richard Watson [WWW.FUTUREEXPLORATION.NET](http://WWW.FUTUREEXPLORATION.NET)

According to *The Economist* magazine, newspapers (or what some bloggers now mockingly refer to as “fibre media”) are on their deathbed and various statistics seem to support this gloomy diagnosis. However, I think this may prove to be a premature extrapolation. It is the bloggers themselves that are an endangered species. Why do I think this? My reasoning is twofold.

***If enough people predict something, it won't happen.***

There is no doubt that we live in a time-starved world where people snack on information and where the common language is becoming visual. The anecdotal evidence against newsprint in this context is strong. Consider, for example, the death of long copy advertisements, the appearance of shortened versions of classic books and, my own particular favourite, executive summary versions of children's stories for the time pressed parent to read to their multi-tasking toddler.

Many people no longer have time for breakfast, let alone newspapers. Lunch is now a quick sandwich in the office.

Not surprising then that first radio, then television and now the Internet have become a faster and more convenient way for people to consume information, especially breaking news. As a result analysts have downgraded the newspaper sector and over-caffeinated young journalists have written their own obituaries. In the beginning was the word but in the future there will be sound-bites and moving pictures delivered over mobile or other screen-based devices.

But there are several problems with this argument.

Most mega-trends spawn counter trends and for people that are old enough to remember they sometimes operate in cycles too. For example, many observers were predicting the death of the bicycle market twenty-five or thirty years ago. The ‘hard evidence’ was there on the trend charts (based entirely on backwards looking statistics) and the culprits ranged from increasing levels of traffic to a plethora of new competition, ranging from daytime television to video games. But then some rather irritating individual invented the mountain bike or MTB. This accidental invention also coincided with a newfound interest in health and fitness and, hey presto, the prophets of industry doom disappeared faster than a bad clip on YouTube.

Similar things have happened, over the years, in markets as diverse as the dairy industry, beer, sports cars, cinema, theatre and English family holidays. Cinema, in particular, was predicted to be dead media following the invention of the VHS recorder in the early 1980s, but again something rather unexpected happened. Instead of dying, we

witnessed a resurgence of the medium. It's difficult to pin point the exact reason for this but an increase in films worth watching and a desire to watch movies on a big screen as part of a large social group almost certainly had something to do with it.

I suspect it will be the same with newspapers. At the moment some people have convinced themselves that the shift away from newsprint is irreversible. Print newspapers will be dead in the future and even if they do survive as online editions they will be a minority interest with marginal influence and revenue streams.

However, the trend towards life speeding up is coinciding other trends, namely that choice is expanding and data, especially digital information and entertainment, is becoming effectively infinite. One prediction of this digital future is that newspaper editors will eventually be replaced with algorithms, but in reality we are a very long way off software that can motivate journalists or connect with readers on a human level.

In fact, the more that life speeds up the more, in my opinion, we will seek to slow it down, especially as we get older and can tell the difference between movement and progress. As the world becomes more complex and confusing we will also start to value hard analysis over instant punditry and start to separate hard news (ideas and events) from lifestyle information and entertainment. But to prosper in this brave new world newspapers need to address a number of critical questions such as whether people can trust an organization that takes money from both sides and is therefore potentially compromised commercially. A newspaper's primary role is to inform the public, not sell them things. Moreover, if people are to take what newspapers say seriously they must stop sucking up to governments and hold them to account when necessary. This could mean doing a number of things that at first seem counter-intuitive, such as increasing editorial budgets and charging readers for access to on-line content.

To do this newspapers may have to divorce themselves from their old business models. Either accept that you are an advertiser driven business and become a free or low cost 'newszine' or remove yourself from the fence and become publicly funded like the BBC or find a committed benefactor who is interested in something beyond quarterly results.

Technically physical books, newspapers and magazines should all be dead and buried



*These days anyone with a computer or a camera can write their own blog, create their own movie or write their own book. The problem is this is precisely what's happening.*

RICHARD WATSON,  
FUTURE EXPLORATION NETWORK

already. Younger people already live much of their lives online but young people are not the future. What I mean by this, apart from the fact that young people grow old, is that demographically speaking Baby Boomers and Generation X are more important than Generation Y. There are more of them, they have more money and they have more time.

For this reason alone, there are at least two or three decades left in the old newspaper model. Indeed, we may even witness a physical newspaper resurgence as people get fed up with technology and recoil against an 'always-on', hyper-connected and increasingly virtual world.

***The cleverly expressed opposite of any generally accepted idea is worth a fortune to somebody.***

If you read the newspapers, user-generated content is all the rage and user-filtered content isn't far behind. Witness YouTube, Wikipedia, Second Life, Facebook and OhMyNews to name a few names. But don't believe everything that you read in the newspapers. User-generated content is all very well, especially in areas like entertainment, but the wisdom of crowds is of limited use when it comes to real news and ideas. Crowds are excellent conduits for information but they are rarely initiators or investigators.

These days anyone with a computer or a camera can write their own blog, create their own movie or write their own book. But the problem is this is precisely what's happening. Anyone with too much time and computing power on their hands is providing the rest of the world with far too much information about their daily lives. Don't get me wrong, this can be fascinating stuff, but it's not news.

Most of this user-generated content is digital drivel. It is the outpourings of people that shouldn't be given a pencil let alone a computer. To be fair, teenagers have always liked to talk about themselves and this new frontier at least allows them to try on various personalities before deciding who they want to be.

Such outpourings also represent an antidote to the claustrophobia of adolescence and should not be belittled. At the moment user-generated and user-filtered content both look like the future of media but, in my opinion, they are not. They are simply part of the future of media. But some people can't see this. For example, one major media organisation has told its chief political editor to set up a blog and use

the responses to it as ‘an important part of developing his judgments’.

But this will not last. Eventually readers will tire of this drivel. At some point in the future we will witness a flight to quality, with established media brands, more often than not, being the signifiers of such quality.

In the US, Sam Zell originally trained as a lawyer but got into real estate because it was more profitable. So why did he recently buy the Tribune Group, the second largest newspaper company in the US? One reason is that Sam is the man when it comes to spotting value in distressed industries. Especially those that other investors have overlooked. Now it’s quite possible that he’s another in the long line of individuals that buy newspapers for political influence or social standing but I doubt it.

I think he’s simply seen something that most other people haven’t. Namely that while newspaper profit margins are not what they used to be, they still represent a good return. Moreover, the more infinite information

becomes, the more there will be a need for editors and sifters to tell us what’s going on. And some people will pay good money for this information, some by subscription and some by pay-per-view. Indeed, it’s not inconceivable that readers could be persuaded to pay money for totally ad free newspapers or perhaps newspapers where the ads are targeted precisely at the interests and passions of individual readers (I think the latter are called magazines but that’s perhaps another story).

Indeed the more that life becomes globalised, digital and virtual, the more, I would argue, people will seek out products like newspapers that slow things down a little and tell us what’s important and what’s not, especially at a local level. And let’s also not forget that physical newspapers, like books, are superb examples of industrial design, which, if invented today, would be greeted as a miracle innovation. They don’t need power, there’s no screen glare, they don’t crash, and when you’re finished with them they can be safely recycled.

## And the future is...

### Being a futurist with interest in the media, I’m often asked: “Are newspapers dead?”

**T**his is an ambiguous question in that it is not immediately obvious whether it refers to physical newspapers, their online equivalents or both.

One implication of the question is also that the future will be a battle where one side must die in order for the other to live. But, using recent history as a guide to the future, it would appear likely that both will coexist and develop a symbiotic relationship whereby each feeds off the other and each plays to the specific needs of its audience.

This has certainly been the case in markets like retail banking where telephone and online banking happily sit alongside bricks-and-mortar branches with each channel appealing to a different demographic segment or sometimes targeting the same segment in a different situation or mindset. Hence I suspect that in the future, different formats (even lengths) of newspaper will appeal to different types of people or perhaps the same kind of person on differing occasions. Why,

for example, can’t I buy an A4 newspaper in a monthly format? (That might be magazines again, but I’m sure you get my drift).

Indeed, it’s slightly odd that newspapers are virtually the only industry where there is almost no audience segmentation or product variance. It’s a bit like Toyota only making one model of car or McDonald’s only selling Big Macs.

This is changing slowly. We are already seeing some interesting innovations such as newspaper subscriptions being delivered online during the week and physically during the weekends when people have more time available. Equally, we are seeing the development of ‘commuter sized’ newspapers, free newspapers, stapled newspapers and weekly digests.

On my way home the other week I was waiting for a ferry with around a hundred other people. Half of these people were reading a newspaper in a hard copy format. Now admittedly almost none of these people had paid for their newspaper, or had it delivered at home, but who cares?

Equally many local newspapers are doing well thanks to locally relevant (personalised) content as are some very large global newspapers that, thanks ironically to the

### IN BRIEF

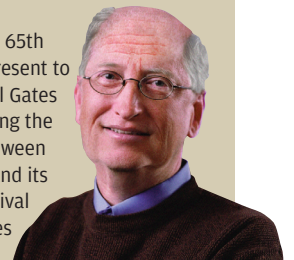
Really Big News Conglomerate today announced a merger with Google Universe that will allow RBNC to stream breaking news content directly to the human brain via its integrated “Google Mind” engine. The merger is expected to generate up to ED (Earth Dollar) \$56 billion, and will further tighten Google’s stranglehold of the online news and search sectors. Yahoo! and the LWDNS (Left-Wing Democratic News Service) are also planning a similar merger to counteract the monopoly otherwise posed by Google-RBNC.



A study by People For Switching Off has found that 65 per cent of people prefer paper-based news products on

weekends and holidays, as opposed to e-Paper news products. The study also found that paper-based news products were 75 per cent more likely to be re-read than their digital counterparts, and were 80 per cent more likely to be shared amongst colleagues and family members, particularly the crossword pages. On weekdays, however, e-Paper products still outnumber paper-based products among commuters five to one.

As an early 65th birthday present to himself, Bill Gates is celebrating the merger between Microsoft and its long-time rival Apple. Gates and Apple



executive Steve Jobs held a lavish reception at the new Macrosoft HQ, where they also showcased some of the first products to roll off the IT giant’s production line, including the latest incarnation of the mp3 player, the 5 terabyte iSoft, featuring sound editing software, mobile phone and PDA, and 500 megapixel camera.



The Tenth Annual Blogley Awards were held last night at Radio City Music Hall, New York. Numerous

illuminaries of the blogosphere were present, including self-professed veteran Perez Hilton. The coveted 2020 Blog Chip went to Mr\_Snax\_59, foreign blog-spondent from the BBC. To see full results visit [blogley.com/2020winners.html](http://blogley.com/2020winners.html)

Internet, are now able to connect with a niche audience on a global scale.

Somewhere in the middle of this muddle are the paid-for national daily newspapers. At the moment some of these nationals are doing reasonably well, whereas others are struggling in the face of new competition from the like of phone companies and Internet search engines. So what's going to happen next? The answer, of course, is that nobody knows, but I'd venture to suggest that there will be a gradual decline for many titles until a technological innovation such as e-paper revolutionizes the entire industry.

E-paper (i.e. flexible electronic screens that have the qualities of paper but which also have the properties of an internet connected computer) will ultimately revolutionise newspapers because they will be able to compete directly with other screen-based platforms. So if you want the very latest headlines you will get them simply by pressing the 'refresh' button on your newspaper. Equally if you want sound, moving images or hyper-links these will be available too. And, ultimately, all this will be available on a flexible screen that's very large, very light and very cheap. In a sense this innovation will make the separation between online and offline newspapers obsolete because the two will merge into another form although, again, I suspect that 'ordinary' newspapers will still survive because they will still have a number of significant advantages including cost (initially) and readability.

However, this is only half the story. For many people living outside of the metropolitan area in which a national newspaper is produced, newspapers are already largely irrelevant to their daily lives. Tabloids are unreal sensationalist 'comics', whereas broadsheets are highbrow, politicised and inaccessible. The content of many newspapers also has very little to say about the lives and concerns of ordinary people.

And to anyone under twenty years of age they may as well be written in another language. So unless the issue of content is really addressed, e-paper (or any other new transmission or distribution device for that matter) won't really change anything.

So where does leave us? Anyone who says they know for certain what will happen to newspapers in the future is either a liar or a fool, but I think it is a safe bet to say that newspapers will still be around in 2020.

Being a futurist I am constantly asked to make predictions but this request rather

misses the point. Calling oneself a futurist is actually a trick because what most good futurists do is study is the present. The word futurist is simply a tool to get people to stop what they are doing and think properly about the now. And in my view some of the questions that newspapers should now be thinking about include the issue of trust (where did it go and how can you get it back?), ownership (are there any credible alternatives to public ownership?), distribution (if the people won't come to the paper, can you take the paper to the people?) and editorial strategy (for example, why have tabloid newspapers not made more of the reality television phenomenon?).

So to sum up, there really is no such thing as a dead or dying industry. Only industries in which people have temporarily lost faith or run out of ideas. Build a better mousetrap and the world will still beat a path to your door.

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