On Campus

J-school Report: Local News Needs Handout

By
David J. Craig
|
Winter 2009-10



Michael Schudson and Leonard Downie, Jr. discuss their report "The Reconstruction of American Journalism" at a symposium in Washington, D.C. on October 21. (Piotr Redlinski)

Newspapers produce the vast majority of serious journalism in this country, yet their earnings have been siphoned away by Web sites that offer free news content and

cheap advertising rates. So why not slap new fees on Internet service providers and funnel the revenue to news organizations?

That's one recommendation in a 100-page report, "The Reconstruction of American Journalism," commissioned recently by the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. Authored by Leonard Downie, Jr., former executive editor of the *Washington Post* and a professor at Arizona State University, and Michael Schudson, a historian of journalism and a Columbia J-school professor, the report was underwritten mainly by the Charles H. Revson Foundation.

Downie and Schudson insist that the American marketplace no longer can sustain a vital free press. They say government intervention is needed especially to prop up local news operations, as local coverage has been hurt the most by newspaper cutbacks and shutdowns. Their boldest proposal is for the federal government to create a new institution, similar to the National Science Foundation, that would give grants to newspapers, broadcast stations, and Internet start-ups to do investigative journalism in the cities and towns they serve. The Federal Communications Commission could generate the necessary funds, Downie and Schudson write, through "telephone bill surcharges, fees paid by radio and telephone licenses, auctions of the telecommunications spectrum, or fees imposed on Internet service providers." The authors also want the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to require public radio and television stations — very few of which currently do any original reporting — to hit the street with their notebooks (and microphones and video cameras) or else lose their CPB funding. The CPB ought to receive more money from Congress, the report adds; the United States currently spends $1.35 per capita on public broadcasting. Compare that to Germany's $25, Japan's $60, Britain's $80, and Denmark's $100.

The report is generating intense debate about how involved the government should be in financing news. "While some of the specific recommendations that Downie and Schudson make have merit, the general thrust is that of a government bailout for journalism," wrote Steve Buttry, editor of Iowa's *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, on his popular blog. "As a First-Amendment purist who believes that independence ensures freedom, I cringe at the suggestion that we become that dependent on government."

Downie and Schudson aren't suggesting that the government alone can save local journalism. For instance, they also say that philanthropists and foundations need to

start giving troubled news organizations the kind of money they customarily donate to museums, orchestras, charities, and universities; the Internal Revenue Service could make this easier by giving tax-exempt status to all serious news outfits, the report recommends.

But Schudson, in a testy exchange with Buttry on his blog on October 22, said that government financing is essential and shouldn't be dismissed for fear of censorship: "Does NSF work perfectly in funding the sciences and social sciences? Of course not. Is the BBC perfectly insulated from government pressure? No. Does CPB serve as an ironclad separation between Congress and NPR or PBS? No. But does each of these institutions work pretty well, on the whole? I think the answer is yes."

Read more from ***David J. Craig***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***David J. Craig***