

NRJ Book Reviews

Mitchell Stephens, *Beyond News: The Future of Journalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). Hardcover. 264 pages, \$30.

Review by Marc Edge

Mitchell Stephens has contributed some monumental books to the field of mass communication, including *A History of News* (1988) and *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word* (1998). His latest book, *Beyond News: The Future of Journalism*, is similarly insightful and authoritative in attempting to sort out the current transformation of journalism. In doing so, however, Stephens places himself squarely in what Dean Starkman calls the Future of News (FON) consensus that has been led mostly by Big Apple academics such as Jeff Jarvis of CUNY, Emily Bell at Columbia and his colleague Clay Shirky at NYU. In urging a shift to a more analytical journalism, Stephens unfortunately buys into the myth that reporting has become less important in today's Internet age because everybody all ready knows what's going on.

Stephens begins by objecting to the 2009 description of journalism by former *New York Times* editor Bill Keller as "experienced reporters going places, bearing witness, digging into records, checking and double-checking." This brand of what might be called "shoe leather" journalism is hopelessly outdated in the 21st century, according to Stephens. The Internet, he argues, now provides us with more "new information of public interest" than ever before. "The future of news, in other words, appears reasonably secure," Stephens writes. "It is the future of journalism that is looking grim. . . . After more than a century and a half of selling the latest facts, journalists need to sell something else."

What journalists should be selling, according to Stephens, is not news reporting but instead what he calls "wisdom" journalism, which "strengthens our understanding of the world." Instead of merely recounting what happened yesterday, journalists should be analyzing, interpreting and commenting on the news, akin to what bloggers do today or printers did in colonial days. Making this shift to a more analytical journalism, however, will require a change in mindset, according to Stephens. Reporting staffs will have to be replaced with "interpreting" staffs organized not along the lines of traditional "beat" systems but more like academic disciplines. Instead of hiring out of journalism schools, editors should be hiring scientists, economists and experts who can match the expertise of their sources in such things as urban affairs

and foreign policy. "What is needed," he writes, "are journalists who can connect the dots." Of course, between bloggers and shouting-head cable panelists, Stephens admits, there is no shortage of opinion journalism these days, but traditional media simply need to get with the program. The bad news is that traditional notions of balance and objectivity may have to go out the window in order for traditional media to compete in this brave new news world, according to Stephens.

"Even-handedness and dispassion might no longer be dominant values," he writes. Citizens who are interested in what is happening at city hall now have a legion of bloggers and citizen journalists, not to mention Facebook friends, to keep them up to date with what's going on. If they really want to know who said what at last night's meeting, Stephens points out, they can probably even watch a video of the proceedings posted online. The surfeit of "news-rich pages on the Internet," he writes, allows journalists to return to a higher calling—"providing a wise take on what's going on." Stephens also subscribes to another central tenet of FON theory, which is that in today's networked world, news organizations are a thing of the past, as evidenced by their flagging economic prospects.

"The day of the *news* organization has ended," he states flatly. "Those computer-Internet-cell-Web devices are the greatest newspaper killers we have ever seen because when it comes to the distribution of news, they are so much more capable than the newspapers."

This is a central fallacy of the FON consensus. While the new media certainly have some advantages over the old, the reverse also applies. Mitchell is right to urge that newspapers play to their strengths by offering more in-depth analysis. That is the way they responded to the advent of both radio and TV when the new media offered more immediacy. Much online news, however, is simply aggregated or regurgitated from traditional media, mostly newspapers. Original reporting is being diminished with the ongoing and devastating cutbacks in reporting staffs. In his book *Newsomomies*, Ken Doctor estimated that local communities had all ready lost 20 percent of their reporting by 2009, for a total of 828,000 stories not reported. Less news reporting will mean that the "invisible environment" posited by Walter Lippmann, which he claimed was only occasionally illuminated by reporting, will grow larger. We also need more quality analysis, as Stephens asserts, but replacing one with the other could result in an absurd preponderance of commentary over facts. The Internet is great for giving us access to quality reporting from around the world, as pointed out by those who argue for this being a new "golden age" of journalism. But it has ironically decimated reporting on the ground in the places where we actually live. For scholars such as Starkman and Paul Starr, this carries the risk of political and corporate corruption running rampant, unchecked by watchdog journalism. It has already led to the rise of a new predominance of public relations, as Starkman points out, and even new forms of pseudo-journalism such as branded content or native advertising, which

are simply marketing disguised as news. Stephens seems to think that news consumers can tell the difference, but research suggests otherwise. As Starkman points out, the FON consensus that rails against traditional reporting and news organizations plays right into the hands of those who would cut back on reporting and transform journalism for their own purposes. Stephens has firmly aligned himself with the FON enthusiasts. He should instead remember Orwell's maxim: "Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed. Everything else is public relations."

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