

The Watchdog Still Barks: How Accountability Journalism Has Evolved in the Digital Era. Beth Knobel. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. 160 pp. \$95 hdbk., \$25 pbk.

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To read *The Watchdog Still Barks* is to be heartened for the future of newspaper journalism in America. “Not only have newspapers maintained their role as watchdogs in the digital era,” writes Beth Knobel, “many papers are concentrating on that role more than ever before.” Her research finds that accountability reporting is flourishing at U.S. dailies despite deep staff cuts made over the past decade because of falling advertising revenues. According to Knobel, an associate professor of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University, American newspapers have been transformed into nothing less than “lean, mean reporting machines.” This runs counter to more pessimistic analyses, such as Dean Starkman’s (2014) book *The Watchdog That Didn’t Bark*, which found that journalists failed to foresee the housing bubble bursting in 2007, plunging the economy into a deep recession, as a result of a decline in investigative reporting.

Knobel conducted a content analysis of newspaper front pages going back to 1991 that found dailies have doubled down on watchdog reporting as a solution to their ongoing existential crisis. She analyzed 5,571 articles and found that 1,491 qualified as enterprise reporting on public policy issues. Of these, 4.46% of front page stories qualified as “deep” accountability reporting in 2011, a steady increase from the 1.26% she found in 1991. “This refutes the conventional wisdom and previous research,” she concludes, “which suggests that watchdog reporting is dying out in this era of small staffs, tight money, and short attention spans.”

I found just a couple of small problems with her research. First and most significantly, Knobel’s data collection stopped in 2011, making her findings embarrassingly outdated. She performed her content analyses at five-year intervals starting in 1991, but she failed to collect data for 2016, explaining that “to do so for this book was not possible because of its tight publication schedule.” A book with data that is 7 years old qualifies more as history than current events, yet Knobel trumpets her findings as “very good news, indeed.” Given that the deep staff cuts at newspapers began in 2009 following a downturn in ad revenues that began with the stock market crash in late 2008, her 2011 data fell two years into a nine-year downward spiral. That doesn’t deter Knobel. “Were my research to be repeated in 2017 or 2021,” she writes, “I would have every reason to believe that the quantities of accountability reporting would increase

over 2011 . . . at most, if not all of the nine newspapers studied,” which brings us to the second major problem with her study—its sample size was in the single digits. Of the approximately 1,250 dailies in the United States, Knobel selected what she considered to be three large-, three small-, and three medium-sized newspapers, which amounts to less than 1% of industry. This thin slice is hardly representative, as Knobel claims, but it does include the national (two of them international) dailies, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. They would be expected to lead the way when it comes to investigative reporting, and by 2011, this was true more than ever, from what Knobel found. Even *The Washington Post* increased its watchdog reporting over the period despite the financial problems that prompted its 2013 sale to Jeff Bezos. So did the *Journal*, which was a concern of Starkman after its 2007 purchase by Rupert Murdoch. Surprisingly, her medium-sized metropolitan newspapers, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Denver Post*, and *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (all of which are actually large, though not national like the others) produced almost as much watchdog reporting as the national (her large) dailies and showed the greatest increase from 1991. Knobel attributes this to several sometimes contradictory causes, such as competition for the *Strib* from the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and a lack of competition for the *Post* since the *Rocky Mountain News* folded in 2009. Her interviews with editors found cultural, economic, technological, and professional reasons for the increase in watchdog reporting. Journalists value accountability stories highly, find they appeal to readers, are easier to research on the Internet, and win prizes.

Knobel originally included the *Albany Times Union* among her three small dailies, but she moved it into the metro tier because it “was so large that it acted like a medium-sized paper.” Its output of reporting on state government was impressive but also understandable given its location in the New York state capital. The remaining small dailies, *Bradenton Herald* in Florida and *Lewiston Tribune* in Idaho (both of which also have larger circulations than the U.S. median average newspaper), produced little watchdog journalism, especially the latter.

One hopes that Knobel is right, but she might have just picked the best performers and not a representative sample. There was nothing random about the nine she selected, as she chose them to reflect geographic diversity and also because they were captured on electronic databases dating back to 1991, which may correlate with quality. The stale nature of her data has also been exacerbated by subsequent events, especially at *The Denver Post*, where its hedge fund owners have cut staff levels even further, drawing protest from journalists there. No matter how highly editors prize watchdog reporting, it becomes impossible with almost no reporters.

Reference

- Starkman, D. (2014). *The watchdog that didn't bark: The financial crisis and the disappearance of investigative journalism*. New York: Columbia Journalism Review Books.

The Return of the Moguls: How Jeff Bezos and John Henry Are Remaking Newspapers for the Twenty-First Century. Dan Kennedy. Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2018. 296 pp. \$29.95 hbk.

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News media junkies, particularly those who grew up in the newspaper business, will relish the storytelling in Dan Kennedy's *The Return of the Moguls*. These are perilous times for newspapers in the digital age, and he sets the stage with an introduction that summarizes key industry trends such as declining readership, paid circulation and ad revenues, employee layoffs, and the quest for sustainable business models. The introduction could have benefited from more discussion about the impact of technology—particularly the rise of mobile, video, and social media—on 21st century journalism. Be patient. Those issues are woven into subsequent chapters. He summarizes some of the news content changes when he writes, "Video, more photography, interactive infographics, and the like have all contributed to a richer experience" (p. 81).

Overall, the author's point of view is clear as he writes "NEWSPAPERS MATTER" (p. 3), and that is not limited to print. Kennedy argues newspapers are crucial to democracy, and he writes that "Original journalism, a broad mandate, and a mass audience are crucial to the soul of a newspaper" (p. 4). Over the course of the nine chapters in the book, he provides compelling insights about the challenges and changes faced by three major metro newspaper companies—*The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, and the *Orange County Register*—that were bought by wealthy men with no previous experience in journalism or the newspaper business. Although their strategies and markets differ, they all are risktakers, value experimentation and their results vary.

The author provides behind-the-curtain looks at how "media moguls" operate in the 21st century. Jeff Bezos, the founder and CEO of Amazon, purchased *The Washington Post* for about \$250 million in 2013, and it is now a privately held company. John Henry, the billionaire owner of the Boston Red Sox who made much of his wealth in finance, bought *The Boston Globe* and other businesses from *The New York Times* for about \$70 million in 2013. Aaron Kushner, an entrepreneur and former greeting card executive, became the public face for the group that bought the *Orange County Register* in 2012 and expanded too quickly. He resigned in 2015. With some interviews from high-ranking insiders such as John Henry of *The Boston Globe* and Marty Baron at *The Washington Post*, the book offers rich details about each leader's style, their organizations, and changes that are reshaping newspapers in the digital age.

Bezos is described as a methodical, data-driven leader. Yet, it was humorous to see the author share that Bezos' early comments to employees "seemed more in keeping with those of a digital troglodyte than with someone who had built one of the world's most successful technology companies" (p. 103). Kennedy describes Bezos' *Washington Post* strategy as threefold: to invest in journalism and technology, target a mass and elite audience, and pursue excellence. Just as Kindle changed how many people read books, it appears Bezos strategy is to become the "Amazon" of news with

digital distribution by “embracing the bundle that Timothy Lee disparaged as well as social media” (p. 105).

The author describes Henry as “an evangelist on the subject of free news” (p. 127) in that *The Boston Globe’s* model is not free, but “a dollar a day for digital subscriptions” (p. 127). *The Boston Globe* also has been a leader in diversifying revenue streams with native advertising initiatives under Henry’s ownership. Henry has a reputation for great negotiation skills. For example, Kennedy writes that Henry’s \$70 million cash purchase included the *Globe*, its real estate, the *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*, and some websites from *The New York Times*. Kennedy writes that “John Henry does not appear to have an overarching vision” (p. 126), but describes the launch of Stat, “a standalone, mobile-first website covering health, medicine and life science” in 2015 as Henry’s “boldest move” (p. 149). Unfortunately, economic realities have not prevented additional layoffs at the parent company.

One of the biggest experiments and saddest chapters in the book is labeled “Orange Crush: From California Dreaming to an Epic Nightmare.” The author documents the dramatic paid circulation drop from “372,000 on weekdays and 430,000 on Sundays in 1991” to “160,000 weekdays and 294,000 on Sundays” (pp. 165-66). The newsroom staff was cut from about 380 in the 1990s to about 180 in 2012. When Kushner and his team added about 150 newsroom jobs, they were perceived as saviors. Kennedy asserts that Kushner’s “one big idea” was to “dramatically improve and expand the paper and customers would flock to it.” Kushner’s group even expanded with the *Long Beach Register* and bought the *Riverside Press-Enterprise*. Unfortunately, that experiment imploded and plenty of folks lost jobs. (Although the book ends in 2016, this reader hopes there will be a revised edition or sequel. *Digital First Media* acquired the *Orange County Register* and *Riverside Press-Enterprise* after a bankruptcy auction in 2016.)

In chapter eight, Kennedy covers why wealthy ownership doesn’t guarantee success and includes Sam Zell as an example. Nonetheless, Kennedy argues that newspapers will continue. “But if they are to survive and thrive, they will ultimately have to do so through some combination of print, digital, and perhaps other sources yet to be discovered,” he adds (p. 225). If a renaissance in newspapers is in the future, then developing sustainable business models are needed pronto.