

NRJ Book Reviews

George Brock, *Out of Print: Newspapers, Journalism and the Business of News in the Digital Age* (London: Kogan Page, 2013). Paperback, 256 pages, \$24.95.

The study of journalism at the university level is a relatively new phenomenon in the U.K., where the traditional route into the newspaper business has been on-the-job apprenticeship or, at best, vocational school training. As the centrality of news media to political and social life has become increasingly apparent, however, dozens of university programs have sprung up across the British Isles in recent decades. Scholarship in the field is thus still catching up there, and it tends to be informed by the dominant paradigm of cultural studies, as opposed to the empirical bent more evident in the U.S. One of the top U.K. journalism schools was founded at City University London in 1976 (I took some classes there in 1982.) and is currently directed by Prof. George Brock, a former managing editor of the *Times*. Brock has taken a stab at sorting the ongoing newspaper crisis in *Out of Print*. The title is a bit misleading because he predicts that newspapers will survive, albeit in a diminished role. He reprises much of the hand-wringing angst heard in the five years since the Great Recession hit newspapers hard, but he also adds his own interesting take on the crisis. While most have blamed the Internet for endangering newspapers by stealing their readers and advertising, Brock believes the problem was instead the power of comparison that readers gained online. Once consumers spotted the “drift to sameness” among newspapers, he claims, their loyalty and engagement would never be the same. The effect on journalism, according to Brock, has been “profound.” He is nonetheless optimistic about the “robust” survival of journalism in the long run.

Brock sets out his method as simply reflecting on the current crisis through the lens of his background as an insider.

“My knowledge of what has gone wrong,” he writes, “derives from direct experience.”

He assures the reader he has attempted to not be too Anglo-centric, and he does include examples from around the world, where newspapers tend to be doing better than in Britain or America. Most of his data, perhaps not surprisingly, comes from the U.S., while most of his anecdotes relate to the U.K. and thus might not be as relevant to American readers. He includes two chapters near the end on the Leveson inquiry and its report, which would have been preoccupying British journalism while the book was being written. Perhaps inadvisably, he injects more than 60 pages of newspaper history early in the

book at the risk of losing readers whose eyes glaze over at the recitation of past events. Readers deterred by disorganized, unfocused prose are similarly bound to find this tome tedious. At one point, Brock announces he will outline three key changes brought by falling newspaper readership and profits but never gets to the third before ending that chapter. He also annoyingly repeats points, for example, that stability brought by prosperity led for decades to newspapers being conservative, hidebound organizations.

But most vexing of all is Brock's reliance on the popular press and Internet sources to explain what is happening to the business of news. Books get short shrift, aside from the history section, and the scholarly literature is all but ignored. Several journals are now dedicated to publishing research on business aspects of media, but none is cited. As a result, *Out of Print* is almost entirely theoretical, which might explain why it buys into some of the most persistent myths about the media business. Foremost is the canard about newspapers being unprofitable. A glance at any newspaper company's recent annual report, or even its Wikipedia page, would show that to be untrue. None of the 15 publicly traded newspaper companies in North America has suffered an annual loss since the recession began, from what I can tell. Brock paints a dismal picture of the British market, but the facts show quite the opposite. Trinity Mirror, the country's largest newspaper publisher, made an operating profit of £107 million in 2012 on revenues of £706 million, for a nice return of 15 percent. Johnston Press, the second largest, made £57 million on revenue of £329 million, for a tidy 17 percent profit margin. But facts often get in the way of a good story or even a turgid, rambling one. A book on the business of news should be based more on facts and less on reflection.

Marc Edge recently returned home to Canada from Fiji, where he was head of journalism at the University of the South Pacific.

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