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From issue: **Media in the Americas: Threats to Free Speech** (Fall 2013)

■ AQ FEATURE

Ask the Experts: Press Freedom

BY [Sam Quiñones](#), [Cristina Manzano](#), [Andres Schipani](#) and [Sibylla Brodzinsky](#)

How have the consolidation of international media outlets, budget cuts and the Internet changed the journalism industry?

Sam Quiñones answers:

One effect is certainly to have strengthened the hand of institutions— government as well as corporate. Spokespeople for these agencies and companies may object.

But increasingly, newspaper newsrooms have been cut back so substantially that they no longer have enough people to adequately cover anything but the institutions that are set up to be covered: institutions that offer restricted access to information and institutions with spokespeople and elected officials.

Cutbacks and consolidation mean that news media are more dependent on the information these institutions provide. This has been true of television news for many years. But it's becoming standard procedure at newspapers, too.

The Internet has made finding people and documents easier. But it has not improved reporters' ability to cover those sides of their society that don't fall under government agencies, that aren't governed by public-record law and that don't have a spokesperson putting out their story. Those stories require immersion, which requires time, which is now in shorter supply than ever.

What's lost are the illuminating neighborhood and street stories that connect the newspaper to its larger community. This is especially important in the global economy, and above all in the U.S., where so many cities now have large populations of people from other parts of the world.

When you add the shrinking news hole and public attention span to the demise of the long-read story—the kind that graced the front pages of *The Wall Street Journal* for so long—the effect is to weaken the public's knowledge of who it is and what binds it.

Ironic, as the Internet would seem to be about connecting people.



Cristina Manzano answers:

The changes have introduced two major elements: fear and expectation. Fear because of the loss of what has been a wonderful way of living for many people for decades: a profession with a cause and a very profitable business. Expectation because this new landscape offers a whole range of opportunities, many of them still

unknown, which adds a thrill to those willing to explore them. Thanks to technology, the scholar Marshall McLuhan's expression, "The medium is the message," might seem truer now than ever. Yet, the global audience is now also freer than ever, able to choose among a panoply of ways to access information and entertainment unknown before.

Paradoxically, the major challenge in this open world will be to find ways to guarantee the funding for independence. The fragmentation of the industry, the decline of advertising and the appearance of multiple sources of free content make it easier for any interest group to spread its propaganda. Yet they also make it more difficult to finance journalism.

There are several interesting initiatives like *ProPublica* in the United States, *Plaza Pública* in Guatemala, and *La Silla Vacía* in Colombia, among others. Funded by a mixture of crowdfunding and private foundations committed to freedom of expression and transparency, they show that the essence of old, thorough journalism can live together with new formats and technologies.

More important, they demonstrate that readers, listeners and viewers are still longing for well-researched and well-told stories. But the transformation of the journalism industry is a work in progress, and only time will tell what the future may look like.

Andres Schipani answers:

Times have changed. Long gone are the days when certain newspapers enjoyed large profit margins. Some have shut down their printers, merged, mutated; and some of those still standing are struggling to find a successful business model. On the other hand, the Internet has helped connect sources, reporters and editors in ways unimaginable to some of my mentors, who still remember filing by telex from wherever on the planet they were pursuing stories. It has also broadened access to sources and information in general, as well as quickened the way we do research and fact checking. And it has sparked investigative websites that go deep into breaking news. This has certainly been the case in Colombia—the country where I am currently posted—which has a rich journalistic tradition and plenty of news, but where the media landscape has historically been concentrated in a few hands. One of the most notable examples of this new wave of Internet-based journalism has been *La Silla Vacía* (The Empty Chair—www.lasillavacia.com), run by Juanita León, a former reporter with *Semana*, the country's premier news weekly magazine that has schooled many of Colombia's best journalists.

Funded originally with León's own money, and now receiving grants, *La Silla Vacía* publishes investigative pieces for its 300,000 unique users, and has become obligatory reading for opinion leaders as well as policymakers and news junkies. (And, speaking for myself, it has also become essential reading for the occasional foreign correspondent looking to understand the Andean country's intricacies). "A lot of people are fed up with the 'consensus' point of view of information, of sources, of traditional media," León recently told me. "They feel they are too linked to power and that they need other sources of information to contrast points of view."

Sibylla Brodzinsky answers:

Many colleagues bemoan the state of journalism today. Stricken by financial woes and a crisis of identity, the quality and quantity—particularly of foreign news—have suffered. True, being a journalist today demands equal measures of creativity, flexibility, determination, and patience. But journalism is also reinventing itself in exciting new ways.

As a freelancer based in Bogotá for nearly 15 years, I watched as major U.S. and European papers opened fully staffed bureaus, then pulled out as budget cuts and interest elsewhere made the bureaus a luxury they could no longer afford. While I mourn the loss of staff correspondents, their departure opened up more opportunities for independent freelancers. But it hasn't meant making a living any easier; pay rates have hardly changed in the past decade, and budget cuts mean many stories are reported from behind a desk rather than on the ground.

And while the industry has downsized, more is demanded of writers, who must churn out blogs, Twitter feeds, news stories, and videos all for the same low price. At the same time, freelancers face new

competition: bloggers offer free content, while newswires that once stuck to straight news are now offering special long-form investigative articles, the stuff of freelancers' dreams.

Yet, journalists are finding creative and enterprising ways to meet the challenges.

Crowdfunding offers refreshing prospects for both media organizations and independent journalists. *ProPublica* and *National Public Radio* have both successfully funded projects through Kickstarter, and a new crowdfunding platform specifically for freelance journalists is due to launch this fall.

And challenging the conventional wisdom about Internet readers, a half-dozen sites are now promoting long-form, narrative journalism, including *Epic* and *The Big Round Table*. Google has also announced that it will start integrating links to in-depth articles in its search engine, providing an incentive for publishers to commission.

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