



Media Minutes

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TRANSCRIPT

Reconstructing American Journalism

Newspapers and commercial broadcast news programs continue to lose both audience and advertisers, and the question of how to support reliable news and investigative reporting looms large. But new models for newsgathering are emerging that give hope for the future of news.

A new report, *The Reconstruction of American Journalism*, surveys a wide swath of the journalism landscape and proposes a set of recommendations for going forward in this new era. It was written by Len Downie, former executive editor of the *Washington Post*, and Michael Schudson, a professor at the Columbia University School of Journalism.

Schudson says that there is considerable adverse reaction to the report's endorsement of public policy playing a part in securing journalism's future, but he's seeing signs that many in the industry and in the public sector are beginning to explore the possibilities of government involvement.

Michael Schudson: *Certainly in academic circles, there is considerable interest in thinking through various public policy alternatives. And I see signs that various people are beginning to make headway in saying it's a more complicated story than that. It's a more complicated story in our own American history, where government in a variety of ways has, in fact, subsidized the press directly. It's more complicated in other countries that have, by no means, lost their press freedom and have much, much greater direct government subsidy of the press – the BBC is the world's leading example. And all of this should make people stop and think about whether the traditional reaction to government support of the news media is one that needs rethinking.*

Among their recommendations, Schudson and Downie are calling a change in the tax code to allow newsrooms to operate as nonprofit or low-profit organizations. This would allow them to focus on their newsgathering mission instead of just their stock prices. They also suggest expanding NPR and PBS to focus on local news and accountability journalism.

One of their most interesting but controversial proposals is to establish a national fund for local news. Downie explains:

Len Downie: *We understand the concerns that people have about it, but we've seen, through the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for Humanities, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, that by and large, on balance, these things work. They're not without problems. Nevertheless, on balance, they work. And we think the fund for local news would work, too. On the other hand, we welcome the debate over it, so we can work out the issues that would be necessary in order for it to happen.*

To read *The Reconstruction of American Journalism*, go to the Columbia Journalism Review at cjr.org.

The Op-Ed Project: Expanding Public Debate

In the United States, the op-ed pages of newspapers and Sunday morning political talk shows are dominated by a narrow section of society — mostly white and 85% male.

Journalist and author Catherine Orenstein started the OpEd Project to expand public debate by expanding the pool of women experts that contribute to our nation's key print and online forums.

Catherine Orenstein: *The submission ratio at the Washington Post last year, just for example, is nine-to-one. Ninety percent of the submissions to that enormously, enormously powerful page came from men, which means that editors don't have a lot of women to choose from. And I thought, isn't the obvious solution to start getting more women — more smart women — submitting?*

The OpEd Project trains women experts in all fields to write for the op-ed pages of major newspapers and contribute their ideas to the public discourse in other ways. They work with top universities, nonprofits, corporations, women's organizations and community leaders to help women channel their voices into online forums, TV and radio, board meetings, PTA meetings or the steps of Congress.

Catherine Orenstein: *We're using op-ed as a metaphor for teaching thought leadership, so we're not focusing on newspaper op-ed pages per se. What we do is train people to make a powerful argument, No. 1. No. 2, we connect them to people who are able to support and review. And No. 3, we provide contact and submission information for all kinds of forums that they can submit to, and we show them how to pitch.*

The project holds trainings in six cities and has more than 3,000 graduates from diverse backgrounds. They have published hundreds of op-eds.

Catherine Orenstein: *It's very hard to wake up and run for Congress. It's not very hard to wake up and write an op-ed, and that is what lines you up to do future things and*

creates a kind of cascade. The publications are not really the end result. The end result is what happens afterwards. People have gotten book contracts, founded nonprofits. There's one woman who's become a national spokesperson. Women have spoken on radio and television – nationally and internationally. One woman briefed Congress – her op-ed was used to brief Congress.

For more information about the OpEd Project, go to theopedproject.org.