



## A renaissance on the horizon!

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The US newspaper industry sees itself hit by a ‘twin tsunami’: the financial crisis wiped out advertising and the internet washed out readers. Tottering empires such as the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and institutions such as the *Christian Science Monitor* moving from paper to the web, have created a moment of truth when ‘the end of journalism’ is no longer an academic topic of classroom discussion but a business topic of decision making in boardrooms.

The crisis of the newspaper business has also galvanized academic scholars as shown by platforms such as the US Social Science Research Council.<sup>1</sup> This discussion serves as a timely reminder that panic is premature and that prospects are much more complex and contradictory than suggested by doomsday scenarios for the newspaper/journalism, on the one hand, and paradise scenarios for the internet/democracy, on the other.<sup>2</sup> While the US newspaper landscape is really shattered by a crisis, and the same symptoms are also felt in Europe, one should not discount the fact that worldwide ‘newspapers are a growth business’ as shown by the World Association of Newspapers.<sup>3</sup>

Finland, like most of Scandinavia, represents the overwhelming majority of the countries which enjoy a relatively high confidence in the future of the press and journalism.<sup>4</sup> This confidence rests with us on a peculiar tradition of politics in this Protestant culture. True, this politics and culture is being gradually eroded by what is known as globalization and market forces. Yet the development is not irreversible, while the European Union not only promotes a free market in the United States of Europe but also upholds values of equality and quality, especially in public service broadcasting.

But my main point is not a Finnish rebuttal of a crisis perspective – a vindication of the press and journalism based on statistical evidence. My point is a general forecast that in these days of global economic crisis people become genuinely interested in what is happening in the world – both far and near – feeding a hunger to know and to understand how all these events relate to their own life situation. Such a hunger renders support to quality journalism:

a compelling need for reliable information on economy, environment and society. This reasoning is based on how individuals feel as human beings and social animals with existential needs – not as citizens fulfilling grand designs of democracy.<sup>5</sup>

So far we have been used to associating individualism with the less reputable side of journalism concerned with celebrities, scandals and spectacles. These have travelled quite well under the western welfare conditions conducive to emotions and escapism. Intellectual support for this structural situation was provided by postmodernism, including brands of cultural theory, which, by capitalizing on constructed meanings, tend to undermine reality.

Now, after 2008, my forecast suggests, the party is over and we are approaching a new age of realism where people really want to know and journalism serves this burning need. I see on the horizon a renaissance for good old quality journalism.

## Notes

- 1 <http://www.ssrc.org/calhoun/2008/12/03/newspapers/> with comments by Herbert Gans, Todd Gitlin, Michael Schudson and Gaye Tuchman among others.
- 2 For the latter, see *Republic.com 2.0* by Cass Sunstein (Princeton University Press, 2007) and *The Myth of Digital Democracy* by Matthew Hindman (Princeton University Press, 2008).
- 3 <http://www.wan-press.org/article17377.html>
- 4 Admittedly, newspaper circulation is falling slightly here as well. However, total readership figures and trust in journalism are strikingly high.
- 5 This remark should not be taken to undermine democracy, which prevails as a vital source of inspiration in journalism, as I have demonstrated since 1997 (Nordenstreng, 1997). However, the concept of democracy remains too often as a hollow slogan like 'freedom' – an ideological instead of intellectual argument.

## Reference

- Nordenstreng, K. (1997) 'The Citizen Moves from the Audience to the Arena', *Nordicom Review* 18(2): 13–20. URL [http://www.nordicom.gu.se/common/publ\\_pdf/29\\_nordenstreng.pdf](http://www.nordicom.gu.se/common/publ_pdf/29_nordenstreng.pdf)