

REVIEWS

DR PHILIP CASS is reviews editor for Pacific Journalism Review.

A grim year ahead, but some cause for optimism

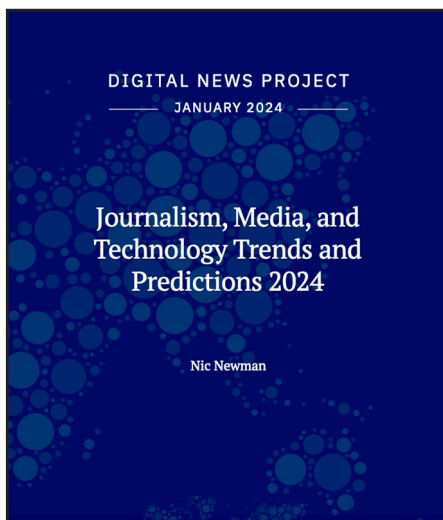
Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2024, by Nic Newman. Oxford: Reuters Institute. 2024. 46 pages. DOI: 10.60625/risj-0s9w-z770

EVERY day more and more online content is disappearing behind paywalls as publishers try to protect their dwindling revenues.

Whether readers confronted by paywalls will bother to subscribe or simply seek the information elsewhere—or just give up and look at another Beyonce listicle—is one of the scenarios prompted by the appearance of the latest set of predictions about the future from the Reuters Institute.

The view from Reuters and author Nic Newman is that this will be the year when AI will really break out and that by 2026 the majority of content online will be generated synthetically.

Newman, who was a founding member of the BBC News Website, has taken the view that much of what will happen is inevitable, driven by falling revenues and an increasingly disconnected and disinterested audience.



Six months into 2024, conflicts in the Middle East, the Ukraine, Myanmar and a dozen other places, the constant peril of climate change and the continued presence of an ever-mutating COVID virus provide a grim backdrop for the media and their consumers.

Newsrooms face collapsing revenues and consumers are faced with inflation. Soaring prices afflict daily life and massive job cuts continue—something seen recently in New Zealand. In April, Warner Bros. Discovery announced it was closing Newshub, with the loss of 300 jobs. TVNZ then axed several news programmes, with the loss of another 68 media roles.

One journalist described the cuts as ‘a blow for democracy’ (Corlett, 2024).

Journalists face unprecedented threats around the world, even in the supposedly democratic West where extreme rightwing politicians and demagogues have gained a level of support not seen since the 1930s. According to

the international Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), unprecedented numbers of journalist have died in the past year, with most of those being Palestinian journalists killed while covering the conflict in Gaza.

The year's top five jailers of journalists are China, Myanmar, Belarus, Russia, and Vietnam, with most journalists being locked up on charges of somehow endangering the state (CPJ, 2023).

Audiences themselves remain an acute problem, with signs that many people are actively avoiding the news, or at least parts of it they do not like and are simply exhausted by what seems like a constant avalanche of grim news.

Publishers are considering a number of ways to hold on to those audiences or to bring them back. According to Newman, two thirds of publishers are considering trying to better explain complex stories, nearly half are contemplating what he calls 'more solutions oriented or constructive approaches to storytelling' and more 'inspirational' human stories.

Interestingly, he says there was less support among the editors interviewed for the report in publishing more positive or entertaining stories. Perhaps they noticed all the unsold Taylor Swift magazines on the supermarket shelves after the circus left town.

Other solutions being considered include combining packages of digital news and non-news content. Newman suggests this could include games, podcasts, magazines, books, and even content from other publishers.

The problem with this is that it

will be all too easy for consumers to fail to see or even to not understand the difference between news and advertising. We have seen for years how publications have quietly abandoned the description of 'advertorial' for paid copy and disguised it with phrases such as 'sponsored content'.

The importance of these puff pieces should not be underestimated. According to Hardy (2021), 'brand sponsored editorial content has offered publishers the potential for increased earnings, and marketers a means to tackle ad-avoidance and boost engagement . . . Sponsored content was the second most important revenue generator (44 percent), after advertising (70 percent) and ahead of subscription (31 percent), according to a worldwide newsroom survey'.

More worryingly for traditionalists, Newman predicts that even more newspapers will stop printing a daily edition as the cost of printing and distribution continues to rise.

How, then, will publishers and newsrooms cope, especially when faced with competition from AI, faked content and unpredictable audience behaviour? Despite everything, Newman is cautiously optimistic, as are some of his interviewees.

He argues that much of the faked and digitally manipulated material was easy to spot (think of the photo of the Princess of Wales and her children) and was mostly not intended to fool people (Mackintosh & Relph, 2024). However, 70 percent of those interviewed for the Reuters report said they be-

lieved AI and Generative AI would lower levels of trust in the media.

Citing political philosopher Hannah Arendt, Newman argues: ‘The biggest danger may not be that people “believe the lies but rather that nobody believes *anything* any longer”.’

And yet not everybody is entirely downbeat and it is possible to end this review with this optimistic view:

‘The explosion of crap content definitely has the potential to shake the trust in media,’ says Christoph Zimmer, head of product at *Der Spiegel* in Germany, but he also argues this could eventually allow some news media to ‘differentiate ourselves even more clearly as a quality medium, and thus even strengthen our position.’

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A tribute to OWEN WILKES

AN OUTSTANDING NZ PEACE ACTIVIST

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