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## Reinventing Local News: 2010

by Adam Clayton Powell III

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*Adam Clayton Powell III*

## **About the Author**

**Adam Clayton Powell III** is vice provost for globalization at the University of Southern California and a senior fellow of the Center on Communication Leadership & Policy at the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism. In September 2010, he will become USC's director of Washington policy initiatives, working on communication policy, health, transportation, housing, homeland security, and other issues including the University's strategic initiatives on Africa and India. Previously, he directed USC's Integrated Media Systems Center, the National Science Foundation's Engineering Research Center for multimedia research.

Prior to joining the USC faculty, he was general manager of WHUT-TV in Washington, D.C., the nation's first African-American-owned public television station, adding several hours per week of local prime-time programming. He also was the founding general manager of KMTP-TV in San Francisco, the nation's second African-American-owned public television station, which he helped put on the air in 1991 featuring local news and public affairs.

Powell has served as executive producer at Quincy Jones Entertainment, where he produced Jesse Jackson's weekly television series and developed nonfiction television projects; vice president for news and information programming at National Public Radio; manager of network radio and television news for CBS News; and news director of all-news WINS in New York. He supervised the Internet and computer media technology programs at the Freedom Forum, with educational programs on five continents.

## Reinventing Local News: 2010

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Four years have elapsed since the first edition of *Reinventing Local News*, four years that have seen the 20th-century mass media business model eroded by accelerating efficiencies of digital production and distribution technologies and, more recently, crushed by the recession's collapse of advertising revenue.

At the same time, even the largest news organizations, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, have aggressively moved into such previously niche media as blogs, following the brand-extension logic that has served companies from Procter & Gamble to, in its heyday, General Motors. And the blogosphere has attracted its own journalism tools, from established measures of blogs as news media, such as Pew's New Media Index,<sup>1</sup> to new blog evaluation tools, such as Swift River.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the growth of new digital platforms has attracted news and information providers large and small. Cell phones were originally designed to supplement and then replace landline telephones. But now, numbering 5 billion (up 25 percent in the past year<sup>3</sup>), mobile telephones have emerged as a medium in themselves, for news, entertainment and advertising. And as each has a unique number, they are ideal for micro-local service at the most granular level – the individual.

Their small screens may at first have been considered a disadvantage to those accustomed to television or desktop screens, but cell phones are just the right size for abbreviated messages, notably Twitter, which have proven crucial to relay news of street protests in Teheran or earthquakes in Haiti and Chile. And as mobile devices have become a primary medium, cell phone photos and

video have become a staple of news organizations from the micro-local to the global.

Facebook and other social networks also have become a mass medium, with hundreds of millions of users. A quick look at the websites of the largest news organizations will reveal that they are inviting users to join their Facebook pages or to register for news over mobile phones. And once they sign up, users are invited to join the conversation.

But as has been the trend for at least two decades, the barrier to entry is so low – anyone can start a blog, Facebook page or Twitter account – that millions of individuals worldwide now are providing their own micro-local news and information. And it's not just about the police blotter or the local school board. Do you want to know all about twin toddlers in a town in Michigan? Dachshunds in Virginia? Used vinyl LP records in New Mexico? There are information providers to serve any interest, however narrow.

So it is an interesting time to revisit the questions raised in 2006, to ask them once again but more urgently, and to examine the emergence of new technology-enabled tools and business models for local news, information and public service.

### **What is now undeniable is that the practice of journalism itself is changing.**

My former CBS News colleague Peter Herford, who now teaches journalism in China, has written that the craft of journalism, almost alone among the professions, has remained practically unchanged for 200 years, and is now being forced to evolve. Many place the start of the era now ending even earlier, when movable type was introduced.

"Printing and books replaced handwriting and scrolls," writes Guy Rundle, "and thus

monasteries, popes and feudalism gave way to universities, the Enlightenment and capitalism.”<sup>4</sup>

Rundle says an even longer view can be argued, writing that news and information may have undergone an even more fundamental shift 5,000 years ago, when Mesopotamian cuneiform writing meant that “meaning, intent, communication could be separated and transmitted without a person there to present it.”<sup>5</sup> The Internet thus becomes the latest embodiment of disembodied information.

### **Newspaper readership and television news viewership are falling.**

Newspaper circulation is declining in almost every U.S. city. Local television newscasts also are losing viewers. One metric of the larger trend: Newspaper company stocks declined 83 percent in 2008, among the worst performing businesses, according to the Pew Research Center.<sup>6</sup> Here’s another: The “CBS Evening News” has lost three-quarters of its audience since Walter Cronkite retired in 1981.<sup>7</sup>

This trend is having an enormous impact on reporting and gathering information: One-tenth of newspaper newsroom positions disappeared in 2008, accelerating a trend. NPR cut 7 percent of its staff and two hours of daily news broadcasts. In local television news across the United States, “layoffs were accelerating.”<sup>8</sup> And ABC News executed the largest layoff in network news history, pink-slipping more than 300 journalists – a quarter of the news division.<sup>9</sup>

The outlook for local broadcast news is not bright, because local advertising sales that pay the bills are dropping rapidly. Local television revenues fell almost 30 percent from 2008 to 2009,<sup>10</sup> but there are signs the decline has been reversed mainly by the growth of political advertising for the 2010 and 2012 election



**“And that’s the way it is.”**

The “CBS Evening News” has lost three-quarters of its audience since Walter Cronkite retired in 1981 – and ABC laid off a quarter of its news division in 2008.

Pictured: Cronkite’s last broadcast as “CBS Evening News” anchor, March 6, 1981.

campaigns.<sup>11</sup>

In print, newspaper revenues in the United States also are off sharply, down 23 percent in the past two years, which the “2009 State of the News Media Report” describes as “perilously close to free fall.”<sup>12</sup> *The Baltimore Sun* dismissed a third of its newsroom in spring 2010, and the *Boston Globe* barely escaped being closed by its parent New York Times Company.

Despite much smaller audiences than the broadcast networks, Fox News and CNN are the most profitable television news services, more profitable even than NBC News, with annual earnings in excess of \$400 million.<sup>13</sup> This is largely due to the business model of cable television, where Fox and CNN receive revenue both from advertising and from fees paid by each cable and satellite subscriber.

Again, this seems a fundamental shift. In a widely quoted article, Clay Shirky writes that what has happened is nothing less than a

“solution” to an industrial-age “problem.”<sup>14</sup>

“With the old economics destroyed,” Shirky continues, “organizational forms perfected for industrial production have to be replaced with structures optimized for digital data. It makes increasingly less sense even to talk about a publishing industry, because the core problem publishing solves – the incredible difficulty, complexity and expense of making something available to the public – has stopped being a problem.”

So much for the bad news.

### **Now for the good news: People still want news and information.**

The number of different people who visited newspaper websites each month - unique visitors - rose 15.8% to 65 million in the third quarter of 2008 from the year earlier, according to Nielsen Online. Page views rose 25.2%.<sup>15</sup> News Corp. will attempt to monetize its British newspapers by charging for access to content, as it does successfully for *The Wall Street Journal*. According to one published report, News Corp. may attempt an innovative cross-platform revenue growth plan by offering its Sky News pay-television viewers a plan to bundle Sky with a subscription to, say, the *Times of London*, all for a small additional monthly fee.<sup>16</sup>

There is no reason cross-platform deals could not spread to local and micro-local news providers worldwide, local and micro-local providers joining to bundle subscriptions with local cable companies or even broadcasters. Local public broadcasting stations could offer their members subscriptions to local online news sites for just a small increase in the membership fee. Access to other news sites could even be a premium for those pledging to NPR news stations or a local station’s broadcast of the “PBS NewsHour.”

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*All-news WTOP Radio in Washington, D.C., continues to repurpose and repackage its journalism in many forms, in effect extending its services to new audiences.*

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These are major, rapid shifts in the landscape. But the shifts are moving in unanticipated directions: Instead of *The Daily Me* personalized newspaper predicted years ago by Nicholas Negroponte,<sup>17</sup> the Internet instead begat *The Instant Me* – an on-demand tailored news-information mix.

How can local news and information transition from the collapse of the 20th-century mass media economic model to the emergence of still-unclear business models for 21st-century news and information? *Reinventing Local News* attempts to address this question.

Revisiting some case studies from the 2006 edition, there are some encouraging signs. All-news WTOP Radio in Washington, D.C., continues to repurpose and repackage its journalism in many forms, in effect extending its services to new audiences. WTOP’s 24-hour Internet news service for federal government workers, which was profitable the day it launched, now also is heard over-the-air on broadcast station WFED, where it is gaining still more listeners. In the past three years, WTOP Radio rose to become the number one station in the Washington D.C. market<sup>18</sup> and in 2010 started to identify itself as “WTOP...on air, on line, mobile,” embracing that new medium, cell phones.

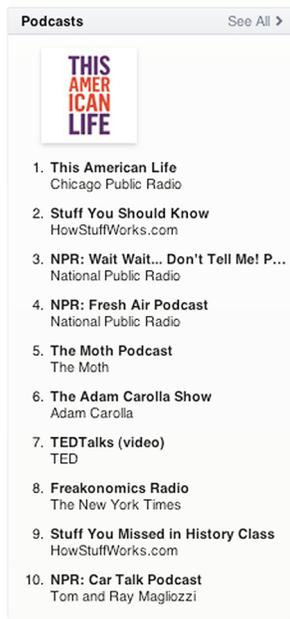
That was in part due to a winter storm, but a year earlier, according to the February 2009 Arbitron ratings, WTOP was No. 1 for the full week as well as morning and afternoon drive

time. Among 25- to 54-year-old listeners – a group highly sought by advertisers – the station reached an 8.7 morning share, 7.4 in midday and 10.8 in the afternoon. Even in evenings, normally not a significant time for commercial all-news outlets, WTOP ranks eighth among Washington, D.C., stations with a 5.5 share, and it is fifth on weekends with a 6.4 share. WTOP attracted more listeners than any other station and outperformed similarly formatted radio stations in other cities around the United States, where the same all-news format is declining on similar commercial stations – but NPR stations are benefiting.<sup>19</sup>

This is one of the most dramatic cases of what in other industries is called brand extension: For a small incremental increase in cost, a company that sells soap or paper towels can introduce a

### All things considered, not bad

Public radio programming fuels many of the most popular downloads on iTunes.



iTunes podcast data for July 20, 2010

slightly different soap or paper towel to appeal to new customers. Market segmentation – appealing to different customers with different products – is fundamentally different from the traditional monopoly of metropolitan newspapers and broadcasters aiming for the broadest possible audience. In print and over the air, journalists historically developed a single publication or newscast for the largest number of customers.

As Malcolm Gladwell documented in what he calls “the wisdom of spaghetti sauce,”<sup>20</sup> this was used by newcomer Prego to crush the longtime dominant brand, Ragu. Prego launched several variations – extra spicy, or extra chunky, or extra thick – each of which attracted a devoted following. The different Prego sauces were easily created by varying only slightly the same basic recipe, but together they outsold Ragu. Perhaps we can consider WTOP’s spinoff WFED as the extra chunky of Washington, D.C.’s broadcast radio news.

Zoned editions of major metro newspapers marked the beginning of market segmentation, but the extraordinary efficiencies of Internet distribution are driving even major news and information services for ever-smaller micro-local geographic areas – as small as a single apartment building. *The Washington Post* invested resources into building a group of blogs to extend its brands into new micro-local niches – and to aggregate audiences for the *Post* website.

Another broadcaster highlighted in *Reinventing Local News* was WAMU-FM, also in Washington, D.C. There too is a success story, but because of a different set of tools. In the past three years, WAMU rose to become the No. 2 station in Washington, second only to WTOP and outperforming similar NPR stations in other cities. The key, according to Jim Asendio, WAMU’s news director, is a determination to get closer to communities and neighborhoods.

Asendio says he makes room for expanded community coverage by downplaying “official” news, covering statements from City Hall in short scripted stories or very brief tape excerpts.<sup>21</sup>

Podcasts are way up, and mobile telephones are emerging as a new mass market for text and audio and video information. Public radio programming fuels many of the most popular downloads on iTunes. And this new medium may be gaining ground even more rapidly outside the United States, where the number of cell phones is increasing much more rapidly. And it isn’t just China and India, with their large and expanding middle classes, where mobile phone audiences are increasing and turning to news. In Kenya, 800,000 people watched and listened to audio and video news reports on their cell phones when Voice of America started offering the service.<sup>22</sup> Now Kenyans have video talkback from their mobiles.<sup>23</sup>

Simple technology and design tools also can boost use and revenue. Consider the success of a new business service that launched in 2008: “Just a year after its initial foray into the field, CNNMoney.com has become the most-popular source of business-news video on the Web,” reported *The Wall Street Journal*.<sup>24</sup> The site achieved this striking result by using video aggressively, which users clearly enjoyed.

### **Now for more good news: Technology may be saving local news.**

When the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* and Denver’s *Rocky Mountain News* closed, reporters who had worked at the newspapers started their own websites, preserving at least some of the local news and information sources in their communities.<sup>25</sup> And, in smaller cities and towns, local and micro-local news websites are gaining enough financial support to survive and turn a profit.

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*A few newcomers have broken through the digital cacophony to become mainstream players. Politico is one example of a web-based newsroom serving a niche—a large niche—that became so successful that it started a newspaper.*

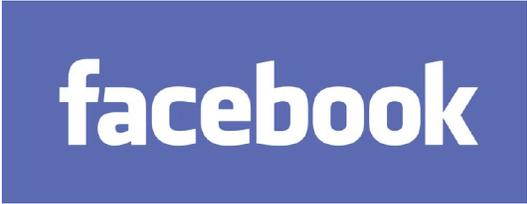
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Indeed, even as the *Ann Arbor News* planned to cease publication,<sup>26</sup> my USC colleague David Westphal reported that a new local online news service there was already making money.<sup>27</sup> Nationwide, more than 800 community news sites were launched between 2004 and 2009, according to Jan Schaffer, executive director of J-Lab.<sup>28</sup>

“I think there is a bunch of media people going, ‘Oh, the world’s collapsing.’ And, as much as that’s true, [news is] not going to go away, it’s just going to come into a new form,” Jason Barnett, executive director of a new Minnesota website, told CNN.<sup>29</sup> “There are more opportunities now for entrepreneurs to figure out a system.”

While many lose money, a growing number of micro-local information sources are reaching financial sustainability, typically with ruthlessly low costs or assistance from foundation and individual donors, using the public broadcasting business model of voluntary membership.

Some are also information services of interest groups, raising questions of credibility. For example, the California HealthCare Foundation has teamed with USC Annenberg to develop original reporting in regional health care. However, as long as ownership is disclosed, the public will be able to know how to filter the information. On

The Facebook logo, consisting of the word "facebook" in white lowercase letters on a blue rectangular background.

*Facebook harnesses social network technology to connect with communities, just as WAMU or the Ann Arbor website do. But instead of a central newsroom, you have a community of informed individuals sharing news and information with each other.*

the national level, the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts have been longtime information providers in the fields of health, journalism and public opinion, and now more local organizations and interest groups are doing the same.

And a few newcomers have broken through the digital cacophony to become mainstream players. Politico is one example of a web-based newsroom serving a niche – a large niche – that became so successful that it started a newspaper. Imagine that.

Citizen journalism also is filling the gap: Fifty-six percent of news is from citizen journalism news sites now, closing in on professional legacy sites (89 percent), and far more than blog content (27 percent).<sup>30</sup> These sites may not be staffed by professional journalists, but their content is often far from amateurish. And crowd-sourcing software such as Swift River can provide everyone with powerful assessment tools to evaluate information that comes from unknown

individuals across town or, as we saw in Iran and in the Haiti and Chile earthquakes, strangers from the other side of the world.

Some are now reporting there is an ever more promising opening for micro-local news. “Smaller communities seemed to fare better,” according to the “2009 State of the News Media Report.” But we all live in “smaller communities,” including communities of niche interests, professions or hobbies, niches where new websites are recording some of the fastest online revenue growth.<sup>31</sup>

And we all live in small *geographical* communities, from small towns to individual blocks and apartment houses in cities. That creates opportunities even in the largest media markets.

“[A]s the major metropolitan dailies decline, they are unfortunately cutting back at the community-specific level, which really, in our minds, creates a void in the amount, the quality and the access to news and information at that all-important community-specific level,” said Jon Brod, founder of Patch.com, which hopes to make money providing online news and information for communities of up to 50,000 people.<sup>32</sup>

“I think there are two things going on,” Brod noted. “First is that this is an incredibly low-cost model. When you take out the ink, the distribution, the circulation, the print costs and the significant overhead, and you compare ... Patch.com to a like-sized daily newspaper, you’re looking at roughly 4.5 percent to 4.7 percent of the cost.”

Perhaps the fastest-growing new information technology is social networks. Consider that Facebook has grown to more than 300 million unique monthly visitors – twice as much traffic as Google, Yahoo or MSN.<sup>33</sup> With this in mind, Michael Rosenblum last year constructed an interesting model in his essay “Facebook + Content = Newspaper?”:

Old media companies have tried, and failed, to plug the old model into

the new technology. Take *The New York Times*. Go to its website and what do you see? A newspaper online.

Quaint.

But look at a website that is alive, humming, vibrant and growing – look at Facebook. In only a very few years, it has grown to 170 million users and it's just getting started. Something in here works.

What works is that the architecture of Facebook, that is, the way it works, matches what the web does – connect like-minded individuals to like-minded individuals – all the time. It keeps them informed.

Of course, what it keeps them informed about is sheer trivia. “Went to the park today.” “Can [you] believe I ordered the Osso Bucco here in Vegas?”

It is news, but of a rather banal stripe.<sup>34</sup>

Not so. Journalists and others are posting serious news and analysis on Facebook every day, and it is extraordinary – and extremely useful.

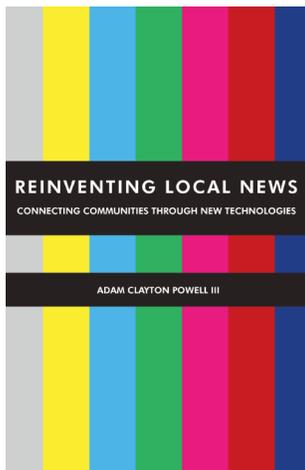
Facebook users can easily filter the news feeds from their Facebook friends to get the mix they want. OK, much is of “a rather banal stripe.” So is most of what is in the publications on a typical well-stocked newsstand. And the fluff on Facebook is just as easy to bypass and ignore.

Facebook harnesses social network technology to connect with communities, just as WAMU or the Ann Arbor website do. But instead of a central newsroom, you have a community of informed individuals sharing news and information with each other. It is exactly what Kevin Kelly predicted more than a decade ago in his pioneering book *Out of Control*. For me, the Facebook sources include former colleagues posting international news from the distant shores of the Pacific and Atlantic as well as D.C. friends posting on Washington politics from inside the Beltway. And yes, there are relatives posting jokes and pictures of grandchildren.

But this is something new: the wisdom of a self-selected community.

Instead of *The Daily Me*, we have not *The Instant Me*, but *The Instant Us*.

— August 2010



Copies of the original edition of **Reinventing Local News: Connecting Communities Through New Technologies** may be purchased for \$15.

To order, visit [www.figueroapress.com](http://www.figueroapress.com) or call (800) 934-9313. The book also is available at Amazon.com.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pew's New Media Index, [www.journalism.org/print/20949](http://www.journalism.org/print/20949)

<sup>2</sup> Swift River, <http://swift.usahidi.com/>

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<sup>4</sup> "The Web We Weave," by Guy Rundle, *The Age* [Australia], March 15, 2009, [www.theage.com.au/opinion/the-web-we-weave-20090314-8yga.html](http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/the-web-we-weave-20090314-8yga.html).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> "State of the News Media" 2009 edition, Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, [www.stateofthedia.org/2009/](http://www.stateofthedia.org/2009/)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> "ABC News to Cut Hundreds of Staff," *The New York Times*, February 23, 2010, [www.nytimes.com/2010/02/24/business/media/24abc.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/24/business/media/24abc.html)

<sup>10</sup> "Advertising Losses Put Squeeze on TV News," *The New York Times*, May 10, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> "BIA Raises 2010 TV Station Revenue Forecast," *Television Broadcast Magazine*, June 30, 2010

<sup>12</sup> "State of the News Media" (note 0.6).

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<sup>15</sup> "State of the News Media" (note 0.6)

<sup>16</sup> "The Empire and the Son," *Financial Times*, June 19, 2010

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<sup>18</sup> "WTOP Tops Ratings," *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2010

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<sup>20</sup> Malcolm Gladwell lecture, June 24, 2008, at

[www.ted.com/index.php/talks/malcolm\\_gladwell\\_on\\_spaghetti\\_sauce.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/malcolm_gladwell_on_spaghetti_sauce.html)

<sup>21</sup> Jim Asendio interview, at his office at WAMU Radio, February 13, 2009. A similar technique has powered the growth of KPCC in Southern California.

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## About the Center on Communication Leadership & Policy

Based at the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, the Center on Communication Leadership and Policy conducts research and organizes courses, programs, seminars and symposia for scholars, students, policymakers and working professionals to prepare future leaders in journalism, communication and other related fields. CCLP focuses its activities in two areas: **1) The Role of Media in Democracy** and **2) Communication Leadership**. Current projects include: Public Policy and the Future of News; New Models for News; The Constitution and the Press; Media and Political Discourse; Children's Media and Ethics; Women and Communication Leadership; and Photographic Empowerment.

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