

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Strong Press, Strong Democracy

The Observatory — April 30, 2010 05:40 PM

Paper or Pixels?

News Corp.'s efforts to go carbon-neutral raise questions about the future of sustainable publishing

By Thomas K. Zellers

Amidst the steady **decline** of newspaper circulation in the U.S., could industry concern for carbon emissions affect the relationship between print and digital news media?

Last Friday, *Mother Jones*, in conjunction with the **Climate Desk** project **launched** last week, posted an **article** about Rupert Murdoch's decision to make News Corporation carbon neutral by the end of the year. The decision itself is by no means recent news, as Murdoch first made an anti-carbon **stand** clear more than three years ago. News Corp. has recently begun to make strides towards its goal, however, hiring the software firm Hara to measure and reduce its carbon footprint, estimated at 700,000 metric tons per year.

The most controversial aspect of the story is, of course, the contradiction between Murdoch's position and the consistently skeptical (if not vindictive) tone of Fox News's climate change coverage (not to mention many other News Corp. publications). But News Corp.'s sustainable efforts may also offer some insight into the future of print and digital media in what many expect will be an increasingly carbon-efficient economy. In 2008, the Magazine Publishers of America released its **Environment Handbook**, an exhaustive report on the environmental impacts of print publishing from forest to landfill—and more importantly, what can be done to mitigate these impacts. The report is decidedly optimistic, despite enumerating the complex environmental consequences of print publishing. Between carbon emissions and the production of solid, chemical, and liquid wastes, the pollution is substantial, but the report tempers that bleak outlook with ample information on everything from recycling and sustainable forestry to soy inks and the development of environmental policies to address all of the above.

Along with this optimistic outlook on the potential sustainability of print media, dramatic increases in online news consumption and technological advances like e-readers and Apple's iPad have prompted more coverage of the environmental costs of digital media. Many news outlets now collect and process so much digital information they have had to rely on cloud

computing, in which information and software are stored on remote servers.

Just two years ago, *The New York Times* moved its digitally archived issues from years 1851 to 1922 onto Amazon's cloud servers, as part of its **TimesMachine** project. But even individual reporting projects are headed in that direction. At the presentation of the **Oakes Awards** at Columbia University on Thursday, *Times* investigative reporter Charles Duhigg said he had to rent server space (cloud space) from Amazon to store the 200 million data records used in his prize-winning series, "**Toxic Waters.**"

Theoretically, cloud computing is supposed to mitigate the environmental impact of digital information by consolidating information from millions of servers into a much smaller number of repositories, but there is a lot of debate about this. As long ago as 2008, *The Economist* **reported** that, "As servers become more numerous, powerful and densely packed, more energy is needed to keep the data centres at room temperature. Often just as much power is needed for cooling as for computing. The largest data centres now rival aluminium smelters in the energy they consume."

Many other stories have also questioned the environmental benefits of new information technologies. Articles from prominent green blogs like Tree Hugger about the carbon footprints of **Google searches** and **Twitter posts** mark a shift in environmental concern away from paper waste and toward e-waste.

PBS's project on digital media, Mediashift, recently posted a provocative **article** by Don Carli, challenging the assumption that digital media is necessarily "greener" than print publishing. Carli cited the trend toward appending e-mails with the polite request to "remember the environment before printing this email" as reinforcing outdated ideas about the environmental friendliness of paper usage.

According to the article, "the false dilemma is: 'By using paper to print your email or by receiving paper bills you are knowingly degrading the environment, destroying forests and/or killing trees.' The forced choice is: 'Eliminate your use of paper or feel like a guilty hypocrite.'"

Carli further argues that digital media could have just as negative an effect on forests as print media, connecting the massive amounts of energy required to produce and maintain digital media to unsustainable practices like mountaintop-removal coal mining. And this is to say nothing of solid e-waste, Carli adds, as the turnover of digital appliances shrinks and more and more electronics with non-biodegradable toxic components sit in landfills.

Rather than arguing for either paper or digital media, the Institute for Sustainable

Communication published an **article** earlier this year that answers the which-is-greener question simply: neither, and it's not worth arguing about.

According to the article, "our better nature will best be served if we strive for the sustainable evolution of both print and digital media, rather than allowing or cheering the demise of one or the other."

It would be a stretch to call this debate a real controversy, as it is still mostly confined to environmental groups. Nonetheless, though the concerns of the news industry are currently focused less on sustainability than on staving off bankruptcy, changes will likely come soon.

As the *Mother Jones* article points out, Murdoch and News Corp. are ahead of the game. The Securities and Exchange Commission now requires full **disclosure** of carbon emissions from publicly traded companies, the EPA is still set begin **regulating** greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act, and pending (though recently **imperiled**) legislation in the Senate would further control carbon emissions.

These measures are unlikely to affect the media industry as much as they will the transportation and utilities industries. Nonetheless, the sustainability efforts of companies like News Corp. and other large media conglomerates will likely indicate where gains in efficiency can best be made. Is cloud computing the answer? Will print circulation shrink even faster as companies cut carbon? Will print see a resurgence, if paper is heralded as the most environmentally responsible medium for news? More data and experience is surely needed, but it's time for news outlets to start asking these questions.