

What now? Who knows?

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The 180,000-word annual *State of the News Media*, circa 2010, begins with a two-word question I expect all journalists have already asked themselves – "What now?"

Indeed, the dizzying pace of change in the media is nothing less than a "revolution" in which many critical questions about the future of journalism remain unanswered, this year's report on the health and status of the news media by the

Washington-based Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) tells me.

Among the questions it raises about news in the digital age are:

What ethical values about journalism will guide new media?

As established news organizations become smaller, is there some collaborative model that would allow "citizen" journalists to supplement the work of professional journalists in a meaningful way?

Will legacy media and new media cooperate more?

If they do, how can one operation vouch for the fairness and accuracy of something they did not produce?

The State of the News Media report is considered the most comprehensive annual study of media in the United States. But do its findings apply to Canadian media?

That's a question that Tom Rosenstiel, the report's lead author and director of the Pew Research Centre's PEJ, will likely address when he speaks Tuesday in Toronto about the challenges facing the media. His talk, expected to draw a large audience of concerned journalists, is being sponsored by Samara, a new Canadian organization dedicated to public service and public leadership, in partnership with Massey College.

Rosenstiel believes that while there is some difference between U.S. and Canadian media, the most significant factors apply across borders: Audiences are migrating online and legacy news organizations are becoming smaller. And "there is still no apparent way, here or anywhere, to monetize the audience online," he told me in an email.

Not surprisingly, critical questions about the economic health of the news industry are at the heart of this year's report. Repercussions of cutbacks in traditional media dominate. Most

distressing, the report estimates that U.S. newspapers now spend \$1.6 billion less annually on reporting and editing than they did a decade ago. This is due to the staggering fall in the advertising revenue that has long paid the cost of bringing you the news.

"The losses suffered in traditional news gathering in the last year were so severe that by any accounting they overwhelm the innovations in the world of news and journalism," the report says, adding that "a good deal must change before the digital age will begin to sustain itself."

For Rosenstiel, co-author of *The Elements of Journalism*, the most relevant book published in recent years on the purpose of journalism within democracy, this shrinking of the "ecosystem of reporting" is of great concern.

"There are fewer boots on the ground covering statehouses, zoning commissions, city councils. More of our civic life is simply occurring in shadows, and we do not know what we don't know," he told me.

Still, even as "old media are trying to imagine the new smaller newsroom of the future in the relic of their old ones," it's worth noting the report's finding that newspaper organizations still have the biggest newsgathering forces within most communities and websites tied to legacy news organizations attract the majority of web users.

While social media is now firmly established within the new media orbit, the report notes that the power of social media such as Twitter has less to do with reporting than providing a means for people to connect to share information and concerns around issues.

The report did find optimism in the "tremendous energy" in efforts devoted to innovative journalism in the digital age. It also concluded that many of these efforts are bringing "a renewed sense of mission" to the news.

Here, it cautiously lauded some citizen journalism efforts, particularly partnerships between legacy news organizations and concerned citizens. Initiatives similar to the *Toronto Star's* new Stimulus Tracker project, in which volunteers will monitor and report on infrastructure projects in their neighbourhoods to help track where our tax dollars are going, may help bridge the reporting gap in shrinking newsrooms.

This is the good news in a mainly bad news report.

"News people say a new culture of experimentation is genuinely taking root and technology gives us more tools to gather and disseminate news," Rosenstiel said. "We have the tools for a better journalism than ever before.

"The question is whether we have the imagination to use them wisely, and to monetize them."

That's yet another important question about the future state of the media. The answer at this point – who knows?