

Matter of Facts
Season 2 Episode 7
Dr. Boczkowski – Newspapers
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[INTRODUCTION - BYRNE] Facebook Twitter 24/7 News Talk Radio citizen journalism fake News Real News audiences are drowning in an overwhelming overload of information. Clearly a guidepost is needed to identify what is trustworthy and a reliable source of both news and information. Season 2 of the Delaware Humanities podcast “A Matter of Facts” delves into the topic, this year examining more closely popular sources of news and information. The “A Matter of Facts” podcast is brought to you by Delaware Humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its mission is to engage, educate, and inspire all Delawareans through cultural programming.

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[BYRNE] Thanks for joining us on the “A Matter of Facts” podcast. I’m your host Tom Byrne. In this episode, we turn to a source of news that has struggled with its identity over the past decade or two: traditional newspapers. They've struggle to make the transition to the digital age, their difficulty finding a viable business model has caused them to bleed money and staff doing a blow to local journalism, especially. At the same time, they've faced competition from new online newspapers that are built specifically to operate in this new digital realm. What does all this mean to what news and information is available to people and how they consume it? To help answer that we are joined on the podcast by Dr. Pablo Boczkowski. He is a professor in Northwestern University's Department of Communication, founder and Director of the Center for Latinx Digital Media, and co-founder and co-director of the Center for Media and Society in Argentina. His work focuses on the dynamics of digital culture. Dr. Boczkowski, thanks for being with us on the A Matter of Facts podcast.

[BOCZKOWSKI] Thank you very much for having me.

[BYRNE] So let's start with the kind of overall here, that is that traditional print media has faced some difficulties in adapting to the digital age and specifically finding a business model. From your perspective, have things at all improved for those entities in recent years, are they any closer to finding their legs online?

[BOCZKOWSKI] Traditional print newspapers have really struggled in recent years. There have been a number of closures across the nation and I think the local newspaper. Now having said that some of them, some of the most powerful and well-known ones such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, have however done quite well in the transition to digital in particular their ability to generate a significant revenue from an ever-expanding subscriber base. And as a result of that, you know, use those revenues to fund news from expansion on great coverage. So what you have is a situation, that you know has on the one hand the smaller

locally-based outlet struggling and then the handful of very successful national outlets doing well. So that's not surprising in the sense that digital media markets tend to be winner-take-all markets, that is markets where one or a handful of players really dominate, you know, we buy stuff on Amazon, we search stuff on Google, we communicate on social media, the number of properties owned by Facebook—you know Facebook, Instagram, etc, etc.—so it's not surprising that we go get news on a handful of outlets. That's unfortunately or fortunately depending on where you see it, the evolution of traditional news media in recent years.

[BYRNE] You mention that divide between the kind of the larger publications, the bigger houses, and local newspapers and local journalism--is there anything that can be done to help those local outlets, is there a way they can respond to maybe not have the same type of success as a New York Times or Washington Post to have greater resources, but at least get themselves a little bit better situated in this new realm?

[BOCZKOWSKI] So there are a number of initiatives in play and there are wonderful colleagues of mine in different universities across the country who have been studying this phenomenon. I however, and this is my own perspective, I have not done by own empirical research on this topic in recent years, but my sense is that because of the nature of digital media markets and, what my former colleague, now retired but a wonderful scholar, James Webster called "The Marketplace Attention", given the evolution of the digital market place of attention I think we're going to see more and more concentration of attention and a media industry, whether we be a handful of extremely power and well-resourced outlet and fewer and fewer of the smaller ones.

[BYRNE] The other piece of this puzzle is the outlets that are kind of online first or online only. Have we gotten the sense of how they're faring? Theoretically they'd be better suited to thrive in this environment because they were built for this environment, but some of those have also struggled. How viable are they and can these outlets and traditional outlets and their digital offerings coexist?

[BOCZKOWSKI] So they can certainly coexist. Now, it is true that because they do not have legacy assets, you know, delivery trucks or printing presses or you name it, they have a different sort of fixed costs, right? But it's less an issue of that and more an issue of brand recognition. Information products are experiential products. That is if we go to a store to buy a pair of jeans we try a number of pairs of jeans on, we decide on the ones that we like the best, we buy them and we use them over time. Information products, once you try them to use them. Once you read a story it's over. So because of that, attention tends to gravitate towards well-known brands. So the role of brands which is very important across all commodified goods is particularly important when it comes to information goods. And as a result of that, legacy use organization might have depending on the circumstances a bit of an advantage because the brands are highly recognizable. Which is the reason why, if you think about, you know, the top 50 or so, online digital websites or digital news operations, you see a load of so-called legacy or traditional players, having significant presence in that space. There have been a few successful ones in the US but also around the world in different languages. But we still see that people tend to gravitate towards better known brands that are typically associated with traditional legacy brands.

[BYRNE] So this kind of brings into talking a little bit about audience news consumption in this digital environment, and you look at part of this, or at this as part of your upcoming book *Abundance on the Experience of Living in a World of Information Plenty*. What do we know about audience consumption of news via traditional newspaper publications online, these newer online outlets, and compared to other media, radio, television, things like that?

[BOCZKOWSKI] So yes in that book Oxford University Press will be publishing in a few months, what I found is that more and more our consumption of news, not only digitally, but also in traditional media, tends to be of an ambient form, that instead of sitting down and opening the newspaper and having an entire sort of experience focused on reading the news pages, of sitting and turning on the TV and watching that, we tend to consume news in an ambient fashion. We listen to a podcast when we do something else, we put on the television and we do laundry or cooking, and more importantly we are out and about, we check social media when we have seconds of down time, and that way a story is posted, we find a story that is posted by a friend or an acquaintance on a given platform and that's how we learn about current events. So it's less about having our primary focus of attention being the news, but the news being something that we learn about in an incidental fashion while we're doing something else, as a byproduct of that other activity, and that's why more and more our consumption of news happens on social media. We do not go to a social media platform to learn about current events, Twitter being the exception, but Twitter is a fairly niche platform when we think about the array of platforms people have at their disposal, we go on social media to socialize, to tell our stories and to find out what our acquaintances and friends and family members have been up to. And then while we're there we stumble upon the news and on occasion we might click on the story, but for the most part we just get the information that is posted on somebody else's news feed.

[BYRNE] I find it interesting because one of the ways you described social media and kind of its impact is it's a labyrinth, and I'm curious listening to what you just had to say, what the implications of this way of kind of engaging with news and information has on people, and maybe more specifically their ability to distinguish between credible news, which you would expect to get if you went directly to a newspaper or online news source, or listen to the radio, and what you're getting off a social media platform?

[BOCZKOWSKI] Correct. So what happens when we get news on social media is first and foremost that, our, you know, diet so to speak, is filtered not only to the media which primarily produces the story, but secondarily through the contact on social media, so say Facebook, who posts that story, unless we get that story directly from the account of a traditional media organization, but most people really get their news on social media through their contacts. So what you have there is a two level filtering. You have the filtering by the media organization, which decides of all possible events in the world, which ones are going to be newsworthy, and then there is a framing of that, "we are going to tell the story in this way but not in that other way", that's one first layer of filtering. Then you have to add to that the second layer of filtering, that is a filtering of a person who selects "of all the possible stories I'm going to post on that story", and they add their own perspective. So the first thing to notice is the two levels of

filtering. The second is that when we watch television or read the news, what we have is news content, a particular story within the context of other stories, and social media we have a news story in the context of posts about trips, about pets, about anything in the world. So the news is sort of decontextualize from the flow of news in general, and their attention is fairly fleeting. Most people scroll through their feed and it is very common for instance that people are on social media during public transit, and whenever they get to their destination, they start walking. So it's not that they finish their consumption of news when the news story ends. They finish their consumption of social media, including bits of news that is part of that, when they have to do something else. So in a sense the consumption of news has become secondary or derivative in our daily experience.

[BYRNE] And I would imagine that would be difficult for these news organizations that are producing this news because they are producing something that they expect people to kind of take in total, and it sounds like what you're saying is maybe sometimes they are only kind of getting bits and pieces of it.

[BOCZKOWSKI] Correct. Absolutely. It's very difficult, and it's also very difficult because they are not getting their revenue either. In the US, two companies, Alphabet which you know is Google's parent company, and Facebook, get more than two-thirds of digital display advertising dollars. So they get the content essentially for free if you think about it. So news companies have produced the content story but the social media platforms are getting the revenue. So it doesn't seem like a very fair proposition but it is the way in which it has evolved.

[BYRNE] I do want to ask you about something else if that I found in looking over your book *Abundance*. And that is one of the things you found was that with news consumption the socioeconomic impact seems to be greater than other types of information consumption where age tended to be more of a factor. I'm curious because a lot of times in the news business you hear people talking about age lot, like you need to meet this younger audience where they're at in the digital realm, you need to produce things like podcast and use data visualization to reach this younger audience. Is age likely to become more of a factor or do you think it will remain this way with where in terms of news, socioeconomic factors are going to trump age factors?

[BOCZKOWSKI] That's an excellent question. So what we know now is that if you think about three major sources of media, broadcast media (television, radio), then print media (newspapers and magazines), and then digital media (in two forms, news websites and social media) what we see is that by far still the top source of news is broadcast news, in particular television. Now the second most important source of news, digital news. So print is going out essentially. So people are still consuming it to a degree but it's not a top contender anymore. Now, the main driver when it comes to broadcast news, and the main factor, has to do with socioeconomic status, and that has been fairly stable for quite some time. The thing is that, so if you think about over all and that is the main source of news that means that socioeconomic status trumps age as the main structural determinate of where people get their information about current events. However, the audience for broadcast news is not growing, but the audience for digital news is. So as we project to the extent that we can, since you are alluding to that, one might think that overtime age will become an even more important factor than it is

today and might at some point trump socioeconomic status when it comes to determining whether/where people get their news. But you know futurology is not the strong suite of the social sciences so I will not make any major predictions.

[BYRNE] [laughs] Understood. I did want to also ask you about something that comes up frequently now when people are accessing news content through these various news sites. And that is this idea of sponsored content. A lot of entities of turn to this to help bolster their business model, blurring the line between this paid content and actual news that's produced by journalist. I'm curious what you feel are some of the implications of that for people who are trying to find reliable news?

[BOCZKOWSKI] [On] the audience side, it complicates the issue of trust. We, you have to understand, we are living in a time when trust in institutions is declining and trust in the news institution has declined quite considerably globally, so the largest study of digital news consumption done by friends and colleagues at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, the digital news report documented that last year there was a significant drop globally of trust in the news that one consumes. Even in the country they measured, I believe it was 41 countries last year, even in the country where trust was the highest, which I believe was Japan, even in that case, level of trust when down. So in a climate in which the public is already sort of quite distrustful of the news, then organizations presenting content that even though they are labeling that "it's ok, this is different, this is sponsored content" but that by itself, by its very presence they're suggesting that the organization is engaging in "objectively supporting" and "some sort of public relations". I think it can sort of over time undermine the overall trust in that particular brand. So, what you have there in my opinion is a tension between the need for short term revenue versus the potentially negative consequences for the brand down the line. And going back to what I was discussing before, if brand is an incredibly important asset in digital media markets, then that is to me quite a risky proposition.

[BYRNE] One of the other things I wanted to ask you a little bit about is that the fact that the news outlets also have to compete with other content and entertainment that people consume when you're talking about the digital realm, that they oftentimes stand side by side these other pieces of content with news on people's devices and I'm curious, does that you feel also play a role in what these news entities need to do? Is there a concern that clickbait holds a higher value because it feels more entertainment like then complex and nuanced journalism that people can find maybe too heavy or too depressing?

[BOCZKOWSKI] Right. I think that's an absolutely critical point, that just to illustrate this with a very simple number--in the US the duration the average duration of succession on the news website, not the people who get a story through a social media feed—but somebody who goes on a website, the average duration of succession, not the click on one story but the entire time of that visit, of the top 50 digital news website has been fairly steady over the years and I believe the last measurement I saw was 144 seconds, that is 2 minutes and 24 seconds. That's on the one side. On the other side, they naturally tend to be fairly secretive about their numbers, but there was an article a few years ago in the New York Times, so I'm assuming it is

well sourced and credible because it is a wonderful news organization, so in that article, I remember there was some figures about the consumption of Netflix shows, and the average time that was devoted the week of release of a new season of a top thriller, the medium viewer was devoting 150 minutes a day of watching that. So you go for, say the season lasted four days for that person at that pace, for comedies it's five days. But if juxtapose, put side by side 144 seconds for news versus 150 minutes for the you know, a fiction, then you have a problem for the news. So to me the issue is not so much the issue of clickbait. To me the issue is evidently binge watching is a driver of consumer behavior of entertainment and it seems quite difficult for new organizations to generate that. There is a portion of the audience that spends a lot of time on the news; however, it is much small proportionally than the portion of the audience who spent significant amount of time on entertainment. To me that's the key, how can news organizations generate that level of attachment to news content, that is manifest, that is expressed, in the common practice of binge-watching.

[BYRNE] That is a fascinating topic. We like to end our podcasts, Dr. Boczkowski, by asking each of our guests the same question, which is where do you get your news on a daily basis? What are your favorite or go to news sources?

[BOCZKOWSKI] So my favorite source in English speaking language is the Guardian. My favorite source in Spanish, as you can tell from my accent English is not my native language I was born and raised in Argentina where we speak Spanish predominately, so my top source in Spanish is a wonderful news website call *Infobae*, which is now the leading news website in the world in the Spanish speaking language, and it is an online only site, which is quite remarkable, an achievement to get to that stage.

[BYRNE] Dr. Pablo Boczkowski, professor in Northwestern University's Department of Communication, founder and Director of the Center for Latinx Digital Media, and co-founder and co-director of the Center for Media and Society in Argentina. Thank you for joining us on the A Matter of Facts podcast.

[BOCZKOWSKI] Thank you very much Tom for having me and thank you to the listeners for staying with us.

[OUTRO - BYRNE] Thanks for listening to this episode of the A Matter of Facts podcast. The "A Matter of Facts" podcast is brought to you by Delaware Humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its mission is to engage, educate, and inspire all Delawareans through cultural programming. We thank the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for its generous support of this initiative and the Pulitzer prizes for its partnership. A Matter of Facts is produced by Delaware Public Media, Delaware's source for NPR news.