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The New News Cycle

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The long-awaited third edition of SMPS' *Marketing Handbook for the Design & Construction Professional* will be released this month. Asked to revise and update her original chapter on publicity, Joan Capelin found almost everything had changed—including the definition of news and how to get it. One sidebar to her reconceived chapter includes a discussion of what's news and what's information, which continues here.

A "wholesale carnage afflicting all sectors of that industry" is how the April 2 *Business Week* blog "Media Centric" described what's happening in the "old" media world of newspapers and magazines.

Even positive survey results from Scarborough Research that broke the prior week, which indicated "the average integrated newspaper audience is 75% for the 81 markets measured," had no impact on the generally gloomy perspective.

How has reporting changed? Is this good, bad, or just different? Has the definition of news morphed as well? Then, who's playing reporter and editor? Most to the point: How does this affect the design and construction industry?

The loudest of the thunder claps came in a March memo from the new managing editor to the staff of the *Wall Street Journal*, one of our few national papers, which, no surprise, Rupert Murdoch had purchased. The memo told staffers to provide more breaking news to Dow Jones Newswires. As Jeff Bercovici describes the reaction on Portfolio.com: "Pre-Murdoch, *Journal* reporters had a mandate to pursue the sort of in-depth, counter-intuitive, and/or quirky stories that would result in the lengthy page-one articles," not news bites.

Here's what we need to know, taken from that memo: "Even a head start of a few seconds is priceless for a commodities trader or a bond dealer—that same story can be repurposed for a range of different audiences, but its value diminishes with the passing of time." Speed matters; perspective, less. That's definitive and depressing, not just to *WSJ* reporters.

Meanwhile, back at publishing as we still know it, the adage, "It's not news unless the editor says it is," is getting hammered. The CCTV hotel goes up in flames and the Chinese government, embarrassed, does everything possible to suppress the ominous story. The first whiff of smoke crossed my desk via a UK construction-industry online source. Visuals and details quickly followed, courtesy of street journalists in Beijing carrying cell phones with cameras. The subsequent *New York Times* report was more about the hush-up than the fire.

Turns out, it is still thrilling to feel that you can be a reporter. Yet what do you have without the training, the investigation, or the ethics? We are in a period where readers and viewers need to weigh what might be fact versus opinion. Try to teach that to a 7th grade civics student, who probably already has a blog of her own.

Media commentator Clay Shirky defined the issue, which was then quoted in *New York Magazine*: "Society doesn't need newspapers. What we need is journalism."

I asked Charles Linn, FAIA, of *Architectural Record*, one of the magazine's most respected senior editors, for his take on this situation. "What's news?" was our general topic, specifically in the design and building world. "News is what will make them excited and curious enough to read further," Charles answers.

Is news any less carefully reported today? I wondered. Charles contradicted me: "In the past, we might have chosen only the choicest items. We're producing much more now, more like a daily newspaper than a monthly magazine. But now there is a reporter assigned to everything, to dig up facts, check accuracy, provide multiple points of view. Accuracy is more important than ever because, once an error hits the Web, it can be repeated indefinitely."

In fact, Charles explains, McGraw-Hill Construction publications—*Architectural Record*, *Engineering News-Record*, 11 regional construction magazines, Construction.com—go to great lengths to be sure that there are more stories from beyond the major metropolitan areas, and that they are accurate and provided in context. “Doing this required improved professionalism across the board,” he comments.

I asked Charles whether the typical news cycle for a project had changed. He provided this hypothetical example, which also shows how magazines have different standards for timeliness than newspapers: “A story about a Frank Gehry building is five years old before there’s a groundbreaking. There’s an announcement, and then it’s dormant unless there’s a problem, in which case it comes back around. When the building is completed—that might be news, if it’s a building of extremely high profile. Then there’s a different phase with an article from a design perspective. Not everything makes it into our design ‘well’—but others may not make it into the news section.”

GreenSource is a new McGraw-Hill publication for the U.S. Green Building Council. Its prudent launch, from two to four to six issues a year, also has necessitated rethinking its news cycle. Says Charles, who is listed as consulting editor on *GreenSource*’s masthead, “News needs to be fresh and refreshed all the time.” He explains further: “Now that *GreenSource* is a viable venture, we need to keep our news fresh to drive traffic to its Web site. When we were only coming out twice a year, people didn’t expect that. Well, we want eyeballs on that Web site, so we’ve developed our own news feeds. And people want and get good information from us.”

Here are some other comments on the issue of news versus information, snippets from the interviews that made their way into the chapter sidebar for SMPS’ *Marketing Handbook for the Design & Construction Professional*:

- **Jan Tuchman**, editor-in-chief, *Engineering News-Record*: “In the business-to-business world, news is news as long as industry professionals find it can help them do their jobs more effectively. There is new news and old news, but I don’t think old news becomes ‘information.’ I think of information as data...listings, calendar, directories. Ranking and prioritizing information can make it news. This is the news you make.”
- **Kristen Richards**, editor-in-chief, ArchNewsNow.com: “[News] is based solely in the eye/mind of the beholder/observer...not on the information being imparted ... Any information about something I did not know before is news to me—no matter its source or date.”

- **Dave Barista**, managing editor, *Building Design + Construction*: “Most B-to-B media organizations like *Building Design + Construction* are not in the breaking or hard news businesses. Our target audience does not look to us for up-to-the-minute reporting on burning buildings, collapsed bridges, etc. They turn to us for *ideas* and *solutions* to help them design and construct superior buildings...”

- **Amanda Kolson Hurley**, senior editor, *ARCHITECT*: “News is ‘news’ as long as those hearing or learning of it are unsure how to assess its relative significance or slot it into a narrative. Once people have been offered a ‘verdict’ by experts ... the consequences, good or bad, are already playing out, making it news no longer.”

- **Scott Jaschik**, editor, InsideHigherEd.com: “News is news as long as it is new to significant audiences. Lots of topics are hotly debated in relatively obscure blogs, but just because that has gone on for a few weeks doesn’t mean it’s not news when a major blog or traditional media outlet writes about the topic—and it is brand new to most people.”

- **Jenna McKnight**, news editor, *Architectural Record*: “I watch our Web numbers like a hawk, and I’ve been surprised to find that stories I thought were old news, because they’ve been reported in blogs or in newspapers, actually generate a lot of traffic... [I] conclude that most architects aren’t combing the Web every day looking for sizzling news stories related to architecture. I certainly don’t comb the Web every day looking for stories related to my trade, journalism.”

- **Scott Melnick**, editor, *Modern Steel Construction*: “All news is simply another information channel. The trick for professional marketers is to package the information in such a way that those who disseminate information (be it through a traditional medium such as magazine publishing or a current medium such as Yahoo News or a social networking medium such as Twitter) are interested enough to pass the information to their audience.” ■■

About the Author



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—Clay Shirky, *New York Magazine*