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## Can Journalism Survive?: An Inside Look at American Newsrooms

*David M. Ryfe*

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SURVIVE? AN INSIDE  
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NEWSROOMS



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**David M. Ryfe : Can Journalism Survive?: An Inside Look at American Newsrooms** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Can Journalism Survive?: An Inside Look at American Newsrooms:

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A road map to how we got into this messBy Beau YarbroughI've been a newspaper reporter since 1992, working for five newspapers, along with a freelancing stint and a little time in the wilderness between newspaper jobs. This is a confusing, difficult time for newspapers: At least two of my previous employers have gone under and many of my former coworkers are no longer in the field -- a loss to both journalism

and the readers they once served. But it's not, as is sometimes suggested, all the Internet's fault, or the fault of changing public tastes, or the fault of clueless executives, although each of those have played their part. Academic David Ryfe's book looks at the decades-old societal changes that both created the modern newspaper industry and the forces that are now, if not destroying it, are certainly turning it into something else. His book includes a case study of three papers struggling with change in the modern era and why each of them ultimately failed. (Full disclosure: I'm now employed by the same company as John Paton and Steve Buttry, two of the only newspapermen whose actual names are used, which I admire. I've never met Paton, but I've been in the same room with Buttry at least twice.) The failures he outlines mostly boil down to journalists being unwilling or unable to change dramatically enough in this shifting economic, social and technological environment. That seems harsh, but I found myself ruefully nodding in recognition to most of his descriptions. If someone is going to "save" newspapers, it'll be someone like Jeff Bezos, imposing change from without, rather than an established journalist managing to reinvent the wheel. And that's one of the failures of the book, beyond Ryfe's occasional tendency to write too much like an academic, and not enough like the journalist he moonlighted as while researching this book: While he clearly has some idea of what the "networked journalism" future looks like, he's seemingly reticent about spelling out even many of his theories, despite an audience of journalists who'd surely like an idea of where Ryfe, after his years of research, suspects the road might ultimately lead. Still, this is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in a dispassionate and well-considered look at how newspapers got into the state they're currently in and at least a few hints at to where the road might lead from here.

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. No moral center  
By Alyssa A. Lappen  
For more than a decade now, I have regarded my own profession, shamefaced, given the bulk of practitioners demonstrating dereliction in their duty. The problem is the dearth of facts in their reportage, and the lack of objectivity and balance. For a grotesque example, consider the 2008 presidential campaign, and compare the intense, outsized scrutiny given to reviled Republican Sarah Palin, whom the mainstream press rendered Public Enemy Number One, to complete cover-up in the form of fawning, mewling admiration that granted celebrity status and stardom to the underdog favorite who, as a result, soon occupied the White House and still does. What Sarah Palin's daughter ate for breakfast grew more controversial, as it were, than the unquestioning presence of one Barack Obama every Sunday for more than 20 years in the pews of a church lead by a hate-spewing "pastor" named Jeremiah Wright, much less Obama's longtime tutelage under the FBI's Most Closely Watched Communist Frank Marshall Davis, or his comradeship with wanna-be terrorist Bernardine Dohrn and her Weather Underground husband, co-founder and bomb-building revolutionary Bill Ayers, who suggested to the New York Times on Sept. 10, 2001 that he and his pals should have built more bombs and killed more people. It would now appear that Ayers was even Obama's ghostwriter. So no, the problem of journalism is not that the Internet provides an opinion forum, with the loudest, extreme opinions garnering the most attention. The problem is that so-called "journalists" choose sides and do everything possible to ensure that the winners are those for whom they prefer to cheer loudest. This mess began to take shape long before the Internet became routine. Decades ago, opinions began to replace facts, front and center and "above the fold" on newspaper front pages. Once upon a time, any front page column that included opinion was clearly labeled "news analysis," sort of like the warning label on cigarette packs. Such stories opened with leads far beyond the standard, who, what, when, where and why, and sometimes how. They stacked information knee-deep, albeit skewed but at least labeled as such. Then the "news analysis" labels went by the boards all together, and virtually all objectivity got chucked out with it. Worse was the total loss of balance. Editors no longer insisted upon a response, or at least an attempt to get one, from targets of increasingly crass political criticism. We could separate facts from fiction if only journalists themselves still knew the difference, but newsrooms have been steeped in political correctness for so long that a giant fog has descended and clouded the few brains still left sitting at the desks. Partisan writing rules the news, and most of the mainstream press is dominated by what editors like to call "liberal" thinking. Truth to tell, there is nothing liberal about telling the public what they are supposed to think, with no attempt whatever to provide balance or perspective or encourage careful consideration of all points of view. The result is that our democracy, a three-legged stool involving the public, government and press, has lost a leg and collapsed. This book addresses only the commercial side of things, the loss of ad revenues as classifieds, once the primary source of newspaper revenues, migrated from expensive, paid print columns, at \$100 or \$150 a pop, to freebies on the likes of Craigslist and eBay Classifieds. What has been lost as a result is an entire profession, once populated by hardened life-observers unwilling to take sides. These men and women painstakingly collected facts from often-hostile sources, each more reluctant than the last to part with state or corporate secrets. The difficulty of gathering that news gave the newsmen and women all the more pride over their objectivity. They were eager to disclose hard-won nuggets gleaned on little-known secrets critical to tip the scales of justice in the right direction or shed light on double-dealing or dirty political battles or huge city zoning wars. Not to get too dewy eyed. Some newsmen were never objective and never pretended. Case in point, infamous 1930s New York Times liar, Walter Duranty, who won a Pulitzer prize for covering up and sugar coating the famine Stalin imposed on Ukraine via farm collectivization, a mass starvation that painfully but effectively murdered millions. That prize should long ago have been posthumously revoked. Moreover, Diana West now informs us in a stellar tome chock full of investigative reporting and highly authoritative documentation, of long roots to routine news subversion dating back to the

1930s. Ryfe, however, pretends that journalists are still trained to value and practice objectivity and balance and that they gather the same old information in the same old way, although the old economics of newspapering disappeared eons ago. Actually, most individual journalists do not even attempt to ferret out both sides of every story. Reason and balance are no longer part of the equation and they have not been for a very very long time. A while back I encountered a former colleague, a business journalist, who was now teaching how to cover Islam at a major journalism school. The professor had never cracked a single Islamic text, never read the Quran, any Hadith, or the Sira (Life of Muhammad), much less any volume of Islamic jurisprudence, all of them for years readily available in English. No, the good teacher for all coursework relied solely on indoctrination designed for Western dupes. I agree with another reviewer, who observes that this book lacks a moral center. Sure good journalists have lost their jobs and newspapers have gone under. And whose fault is that? Yes, there is an economic problem. The underlying issue, however, hardly rests alone on the cost of manning a painstaking team of fact collectors or the loss of ad revenue to the internet. Over time, the newspaper industry itself taught society to regard facts as worthless antiques. Oh facts? Who cares about those. Balance? What's that, who needs it. Justice is what I say, and only what I say. Don't bother us with facts. We need report only facts we happen to like, facts that support our view. Sadly, places like the New York Times and Washington Post and Chicago Tribune manufactured that problem, a la Duranty.--Alyssa A. Lappen<sup>2</sup> of 3 people found the following review helpful. The promise of the future of journalism By Malvin "Can Journalism Survive?" by David M. Ryfe is an outstanding ethnographic study of journalism's unraveling and reinvention. Mr. Ryfe is a professor of journalism who skillfully blends academic theory with first-hand research conducted while working as a reporter at three separate news organizations across the country. This timely book will interest readers who want to gain a sophisticated perspective on the news profession including the promise of the future of journalism. Mr. Ryfe demonstrates that big-city newspapers have been in decline for decades as former subscribers have relocated to the suburbs. Immersing himself in various newsrooms in the 2000s, Mr. Ryfe came to appreciate the cultural practices of journalists that have persisted through the current tough times. Mr. Ryfe witnessed the fear among reporters as budget cuts led to layoffs. As the Internet deepened the crisis by cutting deep into print's classified advertising revenues, the author explains that journalists and managers have struggled to find solutions not for want of the desire to change; but out of uncertainty about what exactly to do about it. On that point, Mr. Ryfe surveys the digital media landscape to speculate about what might come next. Mr. Ryfe discusses a few of the promising online news services that have empowered journalists to create more meaningful content. However, Mr. Ryfe contends that only the largest newspapers can thrive in a competitive online environment; small to midsized newspapers will need to figure out how to collaborate with their local online communities and help solve common problems of interest. In this manner, Mr. Ryfe sees opportunity for journalism to both reinvent itself and continue to hold power accountable to democracy. I highly recommend this important book to everyone.

Journalists have failed to respond adequately to the challenge of the Internet, with far-reaching consequences for the future of journalism and democracy. This is the compelling argument set forth in this timely new text, drawing on the most extensive ethnographic fieldwork in American newsrooms since the 1970s. David Ryfe argues that journalists are unable or unwilling to innovate for a variety of reasons: in part because habits are sticky and difficult to dislodge; in part because of their strategic calculation that the cost of change far exceeds its benefit; and in part because basic definitions of what journalism is, and what it is for, anchor journalism to tradition even when journalists prefer to change. The result is that journalism is unraveling as an integrated social field; it may never again be a separate and separable activity from the broader practice of producing news. One thing is certain: whatever happens next, it will have dramatic consequences for the role journalism plays in democratic society and perhaps will transform its basic meaning and purpose. *Can Journalism Survive?* is essential and provocative reading for all concerned with the future of journalism and society.

"One of the finest and more in-depth portrayals of the struggle of newspapers to reinvent themselves." *Digital Journalism* "Ryfe offers compelling evidence that the success of new forms of public interaction - social media, blogs, crowdsourcing, data mining, etc - can, and are, mobilising local communities in the interests of greater transparency and accountability. He identifies a key role for journalists in this process: "Crowds need people who can catalyze the community, organize its work in granular form and put the pieces together when finished." And although he accepts that there are some journalists, maybe the majority, who will find it difficult to accept this new gatekeeping role, he is adamant: this is the future, whether they like it or not." *Times Higher Education* "This is a book which demands attention within the media industry and with all those interested in the development of society in a changing social era." *Orange Standard* "For all our academic debates about what journalism should do to survive in the digital age, David Ryfe has done the invaluable research needed to have this discussion in the first place: he looked at what journalists do to make it work, and why." Mark Deuze, Indiana University "David Ryfe has written an accessible and thoughtful book about US press journalism as it faces the drawn-out challenge of finding new business models in the face of the digital revolution. With its first-person style and lively ethnographic detail, it is written to appeal to a new

generation of students facing many professional uncertainties." Philip Schlesinger, University of Glasgow "There will always be newspapers,' journalists told David Ryfe a half dozen years ago. Now they are not so sure what that could possibly mean, as Ryfe shows in this study of a profession in crisis. A masterful portrait of three different newsrooms close-up, warts and all, this is an original, readable, and important work." Michael Schudson, Columbia University  
About the Author David Ryfe is Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno.