Host: Dan Cohen, Dean of Libraries and Vice Provost for Information Collaboration at Northeastern University.

Dan Kennedy, Associate Professor of Journalism, Northeastern University

Host: Dan Cohen: 00:00 Newspapers used to be an essential part of the daily lives of Americans, informing a shared consciousness of local, national and international events, shaping public opinion and uncovering the worst abuses of the privileged and powerful. Consolidation in the industry and the rise of the internet sharply reduced the number, reach and impact of those papers, but professional journalism still plays a critical role in our society. Today on What's New, remaking the news. I'm joined today by Dan Kennedy, a nationally known media commentator who teaches news reporting, media ethics, and other journalism courses here at Northeastern University. He has been one of the most incisive analysts of the changing shape and prospects of newspapers and journalism in America. His most recent book is "The Return of the Moguls: How Jeff Bezos and John Henry Are Remaking Newspapers for the Twenty-First Century." Welcome to the program, Dan.

Dan Kennedy: 01:04 Thank you, Dan.

Host: Dan Cohen: 01:05 I think you're the first Dan I've had on the podcast, so hopefully our audience won't be too confused. But it's wonderful to have you here, and I think really at an important moment for newspapers and journalism here in 2018. Before we get to the present day in 2018, I was really struck, in your book, by the, I guess, what we would call the long history of newspapers, and the fact that it has most often been a pretty iffy enterprise and has in fact required a Jeff Bezos or John Henry, who owns the Red Socks here in Boston, to sort of support it and undertake it. Just to set the table for us, how would you describe the 150-year history of newspapers in America?

Dan Kennedy: 01:45 Oh, well, and we'll have the nickel version here. Well, I think that if we want to go back to the late 1700s and early 1800s ... We could go back farther than that, but I'll start with that. Newspapers were expensive to produce, and they rarely printed on a daily basis, and they tended to be sponsored by political
parties because of the expense. Men would tend to read them at the taverns and debate the public issues of the day. The business was completely upended by technology. Nothing is new. In the 1830s, mechanized presses came along, and, over time, the press that we came to know came into being, supported by advertising, aimed at a mass market. That is really the model that has prevailed right up until today, but, of course, there’s been tremendous disruption since the rise of the commercial web about 25 years ago, and especially over the past dozen or so years.

Host: Dan Cohen: 03:04  So you bring up in the early chapters of your book just the omnipresence of newspapers in American life. There were over 60 million households that had one or more newspaper subscriptions, really, in their heyday, let’s say post-war America. I use the 150 years as a rough template for modern newspapers, when the Taylors bought The Globe and other major families bought newspapers around the 1860s and ‘70s that we are familiar with today. Those reached their peak in post-war America. There were even evening newspapers that you could subscribe to. What was that heyday like? How central were newspapers before the rise of the internet and the decline we’ve seen in the last quarter century?

Dan Kennedy: 03:52  Well, newspaper readership has actually been declining since the 1920s. People miss that this is a very long-term trend that’s been going on. People used to take multiple papers into their homes, and they slowed down from doing that. The internet is far from the only technology that’s come along and hurt newspaper circulation. Before that-

Host: Dan Cohen: 04:19  [crosstalk 00:04:19] radio and TV, right?

Dan Kennedy: 04:20  Radio and TV not only diminished newspaper readership, but changed what newspapers try to do. Because the rise of radio and TV is breaking news services, newspapers became more analytical. They would stretch out and try to offer a perspective on the news. But, nevertheless, they did remain central to American life. In a lot of ways, I think that they still are to an extent that people don’t necessarily realize, since so much of the news that they encounter online had its origination in newspapers.

Host: Dan Cohen: 04:59  Right, it’s the first touchpoint still, even with this reduced readership. I think you say in the book it went from 60 million households to somewhere in the 20 to 30 million range at this point.
Dan Kennedy: Yeah. But when we think about the existential crisis that's facing the newspaper business, it really doesn't have an awful lot to do with the decline in readership. Readership has declined, but it's healthy. There really isn't an issue with that in particular. The real crisis has been created by the collapse of advertising value. In print, it's diminished from a peak of about $50 billion a year, maybe around the year 2000, to less than $20 billion today. The expectation that digital advertising would offset the decline in print advertising did not come to pass for a variety of reasons. Craigslist took all the classified ad revenue. The display ads that newspapers had that were kind of reinvented on the internet as banner ads were a failure. I would suggest that no one has ever clicked on a banner ad except by mistake. Then, finally, the last nail in the coffin came along in the form of Google and Facebook scooping up more than 90% of all news spending on digital advertising.

Host: Dan Cohen: It's just an astonishing number to me. I mean, I'd always heard the Craigslist story, that it carved out all those classified ads, which local newspapers, which you point out, many of them were monopolies in their region. They could charge whatever they wanted for these ads. Craigslist came along, ate that out, and now you have essentially two big players who are eating up all of the digital advertising revenue.

Dan Kennedy: That's right, and that's why you see so many good newspapers, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Boston Globe, and many others, making a real push for subscribers to pay for digital editions of the newspapers. It's the only source of money left.

Host: Dan Cohen: Just for a second, given this decline, the Craigslist followed by Google and Facebook and these really giant internet companies taking away, literally, tens of billions in advertising revenue from the newspaper industry, why would someone like a Jeff Bezos buy a Washington Post in 2013 or John Henry buy The Boston Globe here?

Dan Kennedy: I think that Bezos and Henry in particular ... And, of course, they're the two owners that I focus on the most in "The Return of the Moguls" ... really went into the newspaper business for all the right reasons. I think they had a great sense of civic obligation. I don't think that either of them expected that it would be easy, but they were hoping that their expertise in other types of businesses would help them figure it out. I also think there's a lot of ego involved. In Jeff Bezos' case, his ego has only gotten larger. The Washington Post is growing. Its national reach has exploded because of its digital platforms. For the last
two years in a row, The Washington Post has reported a profit. I use reported a profit as if they were a publicly traded company. In fact, no one knows what their numbers are, but they say they're profitable.

Dan Kennedy: 08:57 I think that for John Henry of The Boston Globe, he said from day one that he knew it was going to be tough, but I think it's proved to be tougher than he realized. Here we are five years into the Henry era, and The Globe keeps shrinking a little bit. I think he's done the best he can to minimize those cuts, but, nevertheless, it's a smaller paper than what he bought. They don't really seem to have a very clear business vision for how they move forward. They had put a lot of energy into a new printing plant, not just for themselves, but for other newspapers, and the printing plant got off to a very slow start. They've lost some of their customers. So here we are pretty much on the fifth anniversary of Henry announcing that he would buy The Globe, and you could say that The Globe is at a crossroads, and it almost seems that you could say that every month of the Henry ownership.

Host: Dan Cohen: 09:59 You talk in the book about how newspapers can still make their way today. I thought you had three really great avenues for maintaining journalism and newspapers. One of them, you called it mass and class, which I hadn't heard before, but the idea of getting a big audience and then getting some amount of people who are actually willing to pay, the sort of elite subscribers, who can pay hundreds or, in the case of The Globe, $1,000 a year for a newspaper subscription. It seems like Henry, unlike Bezos who sort of went for both the big audience, 60 million unique visitors to The Post every month now, plus subscription revenue, Henry has focused on the latter. Is that a correct assessment of how they went at the new business model of the newspaper?

Dan Kennedy: 10:53 Yeah, that's exactly the definition of the two different approaches that they took. But The Globe is a regional newspaper, pretty much restricted to Eastern Massachusetts. Whereas, Bezos could go national and go for those 80 to 100 million unique visitors a month, John Henry didn't really have that option. I should say there's probably not more difficult a challenge in the news business today than owning a large regional newspaper. Bezos was able to take The Post national in a way that it had never been before.

Dan Kennedy: 11:34 John Henry can't do that, so he has to concentrate on people who live in the Greater Boston area who are willing to pay for the journalism. So as you mentioned, it now costs over $1,000 a
year to get print delivery of The Globe. He also charges $30 a
month for a digital subscription, which is more than anyone else
charges. I know exactly why he does it. His pool is smaller. He
has to do that. They have gotten to almost 100,000 paying
digital subscribers. They have said that if they can get to
200,000, it starts to look like a sustainable business. But as they
say, the first 100,000 is the hardest.

Dan Kennedy: 12:26 Also, there's another problem here as well. He charges far more
than The New York Times and The Washington Post do. They can
charge a lot less because they're appealing to a much larger
audience. But for the customer who's saying do I really want to
pay more for this rather specialized package of regional news
when I could pay less and get a much better take on the whole
country and the whole world from The New York Times or The
Washington Post ... I know why Henry's doing it. I hope he has
success, but I think it's just a very difficult challenge.

Host: Dan Cohen: 13:08 It does seem like, as you note, I mean, for the first The Globe
really is in direct competition with The Times for limited
subscription dollars. It's just like cable TV. There's only so many
subscriptions you can have, and people are making choices
about where to go with it.

Dan Kennedy: 13:24 That's right, and, of course, everybody's a member of Amazon
Prime, right? I mean, The Washington Post has become a
benefit of being an Amazon Prime member. You get it for free
for quite a while, and then it's at a steep discount. Not only is
The New York Times up against an advantage that they can't
match, but so too is The Boston Globe.

Host: Dan Cohen: 13:49 The other two avenues for successful newspaper journalism that
you point out are, I think, a little bit more counterintuitive.
Really, they are a sort of return to the true roots and power of
journalism, which is you advocate, really, for an investment in
quality journalism and in excellence. In fact, in some of the later
parts of the book, I really found it interesting just even talking
about how people read on the internet, which everyone thinks
is all about tiny little chunks of tweet-sized bites or Facebook
posts. But you actually point out, in terms of journalism, that
long-form journalism can be extremely successful on the
internet. So investing in this sort of format can pay dividends. Is
that a real route forward for a Globe, which, of course, has
probably one of the two most important investigative journalism
moments in the history of the business with the Spotlight
Investigation and, of course, Watergate at The Washington Post.
Is that return a sort of guaranteed success for a newspaper like
The Globe?
Dan Kennedy: 14:57 Oh, I think absolutely that's the case. People want to feel like they're getting real value out of paying for the news. There are so many sources of free news out there, and the quality of a lot of them isn't bad. But you want to be able to get that in-depth enterprise reporting that you can't get anywhere else. You mentioned Spotlight. We're going back 15, 16 years now. But late last year, The Globe did a pretty extensive series on race in Boston that people are still talking about. The Globe has kind of continued the conversation not only online, but in a series of public events, which is a fantastic way of engaging your public. They did an event here at Northeastern last year ... this year I think, at the Cabral Center. It was one of the most packed events I've seen here. That's the kind of quality that people expect if they're going to pay for the news.

Dan Kennedy: 16:11 I give The Globe a lot of credit for ... A lot of their secondary and tertiary coverage, you look at it every day, and you say, why do I need to read this? But it seems that they always have an important piece of enterprise reporting in the pipeline. You pick up that Sunday paper or you log on, and you say, wow, this not only is really interesting, but it's important. I'm glad I'm paying for this.

Host: Dan Cohen: 16:42 It's a really powerful series, and we'll link to it from the show notes. I also wanted to highlight that, over the summer, The Globe also led what ended up being hundreds of newspapers in coordinating an editorial ... together, although every paper wrote their own and often very different editorials on the state of the free press and the importance of a free press in American society. Do you think that that is going to have a kind of long-term impact on how people view newspapers and the news in general?

Dan Kennedy: 17:14 A long-term impact? Probably not. But I do think that it was an extremely worthwhile exercise in standing up for the values of journalism and the First Amendment at a time when they're under attack. I think that what really got people's attention was that The Globe used this as an opportunity to try to unite the newspaper business and to speak as one, although as you say, everybody was speaking in their own individual voice. There was some criticism of that. You'd say, gee, doesn't this look like collusion, to use the word of the day? I think that what was so important about this is that we live in an age of so much information noise that it's very difficult to cut through that noise. This was a way of doing that. If The Boston Globe had done this on their own, President Trump would not be putting up tweets attacking The Globe. But because they led a nationwide effort to do this, they got the attention of the
president. Now no one was expecting him to say, gee, you’re right, I’m sorry, but it shows that it registered. I think it registered with the public too. Whether this changes the minds of Trump supporters, that seems unlikely, but I think it was an important lesson in how vital what we do is to a democratic society.

Host: Dan Cohen: 18:57

In that society, it seems like one of the biggest problems that we’re facing is a loss of that sort of common ground around truth and facts that American society has had to rely on. I mean, newspapers, of course, there were horrible incorrect things in newspapers, yellow journalism, lots of things that we could discuss on another podcast. But at least the premise of the newspaper in their heydays and their impact on America was that there is some shared reality, if I can call it that, where a newspaper column was important as a sort of news gathering instrument to inform everyone, regardless of their opinion. What do you make ... As a journalism professor and as someone who’s looking out at this media ecology now where trust has declined, trust of newspapers has declined, precipitously? Of course, it depends on what party you’re in and where you are in the country, but, in general, that shared reality seems to be lost.

Dan Kennedy: 20:01

The loss of the shared reality is actually the full explanation for why surveys show that trust in the media is dropping. When people measure trust in the media and note this decline, they’re not wrong, but they completely misunderstand what’s going on. Two generations ago, you were pretty much limited to one newspaper that might be delivered to your door and the three network nightly newscasts, which were all very similar in content and tone. So if you asked people do you trust the media, they’d say, well, yeah, what else? What else am I going to look at?

Dan Kennedy: 20:48

First, because of the explosion of cable and then later because of the mega explosion of the internet, the media have fractured into infinite slices that serve every possible niche opinion. If you ask people today, do you trust the media, they’ll say no. But you ask, well, okay, what media do you use on a regular basis? A liberal might say, oh, The Globe, The Times, NPR. A conservative might say Fox News. Well, do you trust them? Well, yeah, why would I waste my time with them if I didn’t trust them? Yet each are giving their own completely different vision of reality.

Dan Kennedy: 21:37

Now I have to say ... This will probably be dismissed by some people as just liberal bias. I think that some of the news organizations we’re talking about, The Times, The Globe, NPR, and the traditional media in general, are dedicated to doing real
journalism and to trying to get it right and to correcting themselves when they don't get it right. Unfortunately, I think that Fox News, which has really become the 800-pound gorilla of conservative news, is engaging only in propaganda. I think that people who are relying on Fox News and Breitbart are really not being well served.

Dan Kennedy: I was giving a talk at the National Press Club in Washington recently, and we were talking about some of these issues. Somebody got up, and I came away from this feeling really good. Somebody got up and identified himself as a conservative and talked about how much he hates The Washington Post. I'm thinking, okay, where's this going to go? He said that what he likes to read is The Wall Street Journal and The Christian Science Monitor. He felt that he was getting very well informed from those two news sources. I said, this is fantastic. These are great news organizations. Here's a guy who is turned off by what he sees as liberal bias in the mainstream media, and he's found a way to become a really informed citizen without relying on some of these propagandistic outlets like Fox News. I came away with some hope. Here we've got The Christian Science Monitor right here down the street from Northeastern, one of the great news organizations. I don't think enough people know about them.

Host: Dan Cohen: It's true. I think a lot of people don't realize they are in fact just a few blocks from where we are.

Dan Kennedy: That's right.

Host: Dan Cohen: We, in fact, have some faculty who have offices in one of the buildings of The Christian Science complex.

Dan Kennedy: And we have journalism students who have done internships there. It's a great place.

Host: Dan Cohen: It is. I want to actually ask about those journalism students, because despite this decline, I'm actually really impressed and sort of heartened that journalism as a major is still thriving. We still have lots of students who see the value in journalism and its many outlets and want to sort of go into that business. Why do you think that is? The student that's entering college today who might take one of your courses, where do you think they're most likely to end up?

Dan Kennedy: Not only is our journalism major thriving, but our graduate program has been growing in recent years. It's really terrific.
Where are they going to end up? Well, in our program ... Every program is different. But our program combines public relations with journalism. A large share of our students have always gone into different types of corporate communications fields and public relations and whatever. We’re glad for it, because there really aren’t enough journalism jobs for everybody who would like to move into that. It’s always seemed that we have a few students who just burn to go into journalism, and they find a way to do it.

Dan Kennedy: 25:17 We have former students who have landed at rather traditional newspaper jobs, the NBC Nightly News, places like that, which is terrific. But we also have former students who are at places like Buzzfeed, Politico, a number of new types of ventures, and they are thriving in this new digital environment. I just heard from a student the other day. She wanted to quote me on some political thing. She’s been at Wired. She’s been at Politico. She’s been at a number of different places, and now she’s at National Journal, which is a fairly old fashioned politics and policy magazine, except that it’s almost entirely a digital enterprise now.

Host: Dan Cohen: 26:12 You also teach opinion journalism, which I think is fascinating. Today, I think our listeners all know that everyone is expressing or maybe over expressing their opinions a lot online. We certainly see a lot of rants, but you teach this as a distinct genre, how you actually go about writing a very strong opinion column. Can you tell our audience? How do you sort of get into that business and think about writing in that style in a way that’s more rigorous than our quick rants on a Twitter or a Facebook?

Dan Kennedy: 26:48 Sure. It’s funny. I’ve been at Northeastern for over a dozen years now, and I spent most of my professional life before that as an opinion journalist, and yet it’s only been in the last year or so that our director and I said, you know, why don’t I try to develop a course in opinion journalism? I taught it for the first time this past spring, one of the best experiences I’ve ever had here. It was a wonderful group of students. But one of the students at the end of the semester said that he really enjoyed the course because he learned that you need to develop a discipline so that you don’t come off as just another person ranting on the internet.

Dan Kennedy: 27:36 So, in fact, opinion journalism follows all of the ... I guess, you’d call them rules of any other kind of journalism, which is seek truth and report it, seek all sides, all of the values that we think go into good journalism, except that you are expressing an opinion rather than strictly taking a neutral tone. You’re still fair.
If it's a reported piece of opinion journalism, and toward the end of the semester we do incorporate interviews and reporting into the opinion pieces the students are writing, you still need to talk to all sides and be fair to everybody. It isn't really that different.

Dan Kennedy: 28:26 I think that especially today, with the explosion of digital outlets, people are looking for voice and attitude as a way to stand out from old fashioned types of journalism. But I think that the better outlets want it done with rigor, and they want it done in a good, journalistic way, and so that's what we try to do in opinion journalism. You notice I'm staying away from the word objective, which I don't like.

Host: Dan Cohen: 28:57 Well, right. I think your point is that the strongest opinions, the ones that will have the most impact, are in fact the ones that take pride in the basic journalistic values of seeking facts to support the narrative, to find viewpoints to discuss the values of other viewpoints and then to say why you view them as wrong. These are sort of the basics of-

Dan Kennedy: 29:22 That's right.

Host: Dan Cohen: 29:24 ... writing that I think we can all benefit from.

Dan Kennedy: 29:26 That's right, absolutely. If you think about the ultimate type of opinion journalism, you might look at a long feature story in The New Yorker. There's always a strong point of view in those types of stories. I said I don't like the word objectivity; I want to explain that just a little bit. Objectivity ... Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, in their wonderful book, "The Elements of Journalism," explain that objectivity has come to mean almost the opposite of what it was originally intended to mean. Too often it has come to mean mindless balance. If you have a source saying that the sun rises in the east, you better balance that off with someone saying that the sun rises in the west. What Walter Lippmann meant when he began talking about objectivity in the 1920s was an objective pursuit of the truth, being fair-minded and neutral and determining the truth as best as you're able to do it, not false balance. In that respect, objectivity even has a role in opinion journalism, because you're still seeking the truth.

Host: Dan Cohen: 30:41 Dan Kennedy, thank you for sharing your opinions. We've really appreciated it on this edition of What's New.

Dan Kennedy: 30:46 Thank you.
Host: Dan Cohen: 30:55

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