

## Book Review: Audience Connections Key to Journalism's Salvation

Juli A. Metzger, Ball State University  
jmetzger@bsu.edu

**Can Journalism Be Saved? Rediscovering America's Appetite for News.** Rachel Davis Mersey. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2010, 167 pp. hardback.

In her book *Can Journalism Be Saved? Rediscovering America's Appetite for News*, author Rachel Davis Mersey first sets the scene of a gloomy journalistic environment, with newspapers shuttering and journalists laid off in record numbers.

Mersey is well positioned to take on the subject. A former journalist for *The Arizona Republic*, she is now an assistant professor at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, where she also is a faculty fellow for the university's Institute for Policy Research.

Her premise—that news and community are at risk and that market-driven journalism must give way to “identity-based” journalism—is logical. Since this book's publication, the proliferation of news aggregators that permit audience customization of content has exploded. It could be argued that this affirms the author's point of view. Mersey makes a compelling case that the audience matters, and journalism's job should be to connect the audience with information—whether entertaining or informing. While the concept isn't new, it is one that Mersey builds upon throughout her book.

Identity-based journalism means mastering the science of audience understanding. This identity-based model of journalism suggests that audience is the emphasis, followed by content, then by platform. The entrepreneurial journalist, the journalist who has built a brand for himself, knows this. Popular bloggers and Web-based journalists, even news aggregators, have figured this out. While most traditional media may instinctively know that audience takes center stage, many have not been able to change their focus fast enough or well enough. It is the difference between the “mass” medium and the “niche” audience.

Mersey makes this observation: “Journalists are no longer in a relationship with their audience built on one-way communications as Murrow, Lippmann, and Woodward and Bernstein were.” The connection from the audience back to the journalist has now been solidified as a part of the communication process. She rightly points out that the heart of the problem is historical arrogance, driven by what she calls “the social responsibility model of

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*Juli A. Metzger worked in newspapers for 22 years, including executive editor for Digital and director of Niche Publications at The Indianapolis Star. She has been an editor or publisher of newspapers in Ohio, Indiana, Vermont, and Louisiana. She is interim director of Unified Student Media and an instructor of journalism at Ball State University.*

journalism,” which contributes to mass media’s disconnect with the audience.

Mersey also tackles the subject of the business model. She notes that “shoe-leather journalists out there reporting, writing, taking photos, or editing were once blind to the business side of news.” Now they are very aware of the dire financial circumstances that journalism organizations face.

Mersey says it’s not a revenue problem in journalism today; it’s an audience problem. Today’s communication environment requires ongoing interaction between audience and journalist.

She also argues that “current efforts across all platforms of communication continue to be based on a completely outdated, albeit noble, sense of community-wide service. They are born of the brains of newspapermen and women; and newspapers, as we have established, are ill fated.”

Mersey writes that the need to find a sustainable business model in the midst of this economic recovery remains elusive to corporate media and that individual journalists who pursue an audience-driven franchise will find the support they need.

“Journalism, as it exists, is mired by being under the control of misguided news companies. Should journalism, the best of what we have known historically that focuses on important, relevant storytelling, be saved? Absolutely yes.

“So the real market model of journalism for serious producers of news is figuring out how to tell important stories in relevant and compelling ways with products that are sensitive to users’ changing needs.” Mersey calls this “the identity-based model of journalism.”

Still, many journalists today remain troubled that any knowledge of certain specific realities—where advertising support comes, for example—will color their ability to produce unencumbered journalism. Rightly so, Mersey argues against this nonsense.

If that isn’t enough of a roadblock to reality, Mersey states that journalism still subscribes to a social responsibility model—that it is the watchdog of government, that it provides the checks and balances in business and other institutions. But to Mersey’s point, “All these precepts do not matter simply because journalism exists.” That position, she writes, is “dated.” Journalism matters when it is relevant to the audience.

Today’s tools of sort, select, and share create communities who read, care, and engage.

The only weakness is that Mersey’s writing lacks a sense of urgency or call to action. Attracting a workforce to a field that is uncertain at best will grow more and more difficult. While there are exciting new journalism jobs, it will likely take considerable time before they are as valued as those from the Woodward and Bernstein era. The new skill set required by

the young journalist is that of audience understanding. No one was thinking about that during Watergate. This might be the era where the new journalist can distinguish himself.

Can journalism be saved? Mersey's answer is yes, but not without recognizing that journalists must first connect with their audience and write about what matters to them.