

HOT TOPIC



The Word Is Flat

Will outsourcing change the landscape of journalism?

by Alex Gordon (MSJ04)

In his 2005 best-seller "The World Is Flat," Thomas Friedman makes the case that the continued outsourcing of jobs to India and other countries is a positive trend. Friedman can afford to take that stance. As a Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times columnist, he has a lot less to fear from outsourcing than the scores of computer programmers and customer-service representatives who have seen their jobs disappear overseas in the last decade.

The world is continuing to flatten, though, and Friedman's job, as well as that of other journalists, might not be as immune as once thought to the forces of outsourcing.

While Reuters may have started the outsourcing trend when it moved a good chunk of its rudimentary Wall Street reporting from New York City to Bangalore, India, in 2004, a real firestorm ignited in May when James McPherson, the editor and publisher of the PasadenaNow Web portal, advertised on Craigslist for a "newspaper journalist based in India to report on the city government and political scene of Pasadena, California, USA." McPherson eventually hired two reporters based in India, one of whom had a journalism degree from the University of California, Berkeley, for a combined salary of \$19,200.

The hiring may have generated a lot of publicity for the once-obscure Web site, but it sparked derision and outrage everywhere from the influential Romenesko media blog to Comedy Central's "Daily Show." Predictably, McPherson's move provoked a lot of discussion among the denizens on the Medill listserv.

For instance, Dana Greenspon, a field producer for the PBS Nightly Business Report, who had just returned from a two-week assignment in India, had this to say: "We as journalists are not expendable, and in my opinion, this entire premise is somewhat absurd ... This idea that anything and everything can and will be outsourced is, in my opinion, an enormous exaggeration ... I think the idea that all of our jobs will someday be outsourced to India is unrealistic. As journalists, there are plenty of other external forces putting pressure on our jobs. I don't think India is one of them."

Some of the reactions may have had a hint of xenophobia—would the outcry have been similar if McPherson had wanted to hire two Canadian journalists?—but the idea that a city council could be covered adequately from thousands of miles away was somewhat insulting to anyone who has ever been charged with finding a compelling angle to a zoning board meeting.

Just put yourself in one of the Indian reporters' shoes. Imagine being told tomorrow that you were going to cover Bangalore's city government by watching its meetings via the Web. How good a job do you think you could really do?

New York Times best-selling author Michael Capuzzo (BSJ79) also weighed in on the listserv debate. Capuzzo, who worked for years as a reporter for the Miami Herald and Philadelphia Inquirer before moving to northeastern Pennsylvania to start Mountain Home Magazine, says the idea of trying to beef up local coverage by hiring someone 9,000 miles away is insulting. "It paints the publisher as kind of a money-only guy," Capuzzo says. "If I went to Pasadena for three days we could

find someone to do the job for the same pay. There's a guy in Pasadena right now that would do that job full-time for \$18,000 and clips and he'd be eating those councilmen for lunch and providing a real public service."

Mitchell Lavnick (MSJ94), the president of First Down Media, a Brooklyn-based custom publishing business focusing on sports, says he would never consider outsourcing his work to a foreign country. "I frequently hire independent contractors to do reporting, writing and design work," he says. "I want to work with people I know or who have come recommended by people I trust."

Lavnick, who as a sportswriter covered everything from the New York Yankees spring training to the NBA Playoffs, says you can't beat the visceral experience of reporting on an event in person. "Sure you could conceivably cover sports by watching it on TV and getting press notes off the Internet, but nothing replaces the kind of depth and color you can get by being on the sidelines and in the locker room," he says. "The quality of our work is our greatest selling point, and it isn't worth rolling the dice that a faceless person half a world away can do the job."

While the debate over outsourcing is interesting, it appears that the Pasadena experiment may have been less than successful. In late June McPherson placed another ad on Craigslist—this time the Los Angeles version—looking for a full-time reporter who was a "self-starter" and who would "work to dominate local news coverage with scoops and thorough professional reporting."

McPherson, who was anything but press shy when the controversy first erupted, refuses now to talk about it at all, declining to even confirm if the Indian reporters he had hired were still working for the Web site.

Even if McPherson's move was just a cynical ploy designed to create publicity and drive traffic to his site, it was one of those soul-searching moments for journalists, many of whom have become all too comfortable doing their work via the phone and e-mail rather than using old-fashioned shoe leather.

Perhaps most ironic was that while from a Business 101 standpoint his idea might have made sense, McPherson wasn't selling widgets. In trying to establish his site as a source of the best local coverage of Pasadena, it would seem to be an insult to the site's readers and advertisers and the community as a whole to use reporters half a world away.

"It's kind of offensive," Capuzzo says. "I guess there is a place for outsourcing of reporting in the Reuters/Bloomberg world, where information is more a commodity to be packaged, bought and sold, but at a certain point people need and crave the better information that comes with actual in-person, belly-to-belly reporting."

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