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From the President

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

“IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES, it was the worst of times . . .”
So opens Charles Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities. This essay is a
tale of two worlds, journalism and higher education, and a reflection on how, for those who populate those two worlds, it is the
best of times, and the worst of times.

The Internet has transformed journalism, for better or for
worse, and it could soon transform higher education, for better
or for worse. This edition of Furman magazine is being published
in print and in an enhanced digital form, precisely to try to
illuminate the changes that the Internet has wrought already
in mass media and the changes it now perhaps portends for
higher education.

Print media in its traditional forms — newspapers, magazines,
journals and books — held a virtual monopoly on the life of the
mind from Gutenberg to the invention of radio. In the 20th cen-
tury the field was enriched by electronic media. Yet those media
were generally not treated as complete substitutes for the content
available in print.

In the early days of television broadcasting, when only three
major networks existed, many Americans made it a habit to
watch the nightly news on ABC, NBC or CBS, but well-informed
citizens also read national and local newspapers because they
contained far broader and deeper content than could possibly
be squeezed into 30 minutes of television. It was a golden age for
weekly news magazines — Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World
Report — and scores of other national magazines also flourished.

Concomitantly, the powerful leaders of those elite news or-
ganizations — their presidents, publishers, editors and journalists
— were influential gatekeepers, exerting great sway over issues
that surfaced to the top of the American agenda and over how
those issues were framed and presented.

Matters began to change, slowly at first, as the number of
television outlets exploded from three to some 300 through
changes in the structure of broadcast, cable and satellite
television. Entrainers such as FOX and CNN, augmented by
scores of other news and information channels, let alone the
hundreds devoted to sports and entertainment, began the
process of fragmentation. As more voices in the marketplace
of ideas emerged, the power of the oligarchy of media elites
gradually diminished. But they were still making money.
Whatever deep loyalty to the printed page many generations of Americans may feel, an ever-enlarging segment of the populace does not feel it anymore, and may never have felt it.

The Internet changed everything. Newspapers at first were living beyond their means, and then began dying beyond their means. Their business model imploded. The Internet brought new and more efficient ways for people to sell and buy cars, advertise and look for jobs, and promote sales and services of all kinds and descriptions. The advertising revenue that had sustained the massive infrastructure required to maintain print newspapers — the printing presses, the newsprint, the distribution and delivery networks, the multiple layers of reporters and editors — was all but lost. And newspapers, for so long the soul of American community and democracy, began to disappear.

They are not entirely gone yet. And perhaps, through some blend of philanthropy and entrepreneurial reinvention, they may yet re-emerge in a new and sustainable form. But in their old form and format, in their old business model, they are gone.

The impact of the Internet on the business model was not the only salient factor pushing change. The notions of “gatekeepers” and “opinion makers” and “agenda setters” were altered as well. The Internet democratized the marketplace of ideas, as anyone could suddenly lay claim to being a publisher or broadcaster.

THE GOOD NEWS was that this was democratizing. The bad news was that this new, journalistic wild, wild west lacked for much in the nature of the rule of law or the moral conscience of the community. Lost were the ethical norms, the editorial checks and balances, the training in professionalism, and the legal accountability of the “legacy media.”

The digital revolution also unleashed larger generational and cultural forces, forces that worked changes on how information is received and processed by an emergent “i-generation” reared on electronic freedom. Whatever deep loyalty to the printed page many generations of Americans may feel, an ever-enlarging segment of the populace does not feel it anymore, and may never have felt it.

The students we are recruiting to attend Furman this year have known Facebook and Google and Twitter and texting as their communicative and community “normal” throughout their lives, as if these marvels had always been with us. For some of them a newspaper is as quaint and curious as a typewriter or pay telephone booth. It is not clear that this generation receives information, or even learns, quite like generations before; it is not clear they would read newspapers even if they could survive. (And without a new generation of readers — can we talk? — how can print newspapers survive?)

The question I wish to poke you with here (in good cheer), explored in the video to which you may link in the digital version of this issue, is whether the story of the rise and fall of traditional American journalism, as we once knew it, offers any cautionary tale portending the rise and fall of traditional American higher education, as we now know it.

I don’t want to give away the story in print — the whole point of this tease is to encourage you to go online and watch the video. But to further entice you, let’s ask a few questions:

In what ways are the forces that led to the transformation of journalism like the forces that may push the future transformation of higher education? In what ways are they different?

If the Internet has forever altered our commerce, our politics, our culture, surely we must expect that it will inexorably press some stress for change on higher education as well. Yet that does not mean that residential higher education is doomed, and certainly does not mean, and for the sake of the country and the world must not mean, that the magnificent transformational educational experience offered by the country’s great liberal arts universities such as Furman will be doomed.

But it does mean that we must adapt. It does mean that we must respond. And the goal of this revamped magazine, published in print and digital form, is to spur the imaginative powers of the Furman family to think creatively about those adaptations and responses.

Looping back to Charles Dickens, the quote continues: “...it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity...”

So click in, and think on, with wisdom, foolishness, belief and incredulity! And have some fun along the way. I welcome your suggestions, so feel free to write or call.

— ROD SMOLLA