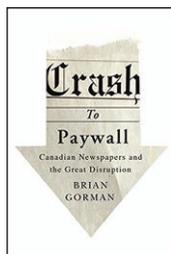


Review



Crash to Paywall: Canadian Newspapers and the Great Disruption. By Brian Gorman. Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. 320 pp. ISBN 9780773545922.

Gorman's book, *Crash to Paywall: Canadian Newspapers and the Great Disruption*, provides a revelatory analysis of the economic tensions within the contemporary state of North American newspapers. Digitization, and the economic recoils resulting from the 2008 global recession are now frustrating many leading industry professionals, and while rates of newspaper readership in North America continue to rise, the industry's profitability remains stagnant. However, the author notes that the increasing concentration of ownership and debt-dependent nature of financial capitalism—particularly during the restructuring of the newspaper industry during the 1970s—have resulted in this unique set of problems for journalists in Canada and the U.S. that are largely non-existent in many other countries. As a result, the newspaper industry has had to develop new ways of adapting to the shifting landscape of journalism in the twenty-first century.

In terms of method, Gorman employs semi-structured, answer-driven interviews with many high-level news media executives, employees, and academics (mostly in Canada, though with some from the U.S.). Gorman is also cognizant of the fact that, due to the nature and scope of his research question and the systemic inequalities that exist in North American journalism and news media, his sample is predominantly (though not exclusively) White, English speaking men. Gorman does not investigate the financial state of Quebecor, although does acknowledge that it is a prime example of an extremely concentrated form of media ownership and control.

Central to Gorman's argument is the notion that Canadian and U.S. journalism have been in a downward trajectory for decades, and that greater levels of investment in quality journalism could reverse this trend. Yet, rather than investing strategically in journalists and resources, media outlets have tended to apply old media practices to new media platforms (i.e., online newspapers). For example, while most free newspapers have traditionally relied on revenue generated from advertising (from both classified and retail sections), the lack of interest in advertising with online newspapers by many companies and the success of such sites as Craigslist and Kijiji have drastically reduced profit for news media outlets. As a result, newspapers have continued to provide free content online, although without receiving the same economic benefits as they did in the pre-digital era. By 2011 however, many of these sites—such as the *New York Times*, *National Post*, and the *Globe and Mail*—began implementing a paywall system in which readers must pay in order to access news content. While it may take time, Gorman argues that these paywalls could prove successful if media owners begin

investing more significantly in producing higher quality journalism for which citizens would be willing to pay.

One issue with the paywall solution, however, is that it could restrict access to the higher quality journalism that this system should ideally produce. Paywalls mean that poorer citizens, who already struggle with other socioeconomic issues on a regular basis, now face a literal barrier to accessing the kind of quality journalism that Gorman notes is required for civic education and democratic participation. It is therefore strange that Gorman does not explicitly address this issue in any great detail. While Gorman does address issues of representation in journalism with regard to class, noting that working-class issues are often less at the forefront of investigation and analysis, he does not address the access problem to news in the paywall system in relation to socioeconomic status.

Given that Gorman's overall argument revolves around the issue of ameliorating the current state of newspapers in order to contribute to a more vibrant democratic society, there are at least two potential reasons for why the issue of class in the implementation of paywalls is not directly addressed. First, Gorman notes that some online newspapers have implemented a metered paywall system, whereby readers can access a certain amount of news stories for free but must buy subscriptions in order to probe deeper (as in the case of the *Globe and Mail* or the *New York Times*). Though this method is less restrictive, it does still limit access to news stories for citizens with lower income, youth/ students, and various marginalized demographics. Gorman discusses the issue of metered paywalls mostly in terms of viewership—by regular, dedicated readers versus “fly-by” readers who sift through aggregator sites such as Google or Yahoo—rather than in terms of stratified accessibility for citizens. Second, Gorman argues that the CBC needs to be revitalized. Though Liberal and Conservative governments have decreased funding for the public broadcaster for at least two decades, Gorman notes that national polls show that the majority of Canadian citizens and politicians (including Conservatives, who are typically portrayed as “out to get the network”) would like to see a greater investment in the CBC and its journalism. The argument in favour of improving upon the CBC further suggests that Gorman is genuinely interested in accessible, high-quality news reporting for all citizens, even if he does not address the issue from a class-based approach.

It should be noted that Gorman does not consider paywalls to be a perfect solution to the current problems in North American newspapers, but rather an effective means by which to keep the industry from total collapse (p. 143). While Gorman does not explicitly address the issue of socioeconomic restrictions in the paywall system, his assessments of metered paywalls and strengthening public broadcasters (such as the CBC) do provide a potential entry point for further research on this topic. Overall, Gorman's work provides an excellently researched and effectively presented investigation into the contemporary state of Canadian and U.S. newspapers, including issues of changing technologies, industry reactions to economic issues, and the role of journalism in a democratic society.