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Black and White and Read All Over: Print, Profit, and Passion - An Interview with Peter Bhatia

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Few industries appear as precarious in today's economy as newspapers. Once the main source of information for millions of people, printed papers now have to compete with a variety of alternative forms of information gathering and reporting. The ink-stained wretches of yore now lock horns with anonymous bloggers, pompadoured TV anchors on 24-hour news channels, YouTube, and social media for the attention of a fickle public. Among the threatened giants of the old media is The Oregonian, one of the state's oldest businesses. We sent Ben Lundin, an award-winning freelance journalist who worked as a staff writer for three Louisiana newspapers and is a graduate of PSU's professional writing graduate program, to interview Peter Bhatia, the recently installed Editor of The Oregonian. They discussed the view of the journalistic landscape from Bhatia's window on SW Broadway. This interview has been edited for length and clarity. — The Editor



Peter Bhatia

Black and White and Read All Over: Print, Profit, and Passion

an interview with Oregonian editor Peter Bhatia

Ben Lundin: *As someone who has worked in journalism for three decades, you've had a front row view of the industry in some of its better times and some of its more tumultuous times. How do you perceive the state of the journalism industry today, and how does that compare to earlier days?*

Peter Bhatia: It's very different. This is as tumultuous and testing a time for journalism, at least as I practiced journalism, at least what I consider to be journalism, as there ever has been. Journalism itself, as a craft, is relatively healthy. In the internet age where anybody with a laptop can call themselves a journalist there are all kinds of people producing journalism. But what's really troubled right now is the kind of journalism that's practiced by so-called mainstream media—newspapers, television stations, networks. The economic model that has sustained those journalistic enterprises—those companies—is under siege in a way it's never been before, because of the growth of the internet, because of the horrible economy we've endured the last several years. It's a really tough time in that regard.

BL: *Where do you see the journalism industry going from here?*

PB: I don't think anybody knows. All the pundits out there say it's going to be this, it's going to be that, newspapers are dead, so on and so forth. I

don't buy any of it, because I don't think anybody really knows. As we sit here the iPad is going to be introduced tomorrow. Who knows what the impact of that will be on

the delivery of journalism? So I think the technology is going to continue to drive us in interesting ways. But exactly what the future is going to look like—are newspapers still going to be here 5 to 10 years from now? Yeah, I believe they will be, but I think all kinds of other forms of journalism are going to continue to grow up and to thrive. And again I think it's really important to differentiate that there's the whole economic model of journalism, which is making money. Because as much as those of us who work in newsrooms would like to ignore the fact we work for profit making business, so much of journalism is a business. The quality of journalism and the amount of journalism that's being done in this country—and people can define it in any way they want to—is plentiful and there's still a lot of great journalism being done at newspapers and at other places, and that will continue to be the case.

BL: *Does the state of the journalism industry in the metroscapes vary at all from the rest of the country?*

PB: I think every area has different economics and influences, but I think the general state of things is pretty much universal, in the sense that smaller community papers have done better through all this because they don't have as much internet competition and they are so anchored and of a place as compared to a metropolitan newspaper that's trying to serve a vast area, or in our case an entire state. I think the struggles that

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everybody is facing are fairly universal, but there are a lot of idiosyncrasies in terms of economics and markets and other things. The dilemma is pretty much universal. Ownership has something to do with it—public versus private—there are all sorts of factors that play into it, but everybody is feeling the pain, and that’s for sure.

BL: *Speaking of trying to cover a wide area. How do you appeal to areas outside of Portland, such as Yamhill County?*

PB: We consider our main market, if you will, Multnomah County, Clackamas County and Washington County. That’s where the great bulk of our circulation is. But you can buy the paper much farther ranging places. Not as far as it used to be, but still a long way from Portland, you can buy the print paper. Our primary focus is on our local market, but as a big city paper or as a metro, we care about what’s going around the state. You mentioned Yamhill County. We devote quite a bit of coverage to the wine industry, for example, which is huge in Yamhill County. If you live in Corvallis, say, and care about Oregon State, particularly sports, we’ve got that covered for you. The Blazers are a statewide phenomenon, so a lot of people buy us because they like the Blazers, or because they want to know what’s going on in entertainment in Portland, because it is sort of the entertainment hub of the state at least in terms of clubs, and bands, and big time concerts and things like that. So there are a lot of reasons. Or there may be expatriate Portlanders who don’t live close in anymore, and they want to know what’s going on around Portland. And in some cases people just want to read a big city paper because they want all the various parts that make a big city paper. So it’s different reasons for different people. But if you live in Astoria, for example, and are buying *The Oregonian* because you want outstanding coverage of what’s going on in Astoria, that’s not the reason to buy it. You buy *The Astorian* for that. You buy us because you want the statewide emphasis. You might want our coverage of the state legislature, for example, or state politics, or coverage of the governor’s race. So we can’t edit the paper for every place around the state or even within our circulation area. Our focus is on the metropolitan area.

BL: *You’ve worked throughout the country in your career. The metroscapes is often considered a literate community, or at least fancies itself as such, but I think Powell’s and*

a great number of small bookstores show that it is. How does this area’s readership compare to other areas? Is there a difference? Is there a difference in the way you cover it?

PB: I think Portland is a big city that’s a small town. That is, it is a big city and has all the amenities of a big city, like a symphony for example, or an NBA team, or all kinds of national chain stores, or however you want to define big city—major concert tour stop at the Rose Garden, whatever the case might be. But it’s still got a small town, intimate feeling to it. And that’s great for a newspaper because people here take ownership, feel ownership of the paper. They see it as “my paper.” It’s almost as if we were a quasi-public entity even though we’re not, obviously. We take seriously our public service obligations, but people feel like the paper is theirs, and if the paper does something they don’t like they’re really disappointed in the paper. I think that’s really different from other places that I’ve lived: San Francisco, Dallas, Sacramento, other places. And it’s a good thing. It’s a good thing that people care so much about what the paper does and says. I think that puts a bigger responsibility on us, which I’m quite comfortable with and quite grateful for. And I think it has to do with the kind of passion people have for this place. I think it has to do with a higher degree of civic involvement than any other place I’ve lived. And I think it has to do with the nature of northwesterners.

BL: *How much influence do you think The Oregonian has over current issues? A good example is when some people threatened to cancel their subscriptions in response to the newspaper’s campaign in opposition of Measures 66 and 67. How much influence do you think over issues like that does The Oregonian have?*

PB: The anger – and I should be clear, I don’t oversee the editorial board, that’s the editorial page editor—he reports to the publisher and I report to the publisher. It wouldn’t be my place to talk about editorial policy. The anger over the editorials and the ads on measure 66 and measure 67 reflects the importance of the paper as it is perceived by the public. If the paper was irrelevant, if the paper was dying, if newspaper didn’t matter anymore, than there wouldn’t have been any furor over the position on 66 and 67. The fact is that the editorial board wrote, I don’t remember how many, four editorials or whatever it was about that. You see it the impact of the paper every time we do an investigative story and we point

You see the impact of the paper every time we do an investigative story and ... point out the failings of some government entity ...

out the failings of some government entity and so on. We wrote a series of stories a couple years ago on how the commission that's supposed to keep track of teachers with problems wasn't doing its job very well. The next year the legislature passed 13 laws changing the role of that board and the enforcement of teachers who had problems in one district to make sure they don't get hired by another district, and that sort of things. Some of these were bad problems, like criminal problems, not just they weren't a very good teachers. In the last few months our reporting on the energy tax credits that the state had in place resulted in the program being changed because they were giving away so much and getting so little in return. The paper's work clearly still has impact, and our advertisers would tell you that their ads work. If they're trying to sell something, whatever something might be, an ad in *The Oregonian* drives traffic. There's no question about that. All of that adds up to saying, "Yeah, this is a difficult time, and a troubled time for us, but as a part of society or as a piece of the fabric of Oregon, we still have tremendous influence."

BL: *It seems like one thing newspapers need to do now more than ever, is to have a monopoly on information, because information has become so accessible. Whereas people would at one point buy a newspaper and get all their news from that one source, now they get it anywhere online at the touch of a button. So it creates a stronger emphasis on localized news, which is more specific to an area. Is that true for The Oregonian? Have you tried to shift coverage to more a local angle? Have you attempted to change coverage at all?*

PB: We've always been a local regional newspaper. We've never had any ambition or desire or inclination to be a national newspaper. We dabble in things as they present themselves that are local stories that turn into national stories, such as when the INS was detaining people here in Portland coming in from Asia at an extraordinary rate. That led us to some reporting that led us to more reporting that led us to more reporting that ended up being a nationwide project that ended up winning a Pulitzer Prize. But our inclination always has been to what matters to our readers, the people who live here.

I do think the future of newspapers does reside with what we call local/local, or hyperlocal, or any number of terms for it, news. And you're right, there are limitless sites and places to go for local news, but arguably the best place to go for veri-

fied, accurate, fair, complete news of local communities, is the local newspaper. Whether you're in Portland, Oregon or Portland, Maine, that's going to be the case. Because so many of the sources out there, while they may be interesting or useful, come with a very, very strong point of view, because the person who's writing the blog is on one side of the issue, or one aspect of the issue, or whatever the case might be. I'm not going to say they're not journalists because I think the world of journalism is a very big tent. But I think there are a lot of gradations of journalism and the local kind of news that we provide is accurate, verified information, and people can come to us and count on us for that. And that's a big part of where our future is, as well as the traditional investigative watchdog journalism that newspapers do uniquely well because we have the resources, and the time, and the ability, and the willingness to take things apart and figure out how they work or don't work as the case might be.

BL: *Speaking of investigative journalism, that's been something a lot of reporters, and people in general, have been concerned about. As newsrooms are shrinking in size due to lay-offs, there's been concern that newspapers won't give investigative reporters that three month chunk of time they need to do that one story. They'll want them to do other stories. Would you agree that investigative journalism is on the decline?*

PB: I don't think I'd use the word decline, but I think that it's a very individualistic thing from newspaper to newspaper and newsroom to newsroom. In this newsroom we've very clearly stated that investigative watchdog journalism is the heart of what we do and will continue to define us as a newspaper for people in greater Portland and the state of Oregon. That really matters to me. It really matters to us as an institution and as a news staff all the way up to and including the publisher. It's a very important part of who we are. But there's also no question that here and in many, many other newsrooms, some of them certainly worse off than we are, resources are stretched—and part of that is the internet as we talked about earlier—because that's taking a huge chunk of our resources that didn't exist 101 years ago. Part of it is just numbers. There are all these things you have to do as a newspaper every day because people expect it of you, and there are only so many bodies available. But I'm not willing to give up on investigative watchdog, accountability, whatever you want to call it, journalism,

The best place to go for verified, accurate, fair, complete news of local communities is the local newspaper.

because I think it's the heart of what we do, and I think we do it better than anybody else in that big tent of journalism and that our readers expect it of us. And we're going to deliver it. I'm not being critical of others—everybody's got their own situation and what they've got to deal with—but I also think it's a matter of will, and sometimes if you've got to sacrifice in one place in order to spend three months, as you say, to do something in another place, then my view is we figure how to get it done.

BL: *But you agree to a degree that in the industry as a whole that the emphasis on investigative journalism might be being pushed to the wayside in favor of filling the paper?*

PB: I think that's happened in some places, yes. But I also see a lot of really good investigative journalism in contests I judge, and in reading industry stuff and so on and so forth. There's still a lot of really good investigative journalism being done around the country at papers big and small.

BL: *The Oregonian laid off 37 people in February, including Margie Boule, a popular columnist. When you're forced to lay off a certain number of people, how is it decided who gets laid off?*

PB: I don't really want to get into individuals out of respect to them. They're my friends. They're my colleagues. They're people I care a great deal about, whether it's Margie or any of the 26 other newsroom journalists. [Editor's Note: *The newsroom took the greatest hit, with additional layoffs in accounting, the warehouse, and other parts of the organization.*] As you said, 37 total in the company. It was a difficult, deliberative process that obviously everybody took very seriously and tried to make the best decisions that we could. There were no good decisions to be made. I didn't know all the people on the business side that were laid off, but everybody I know that lost their jobs was a good person, a hard working professional, a fine journalist, and somebody that I care about both as a colleague and as a person. So it was a horrible, painful, difficult process, and I don't expect we'll have to do that again.

BL: *That was the first lay-off for The Oregonian?*

PB: No. There have been some small layoffs in the past in sort of targeted areas. But it was the first lay-off that I know of—the paper has been around for a 157 years, so who knows what hap-

pened in 1922—but it's the first lay-off in recent memory.

BL: *In the modern internet age of journalism?*

PB: Certainly that. I've worked here 16 and a half years and we hadn't had any prior lay-offs in the newsroom.

BL: *How much influence has the internet had on print journalism?*

PB: It's had a profound influence. It's changed the way we do our work. A newsroom like ours spends a huge amount of time working on the internet now, because that's another platform where we exist and where we're delivering news throughout the day for people, as well as taking advantage of everything the internet offers that we can't do in print, such as video, interactivity, conversations in real time with readers and all the other databases and so on and so forth, all the things we can do online that we can't do in print. The challenge I think for a newsroom like ours and for others is to keep print strong while we grow on the internet side, and frankly some newspapers around the country have not abandoned print but made it a much lower priority. In this newsroom and in this company it's still a priority and will continue to be a priority, but we're also going to aggressively grow the internet side as well.

BL: *To some degree the newspaper industry has been criticized for not embracing the internet as a feasible alternative until readership started to decline, and it's now in a race to play catch-up. Do you agree with that assessment?*

PB: I do to some degree. It's easy to criticize us and we should be criticized. We didn't embrace it perhaps as quickly as we should have. On the other hand, I don't think anybody could have anticipated the meteoric growth of the internet, the development of things like the iPhone and other things that have changed our world so dramatically. Social media and any number of other things have happened almost overnight. Not literally, but it feels like that sometimes. And what people forget—they love to pick on us because we're the old established, grey-haired, traditional media. Okay bring it on—but what they forget is that for almost any newspaper company today, 90% of our revenue, of the money that comes in the door, comes from the print newspaper and not from the internet side of things. So there are people out

There are people ... who say, "You should just abandon print and walk away from it."

there who say, “You should just abandon print and walk away from it.” We can’t do that. We’d be crazy to do that. We’d be out of business if we did that. This is still a very, very large successful financially viable company and that’s because of print. And print gives us the ability to change and the ability to adapt to circumstances as they evolve. Should we have adapted sooner? Of course. Should we have charged from the get-go on the internet? Of course. That’s easy to look back on ten years ago now and say the industry should’ve done some things differently. But, you can’t lose sight of all the economic factors that play into that as well.

BL: Charging for use on the internet is an interesting topic. The New York Times announced that in 2011 they’re going to begin a form of subscription fee for frequent users. Is The Oregonian considering a move like that?

PB: Not at the moment. I think the free model of the internet for kind of everything, to some degree, is a pervasive one and I don’t think that’s going to go away. There are places like the Times, as you mentioned, and any number of others. Mr. (Rupert) Murdoch is taking a lot of content behind pay walls on his properties in the United Kingdom, and here the Wall Street Journal site has always been a pay site, and there are a lot of specialty pay sites within newspaper sites around the country. The Milwaukee paper for example has a Green Bay Packers site. Of course, in Milwaukee and Wisconsin, the Green Bay Packers are about as big as it gets. So, it’s understandable those things are there.

But there are many theories about what would work, as to what can be tried and what would not work. I haven’t seen anything that makes me say, “Yeah, that’s it.” And I haven’t seen anybody whose views I respect saying, “Yeah, that’s it.” People are experimenting with a lot of things. Maybe it is an iTunes model. Because 10 years ago were any of us paying for music at 99 cents per song or whatever the case might be? And now people do that sort of routinely, hear a song they like and go to iTunes and download it for a small fee. So something like that is going to emerge. The question is, though, even with that, is there enough revenue available through those sites to ultimately support news gathering operations as they exist today? The consensus opinion on that at the moment seems to be probably not. So that’s a whole ‘other level of complexity that’s out there. And you factor in the huge infrastructure that a print newspaper has because of presses and papers and delivery and

ink and everything associated with that. A web site doesn’t have any of those expenses. You’ve got your machines and you’ve got your server and you’ve got your personnel cost and that’s a fraction – a small fraction— of what a newspaper costs to run. So, all that is going to be sorted out over the next decade.

BL: You mentioned earlier that maybe 10 years ago, we as a whole newspaper industry should have charged for online use. Because the industry didn’t, has that steered the industry away from doing so today because newspapers are worried their competitors who don’t charge will get their business?

PB: Yes that’s part of it. The genie’s out of the bottle. The cat’s out of the bag. Whatever cliché you want to use. Last month our website had over 3 million unique visitors. How many would we have if they had to pay \$29.99 per month to access the website? It wouldn’t be 3 million, that’s for sure. It might not be 3,000, I don’t know. So how all that gets figured out is still a very, very open question. But it’s not just a simple matter. And there are some newspapers that are doing it and feel okay about that. There are also some papers like New York *Newsday* on Long Island, which charges for access to its web site for its nonsubscribers, and the number of people who signed up for that is very, very small—120 or something like that. I don’t know what the exact number is, but it’s not very much. The model isn’t there yet, but there’s a lot of experimenting going on, and we’ll see what happens.

BL: If people are being laid off, and this is probably something that happens in a lot of newsrooms, do publishers often decide that when someone leaves they’ll just not fill their seat? Is that another form of lay-offs that The Oregonian has employed?

PB: You mean, attrition, basically?

BL: Yes, attrition.

PB: Certainly that’s a common practice in any company, whether you’re talking about the Portland police bureau, or Portland State, or a hospital.

BL: Is that something that’s going on at The Oregonian?

PB: No, not right now. Attrition is inevitable. It happens. People make life decisions. People retire. People move to different companies. People

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change careers. Whatever the case, what happens in any company happens here. But the lay-offs were part of a plan to financially stabilize the company. By all indications, that was a successful step in that specific context of financial stability.

BL: *Should there be any concern that with fewer writers there will be less content for readers?*

PB: There will still be lots of content. Yes, fewer writers means fewer people pounding the keyboard every day. But we still have a significant staff and we still have a very, very talented group of writers here. We're not having trouble filling the paper. But it's really more a qualitative issue to me than a quantitative issue. And we have freelancers that we use. Certainly on the web side of things, we invite the community to participate with us, so there are all kinds of places and ways to generate content. The key question to me is, Are we continuing to do the kind of content that has traditionally defined what this newspaper is about? And we're determined that the answer to that will be yes, and so far I think that's the case.

BL: *Have you had to cut pages out of the newspaper?*

PB: Well the paper has gotten smaller, but that's really a function of the economy, because there are fewer ads. It's not that we've had to cut pages out of the paper, it's just that there's a lot less advertising because of the current state of the world. Hopefully as the economy comes back we'll see a rebound. There are inklings of good signs now that things are starting to turn around, but we'll see. And of course the long-term pressure from the internet and all that that brings isn't going to change.

BL: *If a young person came up to you and had just begun attending college and were planning to get a journalism degree, what kind of advice would you give them?*

PB: What's interesting is that enrollment at schools of journalism and mass communication around the country has never been higher. They're at their highest level ever. Now, that includes PR. That includes advertising. That includes broadcast, as well as what you or I would probably define as traditional journalism. But the other thing about that that's good is that at those schools of journalism, they're changing their curriculums. I wasn't a journalism major, but it's not the curriculum that was being taught at journalism schools when

I graduated in the 70s. It's got big elements of multimedia in it, different forms of storytelling, as well as continuing to teach ethics and writing and reporting, the core of good journalism. So I think that's kind of encouraging because that's exactly what people are going to need to be. When I have a chance to talk to students, I say, "Yeah, there are going to be careers in journalism. They may not bear much resemblance to what my career has been or what the traditional newspaper career has been, but there are always going to be jobs and careers for people who can write and can report and can tell stories and who can convey information to people. The thing is, though, in addition to your pad and pencil, you're going to have to be equally fluent with a video camera and with a web page and with all the skills that changing ways of delivering information require. So the journalists of the future, the people who are in school now and beyond—and this will continue to evolve as the technology evolves—will have a much broader skill set than when I came out of school 35 years ago.

BL: *If we have this many people trying to get degrees in mass communication, would you recommend some of them maybe think about going along a different path?*

PB: I think if somebody has a passion for it. There's still a lot of really fine young journalists coming out of college every year, and a lot of them are getting jobs, at smaller papers, at websites, working on hyperlocal sites and communities—Yahoo, Google, all those kinds of things—but it's a very different world. And some of them aren't. Some of them are going on other directions and careers. But that's always happened. One of the editors of my college newspaper went to law school and is a lawyer in Chicago. He never practiced journalism as a job, which I thought was a shame, because he was a heck of a journalist. So, if people are passionate about it, if it's what they really want to do, if they want to write, if they want to tell stories, I wouldn't discourage them from it. I would just say, "Understand it's not going to be—If you want to be a sports writer and your goal is to get to Sports Illustrated someday, which plenty of people from my generation wanted to do, or if they want to be a foreign correspondent for the New York Times and be in India, or whatever the case might be, those kind of career paths might not be quite the same. And for that generation, the folks coming out now and in the next several years, it's unclear how long print is going to be around as we know.

So they may be writing solely for digital media, electronic media. But again, that's okay, as long as they have an outlet and a place to write where people are reading and absorbing the information and the stories that they're working on. To me what's important isn't that news on print survives. What's important to me is that the kind of journalism we do in print survives. And how it's ultimately delivered, whether it's to handheld or some great big communication device we have in our living rooms someday, or if it's into an implant in your ear, whatever, however its delivered is fine with me as long as that kind of journalism is being done.

BL: *In this new era of journalism, what medium do you believe is The Oregonian's primary competition? Do you see it as the internet? Is it other print sources, such as alternative weeklies or other newspapers?*

PB: It used to be a really easy question. The competitor was the other paper in town, or the TV stations in town. It's not an easy question anymore, because it's coming at you from infinite directions. It might be a blog over here or it might be another paper over here or it might be TV over here. It might be some new internet company that's coming into town that's trying to do aggregation or trying to do hyperlocal news. So there are myriad competitors. But I think arguably going forward, the biggest thing we're competing for is people's attention, because there's so much noise in the world of information now. There's a lesser willingness of people to sort out among the noise. They just go to where their views are being affirmed on something and they take that as truth, and they move on. They don't want to be bothered with anything else, which is not good in my opinion.

I've argued that every university ought to be teaching a media literacy course to its freshmen now, so that kids understand that there are all these different places to look, and they need to know where to look for the truth, whatever the truth might be. Or at least a fair, detailed and comprehensive description of what's going on, and then you can decide what the truth is. Because you know, who can sort out the truth on some complex social issues or international issues?

At the end of the day what we're really competing for is to be heard, more than has ever been the case, even though all the research shows that the vast, vast majority of news that exists in society, still originates with newspapers. Somebody did a study—Pew (Research Center for the People and the Press) or the Project for Excellence in Jour-

nalism—in Baltimore recently, and they found that upwards of 90% of all the news that's being disseminated in Baltimore still originated with the Baltimore Sun. Then out it went to blogs, and to TV, and to the radio, and to everything else, the internet in one fashion or another. That's the case, but the challenge for us is making sure that we're heard amid all that. And I think the way we distinguish ourselves is by staying true to what we do uniquely well and that's the kind of reporting I was talking about earlier.

BL: *I've seen a few studies done that show young people, especially, want the news to come to them. They don't want to seek it out. How do you deal with that as they grow older and become your new consumer?*

PB: That's a real challenge, and that's why we have to master quickly new technologies as they emerge, whether that's the iPad, mobile technologies, smart phones, any number of other ways. And some of which we do routinely in terms of things I never dreamed I'd be talking about, such as search engine optimization, in order to make sure the search engines grab our work and get it to the broadest audience possible. That's very much the challenge. It isn't like it was when I came into the industry, where we just did our thing and everybody knew about it, because it was us and a couple of TV stations. Now it's us and thousands of other outlets, so we've got to master the technology to be able to make sure our information is as broadly distributed as possible. We also have to be very possessive and jealous of our information to make sure we get credit for it. This routinely happens with my 24-year-old daughter, who's a very intelligent consumer of information but doesn't read the paper every day. Occasionally she'll come and we'll meet somewhere and she'll say, "Hey dad, did you hear about X?" Whatever X is. I'll sort of look at her and grumble and say it was on the front page of the paper three days ago. We broke the story. But by the time she got it, by the time it went through the filters, it was just the story. And that's why it's so important we master the technology and understand that we keep not just the story, but that it's the story being brought to you by *The Oregonian*. And I think that's one of the challenges our whole industry has. Because we are old media. That doesn't mean we're dead media, not even close to it. We're old media and we have to master new media. Of course, even new media is an old media term now, so we've got a lot of work to do going forward. **M**

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