

THE SWEET STUFF IN THE MIDDLE

Print media up to the challenge of digital competition

Clifton speaks to aspiring journalists about their future

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The future of newspapers is in the hands of students of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications — and from what Doug Clifton can see, he's not worried.

"My exposure to Newhouse students for the brief time I've been here has been extremely impressive. Everybody that I've met has been engaged, and interested and interesting," Clifton said, opening his speech.

After Clifton, editor of The Cleveland Plain Dealer, spoke of the perils of making predictions, he traced the history of how Americans receive their news, and then talked about changes in news production. When Clifton entered the business in 1970, newspaper production was ruled by typewriters, cutting, pasting, linotyping and copy boys that would run finished copy from reporters to newsrooms.

"It was hot and messy and dirty and ugly," Clifton said. "Within just a few short years, the manual typewriters got thrown out, and we got IBM Slextrics, and then they were replaced by computers. The hot type went cold."

Clifton discussed the ensuing deluge of media options, from the explosion of network news options to the advent of the Internet. While people of the students' parents' generation are adding the Internet to their newspaper usage, our generation is turning predominantly to the Internet to the exclusion of newspapers.

Clifton said there is much pessimism within the industry, along with predictions of the death of newspapers. He cites a colleague who, on the Poynter Institute Web site, predicted the year of the last newspaper publication — 2035.

"It is chilling. Well, could it be as grim as all of that? Do today's freshmen at the Newhouse School have only 15 years left in their chosen career? Will our massive printing presses become the horse and buggy of tomorrow? It's bleak, but it isn't fatal. Like the rumors of Mark Twain's death, they're exaggerated," Clifton said.

Clifton said recent studies show newspapers are still the dominant source of media for adults. Although the majority of young people chose to get their news from the Internet, Clifton said this doesn't mean the end of newspapers.

"Where do you think the Internet gets its news? Does it just appear there by magic? No, they get it from newspapers ... the burdensome and costly task of finding the news falls to newspapers," Clifton said.

Clifton said most Internet news sites get their news from newspapers and sources such as the AP Bureau, which employ reporters. Internet sites do not have the funds available to employ reporters, and newspapers do.

"What would happen if the newspapers suddenly stopped being economically viable? What happens if the newspapers go out of business?" he asked. "What would happen is the available number of reporters who are pursuing the news would diminish. The volume of news would diminish ... If newspapers went away altogether, so would AP. And so would Google and Yahoo sources of news."

While Clifton said newspapers will never completely go away, he does believe they will change out of necessity. Possible adaptations include increased cases of convergence or reciprocal alliances between print, broadcast and Internet media. A successful business model involving the Web could be another solution, but that must be accompanied by

SEE CLIFTON PAGE 14

Editor stresses continued importance of newspapers

CLIFTON

FROM PAGE 13

the appropriate technology.

Clifton said Internet distribution will only take over traditional newspapers if it becomes more efficient and easily accessible to people.

"The newspaper as we know it has clear advantages," he said. "You can leaf through it at your own speed; you can carry it with you wherever you go ... electronic newspapers depend on expensive computer ownership, high speed connection and relatively cumbersome browsability."

Clifton spoke of a colleague who is currently working on a portable electronic newspaper and said this colleague views the flat-panel notebook as "the best vehicle for reaching electronic nirvana."

Clifton said modern journalism has many hurdles to overcome: declining readership, loss of younger readers, the public's growing distrust of the media and society's declining civic engagement.

"Both voter registration and voting itself have been declining in America for decades, as has participation in civic life of all kinds," Clifton said. "That decline in civic involvement closely matches the decline in newspaper read-

ership and circulation."

He hopes as the debate over the future of media continues, journalists will be mindful of their larger purpose.

"I hope we do not lose sight of our fundamental mission, informing people in a pluralistic, democratic society ... it's part of our reason for existence," he said.

Clifton said it's up to the upcoming generation of journalists to address these concerns and reverse these trends.

"It's you folks who have the future in your hands," he said. "It's you who will decide how all of these things are going to be sorted out. You who can make a difference."

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Clifton on the fate of newspapers

Plain Dealer editor at Syracuse.

(Daily Orange)