



# The Edge of Chaos

**Wicked Problems Discussion:  
The Journalism Ecosystem in Birmingham  
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## Participants

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## Facilitators

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## Discussion questions

1. What kind of journalism is currently being carried out or provided in the Birmingham area?
2. What are some of the unmet needs of the community for local news?
3. Are the lines between opinion, advocacy and factual news clear in the Birmingham area?
4. How do we use media, traditional or new, to provide reliable sources of information?

## Discussion Themes

### →Issues:

#### Industry Trends

- Seismic shift in media industry has occurred nationwide, resulting in fewer news gatherers.
- Network TV's "reach" is declining; competitors are different.
- Not enough institutionalization.
- News is now focused on what's popular, rather than what's newsworthy.
- Much more fragmented consumer market; consumers can now create customized news stream via the internet, including social media. There have actually been a couple books written on the role of CHOICE in media viewing. The trend is toward the popular topics in a specific way- it's becoming less about the information and more about the audience.
- There is a trend towards companies hiring journalists to "create journalism" for their brand; companies can now be their own content providers, allowing them to talk directly to their audience.
- The marketing of journalism has changed and impacts how consumers find their news; *The Birmingham News* almost exists merely as a marketing tool for al.com. People tend to cite AL.com as the source for their news, not any newspaper.

#### Accuracy / Reliability

- It is very difficult to determine who the credible / reliable news sources are; even sources that try to filter out what is credible are not credible anymore; the 24-hour news cycle contributes to this problem.
- It is very difficult to get unbiased facts; the line between factual reporting and opinion has changed, and journalists now offer opinion along with the facts. Journalists need to make their processes transparent.
- Not sure young journalists are being taught HOW to get the facts. This is in part because people often don't feel comfortable confronting power, and also feel discomfort when they see power being confronted. It's also a cultural shift- we're teaching our kids it's ok to choose your media from one source, to only choose the news you want to see, to not question those in power.

#### Leadership and Ethics

- There is no advocacy in Birmingham; publishers no longer act as leaders in the community, and are often unwilling to say what's acceptable and what's not in journalism.
- We don't have actual convening of news sources anymore.
- Ethics of media coverage is troubling. Commercial entities don't serve the civic role that media outlets have historically served.
- What is the PURPOSE of journalism on our community? What is the story of the community we're trying to tell? Right now, the media tends to respond to whoever "yells the loudest".
- Anonymity of AL.com message boards is of concern socially, ethically, and economically. These message boards tend to perpetuate stereotypes, which hurts economic development and recruitment efforts. Media outlets have chosen to NOT moderate message board comments, but rather to make the economic choice to be free and open and to not discourage bad behavior.

### Unmet Needs

- In-depth / investigative reporting; many stories are just a glorified version of transcribing, with very little actual reporting.
- Political reporting; politicians aren't challenged enough or held accountable.
- Reporting of science issues, politics and environmental issues.
- Reporting of the recent Presidential election focused on poll predications, rather than the issues.
- Many community newspapers do a great job of reporting on their community, but the gap in Birmingham is with issues that span multiple communities such as transportation/ Jefferson County bankruptcy/etc.

### →Barriers:

- Difficult to get journalists "around the same table". This makes it challenging to develop solutions.
- Not sure people out in the community "get" what the issues are, or care.
- Print/web need to coexist better in how they produce a piece. How is what you're writing going to translate to video, or a web piece?

### →Resources:

- Citizen journalists and neighborhood newspapers do an excellent job; we need to "arm the citizens".
- We need to determine who / what group can convene journalists and stakeholders around this topic.
- UAB and other Universities are possible resources; there should be someone you can pick up the phone and call who is an expert.
- Use neighborhood listservs as an additional communication vehicle.
- Ushahidi- crowd sourcing media source founded by David Kobia, who is from Birmingham and went to UAB.

### →Solutions:

- This is a great time for long-form journalism since you don't have to go "by page".
- The economic model for journalism needs to be examined; do we need to look at a nonprofit model for journalism?
- We need one source to pull data together; right now there are 37 municipalities responsible for making information available digitally, but there is no one source to pull it all together. Could an institution such as UAB finesse and compile the data?
- Flobots.org.