

Harold Innis Lecture with Andrew Coyne  
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*Crisis in the Media: Causes, Consequences and Cures*

It is an honour to be asked to give the 2017 Harold Innis Lecture. An honour and, given the circumstances in which my industry now finds itself, an irony.

Among other subjects, Innis devoted much of his career to the study of the mass media. At the time, the concern was that the media had grown too powerful. Now, the concern is increasingly that the media are not powerful enough. Once, we worried the mass media had acquired too much influence, shaping our debates, our perceptions, our very ways of thinking. Now there is no less concern that the media no longer shape much of anything — and that in their weakness something vastly worse is taking their place.

Indeed it has become a commonplace that the media — and by media I mean mostly the news media, and by news media I mean mostly the newspapers, and by newspapers I mean mostly the existing “legacy” publishers... I’ll start again: it has become a commonplace that the media is in danger of disappearing altogether. Certainly it is a commonplace *in the media*. In the whole history of the world, I venture to say, there has not been a decline and fall so well advertised, so comprehensively documented and decisively bemoaned, in advance of it actually happening, and *by its prospective victims*.

Why are we in our present state? The answer is well known; or at least one version of it is.

Apparently there was this thing called *the internet*, that appeared on the horizon all at once and changed everything. *The internet* brought the marginal cost of distribution to near zero, allowing literally thousands of competitors to emerge, from well-funded startups to individual bloggers, and turning news, once the preserve of a select few with the resources not only to gather it, edit it, and print it, but to put it into readers hands every day, into a commodity.

At the same time, *the internet* has merged what were previously separate industries — print, radio, television and online — making close competitors of news outlets that might previously not have regarded each other as such. The CBC, to take one example entirely at random, is now in the publishing business, in a rather more determined way and with rather more in the way of resources than the newspaper business’s fumbling efforts to “pivot to video.”

Also erased have been the national boundaries that once defined a publication’s reach, opening the way for global brands to emerge — *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, the BBC and so on — offering not only to bring the world to Canadians, but increasingly, to bring Canada to Canadians.

With the multiplicity of new sources, audiences fragmented. But it wasn’t just a struggle for market share: the whole industry has seen a decline in audience share, at least in traditional print or broadcast form.

Worse, the advertisers on which newspapers and other media have historically relied for the bulk of their revenues have deserted them for eBay and Craigslist, Facebook and Google.

At first this was tangled up in the recession of 2009-10, until it became clear that the decline in print advertising was secular, and permanent. For a while it was imagined that the decline in print advertising would be made up by rising sales of digital ads, if not now then in time. That illusion, too, has had to be discarded. The advertisers have gone, and they're not coming back.

It's an unnerving, disorienting time to be in the business. (At *The National Post*, we like to say we work in the non-profit sector.) With the loss of revenues, we have been forced to shed staff. And as staff have been shed, the quality has suffered, paid circulation has declined, and revenues have declined further.

As I say, all this will be familiar to you. And, as I say, it is not that it is not true. It is just that it is not the whole truth.

People in our industry talk about our present dilemma as if it were something that just *happened* to us, like the weather. "Oh, well, you know, it's the internet, isn't it? It's social media. It's completely disrupted the business model." I'm inclined to think people in other industries hear this and say: "Oh really? So you say the internet killed your business model? Join the club." *Everybody's* business has been disrupted by the internet. Whole industries have been gutted; hundreds of jobs in other sectors have been lost.

We can talk all we want about the role of social media, or Google, or whatnot, but in the end it comes down to whether we offer a compelling enough product to attract and keep paying customers. And if we are honest with ourselves we will concede that too often we have not.

We ignored the Web for far too long, and then when we got wise we put out lousy web pages. Most of them seem to have been designed with no other purpose but to deter anyone from reading them: cluttered with ads, and autoplay videos, and links to other sites. When the iPad came along we put out lousy iPad apps, made not for readers but, it seems, for bored children.

We were slow to adapt our methods of news gathering to the new media. We were still looking at content through the filter of the different platforms on which it might be delivered, with separate teams for print, web and mobile. It took us ages to figure out that we needed to create it in a way that could be delivered via any platform.

We stood and watched as Craigslist and eBay took our classified business. And when it became clear that Facebook and Google were taking our display advertising we complained that this was dirty pool. But there was nothing unfair about it. The reason they are now selling the ads that we used to sell is very simple: it's because they offer a better service to advertisers.

(Thanks to their ubiquity they can offer targeted, on demand ads. Formerly, a restaurateur could place an

ad in our paper, or on our site, saying: Eat at Joe's. But Google allows him to buy an ad that reaches the person wherever they are, the minute they type in "restaurant" — hey, Joe's is just around the corner!)

And of course, we gave away all of our content for free, for years. We bet the farm on pleasing advertisers with huge numbers of online readers, just at the very moment both were leaving us. We're still doing it, even today, with "clickbait" — nonsense stories online that make us look like asses for posting them — at the price of damaging our reputation with more discerning readers. And because we were still chasing the loose fish of unpaying readers, we made ourselves vulnerable to the online aggregators and their algorithms.

Mind you, there's nothing particularly new in this. We've *never* charged the reader, at least in North America — Europe's a little different — more than a fraction of our costs, 20 or 25 per cent, relying instead on sales of advertising to cover the remainder. And, not coincidentally — can I let you in on a secret? — most newspapers have never really been much good.

We generally substituted quantity for quality, filling the paper with much more copy than would ever be read, for the quite literal purpose of "filling the spaces" between the ads. Much of what we put out was lazily written, thinly researched, and worst of all, dull. The ratio of cheap sentiment and pack-following to the fearless investigative reporting that is supposedly our *raison d'être* is not flattering to our case.

But when the newspaper was one of the very few games in town — when the choices available were one or two newspapers, a couple of television stations and whatever competition radio provided — and when advertisers didn't much care what was in between the ads so long as the ads themselves attracted eyeballs, we didn't have to be that good, frankly.

The difference is, we could get away with it then. We can't now.

So for all the challenges posed by the internet and the rise of Google and Facebook, we really cannot be allowed to overlook our own contributions to our demise. A lot of our ills are self-inflicted.

That's true, not only of the economic crisis in which we find ourselves, but also, though to a lesser extent, of a related crisis: the crisis of trust in media, and the general decline of democratic discourse to which it has contributed and from which it has suffered in turn.

This has become a subject of particular concern in the last year or two, notably with the election of Donald Trump, with the assistance of massive amounts of "fake news" — in a volume and quality unbounded by anything that might previously have restrained it, whether legal, ethical, technical or economic — much of it, as we later discovered, manufactured by Russian trolls and spread through the algorithms of social media.

Troubling as this is, I think its importance is exaggerated, at least for our present discussion. At any rate it's

far from clear what can or should be done about it. Fake news is a fact of life in the age of social media. It would be proliferating regardless of the state of the legitimate news business.

Of far greater concern, at least to me, is the climate of opinion that is so receptive to fake news. *It's the demand for fake news, not the supply, that is the real problem.* Or rather, it's the willingness of so many people, not just to believe fake news, but to disbelieve the real news — a phenomenon that was evident years before Trump came along. It is the demonstrable preference, among much of the public, for news that fits their preconceptions — not only in terms of the sources they seek out, the so-called filter bubbles, but the items they read, and the facts they believe.

Here again we should be careful. Fake news has always had a certain appeal, after all, as readers of supermarket tabloids have long known: who would not prefer to live in a world in which literally anything is possible, set beside the dull limitations of reality?

Neither is mistrust of the mainstream media an entirely new phenomenon. The media have always been mistrusted, at least some of the time, and to some extent have always been worthy of that mistrust. We get things wrong. We succumb to pack journalism. We have our biases.

To some extent, too, people have always preferred to have their own biases confirmed. Liberals have always tended to read liberal newspapers and conservatives read conservative newspapers.

What's different about the present, rather, is that this free-floating popular mistrust has been amplified, and weaponized. The internet has allowed individuals who are alienated from society, who would previously have been alone in their distemper, to connect with one another, and to solidify their convictions, and to generalize them into a broader theory .

And so a healthy skepticism about this reporter or that outlet has curdled into a blind rejectionism: a childish belief that “the media,” all of it, is engaged in a one-sided conspiracy to deceive the public, of which any story the reader does not like is taken as evidence.

This is not restricted to the media. The crisis of trust in the media is part of a much broader crisis: a crisis of trust in knowledge, in facts, in experts and expertise; a hostility, amongst a certain section of the population, to anyone who knows anything about anything. It is, as some have called it, an “epistemic crisis”: a significant section of the population has simply decided it knows what it knows, unreachable by any amount of evidence .

While there is some evidence of this in most democratic societies, it is not coincidental that it has found its worst expression in the United States, a nation that over the last two decades has undergone a series of extraordinary traumas — 9/11, the Iraq war, Katrina, the housing market collapse and financial crisis. Rightly or wrongly, these have tended to discredit experts, and expertise, among much of the public.

This generalized mistrust of experts has fused with the existing social divisions over cultural change and identity politics to create a kind of class war: class, defined not by money or birth but by education and

culture — and geography. There is, among a certain segment of the public — less educated, rural, more conservative — a boiling resentment at their “betters,” the urban, cosmopolitan elites and their emissaries in the liberal media, who have, they feel, been looking down their noses at them all these years, and worse, shoving their cultural agenda down their throats — and increasingly, suppressing their right to protest about it.

There is, it should be said, a large element of truth in this. That condescension is real. The media does tilt left, and political correctness is a thing. So there’s plenty of fault on both sides.

But the answer to identity politics on the left is not identity politics for white males. The alternative to PC stifling of free speech is not just to say whatever nasty or intemperate thing enters your head. And the response to urban elite snobbery cannot be populist know-nothingism.

Like many isms, populism has its more benign forms — who’s against listening to the people? — and its more malign. For who and what constitutes “the people” can quickly become a matter of sorting out friends and enemies, Us and Them. That’s toxic enough when the Them are of the traditional kind: Big Business, Big Labour, the rich, and so on. It’s especially disturbing when it merges with nationalism, targeting immigrants, Muslims, foreigners of all kinds.

But it’s positively suicidal when the Them becomes, as it has with Trump and his followers, people who know stuff. His contempt for the media is mirrored in contempt for experts of all kinds: economists — hence the rejection of free trade — or scientists — hence the dismissal of climate change — or foreign policy — hence the rejection of NATO — and so on: *rejected not in spite of their expertise, but because of it.*

And the worse he behaves, the stupider the things he says, the more that people like me denounce him, the more solidified a certain section of his support becomes: if the “liberal media” are against him — a term that now embraces every serious organ of conservative thought in America — he must be doing something right.

This way madness lies. Conservatism has a long and honourable tradition of skepticism about intellectuals. But in the past this was directed not at science, but scientism: that exaggerated sense of what it is possible to know, and in particular that vast overconfidence in the ability of intellectuals to redesign society to their tastes, so terribly familiar in the twentieth century. That’s very different than today’s populists.

But that only begins to capture the intellectual anarchy in which we are now enveloped.

On the one hand, we are witnessing a quite unprecedented assault on freedom of speech, not only on campuses but in a general narrowing of the bounds of acceptable opinion, especially on issues of identity. Yet on the other hand there has never been more genuinely offensive and vile speech freely available and

easily proliferated: speech that really does qualify for the labels — racist, sexist etc — too easily tossed at others.

The post-modernism of the radical left has found its match in the post-truth cynicism of the populist right; yet even as each promotes a radical uncertainty about what is true, each remains fanatically certain of its own truths. Each, what is more, feeds off the other; each justifies its own excesses as a reaction to the other's; each makes its own contribution to undermining our ability to reason together, or even to talk to each other.

It's too simple to blame this on the decline of the traditional media; but neither is it disconnected from it. Better to say that both are the product of the same disruption of traditional modes of debate and consensus-forming brought about by the new media technology.

Once, in order to publish and propagate a point of view, a writer would have to have access, not just to a printing press, but to a means of distributing what was printed. That meant persuading editors and publishers and bookstores and newsstands and so on of its merits — not that it was necessarily true or right, but that it was an opinion that could fairly be held by a reasonable person. Part of that enterprise consisted of observing norms of civility and responsible debate.

In short the media, or intellectuals generally, played a kind of gatekeeper function. They made space for disagreement, and yet set boundaries around it, together defining those matters on which “reasonable people could differ.” Certainly this power was open to abuse: the boundaries had neither to be set too narrow, so as to exclude legitimate differences of opinion, nor too broad, so as to put crackpot theories on the same plane as real knowledge. But so long as there were multiple media outlets this was to some extent resolved: to the extent that any outlet fell short they could be judged accordingly.

For good or ill, all that has been upended — again, when anyone can be a publisher, without the obligation to maintain an ongoing business based on reader trust, careful editing etc. To be sure, a much broader range of voices and opinions are now able to reach an audience; what might once have been a suffocating consensus among elite opinion is now properly subject to criticism and dissent. But it has also opened the floodgates to every crank and conspiracy theorist, even as legitimate opinions are being suppressed and intimidated by online mobbing.

So it's a bit of a mixed bag, epistemologically speaking.

Somehow we have to rebuild a sense of consensus out of the intellectual chaos of the present — consensus, not on what we believe, but how we come to believe it. More particularly, we will need to rebuild what might be called the hierarchy of consensus: the pyramid of expertise on which each of us must rely if we are to navigate the world in an intelligent way.

I have only the most fragmentary notions how. One part, surely, is to call off the class war. This is incumbent on all parties, but especially on the right. Conservatism simply must break with the politics of know-nothingism. In the wake of Charlottesville, with the full realization of what kind of depravity this

was leading to, that process has perhaps begun.

Intellectuals and experts, for their part, will have to engage with the public more to re-establish their bona fides. It will not be good enough simply to flash their credentials, on the strength of their peer-reviewed publications. The good news is that this is happening. Popular debate has been greatly enriched in recent years by the willingness of academics — professors of economics, political science, international affairs and so on — to share their expertise on forums like Twitter, where it influences journalists in particular.

But yes, one part of it is also a healthy and vibrant professional media, and its traditional virtues: of careful reporting, judicious editing, reputational investment and so on. I just don't want to oversell this. The entire legacy media could be miraculously restored to health overnight, and it would never regain the kind of power it once held. The social media genie cannot be put back in the bottle. We can, however, set standards by our own conduct that others might at least be compared to.

Which brings us back to the question of how, if at all, the media might be restored to health — and, inevitably, to whether some sort of public policy response — money, in other words — might be appropriate.

Let's be clear about one thing off the top. The mere fact that we are in such trouble is not in itself an argument for subsidy. If anything it argues against it. As an industry we have made every mistake it is possible to make, sometimes twice. Bailing us out amounts, not just to forgiving our mistakes, but rewarding us for them.

Avoiding that outcome will require us to resist the many ingenious appeals our industry has already devised to pressure politicians and sucker the public.

Of these the simplest and most popular is the democracy dodge. The industry's present straits are presented as a threat, not to the profits of its owners or the salaries of its employees, but to Democracy itself. Without a well-informed public, so the argument runs, democracy itself is at risk. Therefore: save newspapers, save democracy.

But there never was such a thing as a well-informed public. Some people choose to be well-informed; most do not. That has always been the case. And it probably always will be. Somehow democracy survives.

Certainly it's not going to change just because the government decides to subsidize a few failing newspapers, for one very simple reason: you can force people to pay for news, but you can't force them to read it. The majority who do not wish to be well-informed will be just as uninterested in our journalism, whether the government pays us to provide them with it or not.

So let's be clear about a second thing. Absolutely nothing is preventing readers from paying for what we produce, if they so chose. They are simply choosing not to do so.

This is not a case of market failure, in other words, but of industry failure. The market is accurately reflecting a harsh but inescapable truth: people do not value the thing we are selling at a price sufficient to cover its costs.

What do I mean by market failure — the kind that justifies public intervention? If there were something preventing consumers from paying — if it were impossible, for some reason, to charge them for our services. There's a name for goods or services for which it is impossible to restrict the benefits to those who pay, or to exclude from benefiting those who do not pay. They're called public goods.

National defence is the classic example: I get the benefit of being defended, even if I don't pay, as long as you do. As such, public goods have to be paid for with taxes. Otherwise chisellers like me would 'free ride' on upstanding people like you. Enough of us chisellers, and not enough of the good would be provided..

Is news a public good? People have tried to make that claim, which I'll get to in a second. But first let me note that the burden of proof is very much on them. .

Even if some putative claim might be made out, it runs into another problem: lots of other claims for public funds can be made, and are, on exactly the same grounds. And resources are inescapably finite. The public money spent keeping newspapers in business is money that will not be spent on literacy programs, or health care or any number of pressing social purposes.

One way to argue that news is a public good is to suggest that the rewards for one newspaper's reporting cannot be restricted to that paper. Newspaper A publishes a scoop, the result of months of investigative work, and immediately its competitors rush to publish the same story, essentially negating any competitive advantage it might have gained. And Newspaper A in its turn does the same to its competitors. So nobody does any reporting.

It's a persuasive-sounding story. It just doesn't conform to actual observation. The more typical responses when a competitor has a big scoop are to a) ignore it altogether, b) match it, but bury it on page 39, or c) actively discredit it. We do so because in fact scoops do pay: the paper that consistently breaks big stories reaps the reputational gain of being a "newsy" paper, the paper that gets talked about, the paper people want to read.

Sometimes the comparison is made between news and basic research: the kind that private businesses can't reap the gain from, because there is no immediate commercial application, but from which commercial applications might later be derived. But there's a fundamental difference between the two.

Science is contentious enough, but there's at least some consensus on what it is scientists do: the scientific method, peer review, the replicability of results, and so on. In journalism, by contrast, *everything* is contested ground. What's a news organization? Who's a journalist? What's news? How should it be

covered? What's true? What's false? To say nothing about differences of political opinion.

And if public funds are to be distributed, that means someone, somewhere, has to be deciding these questions. They have to decide who to give money to, and on what criterion. This brings the government, inevitably, into areas into which it has no business intruding.

Which brings me to my second broad argument against public subsidy: not just that subsidy of the news industry is unnecessary — but that it is, and would be, harmful.

It might have been one thing when the media universe was confined to a handful of newspapers, or three or four television networks, or a few dozen radio stations. But that world is gone.

The business of journalism cannot now be meaningfully defined without reference to hundreds, indeed thousands of online outlets. You can't possibly subsidize all of them.

But you can't have the government picking and choosing, either. The minute you exclude one outlet in favour of another, you involve the government in deciding who should succeed and who should fail — and, inevitably, which points of view should.

The issue here isn't necessarily that this power would be abused in partisan terms, that those who supported the government would be favoured over those who opposed it. It's that any criterion would be applied.

So we would give subsidies, as News Media Canada, the newspaper publishers lobby, has argued, to "proper" newspapers, but not to the scrappy little online startups that are the future of the industry? To *The Toronto Star*, but not *Buzzfeed*? Or maybe we say they have to be a certain size: so *Buzzfeed*, but not *CanadaLand*?

Or let's really get into it — what I call the Ezra Test: Ezra Levant, that is, and his notorious website, *The Rebel*. Inflammatory, inaccurate, prejudicial, *The Rebel* is, most would agree, peddling propaganda, not journalism. And yet many others would insist it is the only place to find real news, that everyone else in the "mainstream media" is peddling propaganda.

Of course it's inconceivable that the government would subsidize *The Rebel*. But it's equally inconceivable that the government would not do so, while subsidizing others.

Because unless you're prepared to subsidize Ezra along with everybody else — Ezra, and others, even worse — you're still giving government the power to decide who's a journalist, or at least who's an acceptable journalist. That's a power it should never have, in a free society. *If the government can't subsidize everyone, it shouldn't subsidize anyone.*

But then, the real threat would not be state selection, but self-selection. I worry less about the impact of subsidy on those who did not receive it as on those who did: how it would change *us* — the things we thought to cover, the attitudes we brought to it.

To take an example completely at random, how could we ever again attack bailouts for Bombardier, or subsidies for the auto sector, if our own industry had just been the recipient of the same? But of course over time it would not even occur to us.

The minute we started taking the public dime, we would do as every other recipient does: we would come to feel entitled to it. We would forget that anyone had ever written a word without forcing others to pay for it.

Maybe some would resist taking the money, for a while. But they would be at a competitive disadvantage relative to those who did.

Over time this benevolence would extend outward, to other industries. Overt political influence would not be the danger, so much as a general inclination to look with favour on the state, and on state sponsorship, as the natural order of things.

We would see our own beneficiary relationship with the state, not as confirmation of our failure to offer readers a product worth the money we were asking of them, but as evidence of our superior worth. And we would come to regard ourselves, not as humble hacks trying to earn a few minutes of the readers' time — the only basis of good writing — but as a public service, with a sacred duty to bore the pants off them.

I am of course aware that government support is not unknown in the Canadian media, from subsidies to the magazine industry to the CBC's annual parliamentary grant to the restrictions on foreign ownership. I hardly think this makes the argument for more of it: that what is now the exception should be the rule.

Neither are the results of this regime an unalloyed triumph. The chief effect of restrictions on foreign ownership has been to make the Canadian media more concentrated, and yet more vulnerable, because thinly capitalized, than it would otherwise have been. The CBC's subsidy, now that it is a publisher as well as a broadcaster, has enabled it to poach staff and advertising revenues from private publishers, to their increasing dismay.

And the Canadian magazine industry! As an argument in favour of subsidy? An industry so dedicated to excellence that it hands out literally hundreds of awards for it, every year.

The premise, in short, that subsidy equals quality journalism, is a flawed one. You are either writing to be read, or you are wasting your time. And nothing focuses the mind more on the reader than the necessity of separating him from his hard-earned money. It is what keeps us from becoming precious and self-involved. Well, it's what keeps us from becoming even *more* precious and self-involved.

I've no idea whether the newspaper industry will survive. But I know in my bones what would kill it, forever. If we must go, let us at least go out with a little dignity, and not as mewling supplicants for government grants.

But then, I don't really think we're going anywhere. And this is my final point: the news of our death is, as they say, greatly exaggerated. (I recommend Professor Marc Edge's book of that title on the Canadian news industry, which has influenced my thinking.)

Arguments for subsidy that ask us, as in the words of the recent Public Policy Forum report, *The Shattered Mirror*, to "imagine a world with no news" or that suggest the industry is about to disappear, and democracy with it, are menacing you, in H L Mencken's phrase, with hobgoblins.

What's really going on is not the collapse of the industry so much as its transformation: from print to digital, yes, but more importantly from advertising finance to reader finance. We aren't going their willingly. But the advertisers having deserted us, some in the business have realized they haven't much choice.

Already we can see evidence of it starting to pay off at the top end: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, all report soaring subscription numbers even as they tighten their paywalls. Newer titles, too, are springing up, with much lower costs and overhead: *The Athletic*, *The Information* etc. A couple of years ago, I might have been in more despair. But now I can see a future for this beat-up old business.

That is the the great migration the industry is on. Not all or even most of the established players will survive the trek. Probably fewer of us will be employed in the business. But the ones who make it into that subscriber-based future may find themselves in a much healthier industry than today. Advertisers are fickle. Readers are (comparatively) loyal. Advertisers don't care much about quality or content. Readers do.

I don't say it will be easy. To persuade people to pay for something they have been used to getting for free is always tough. But the very worst way to encourage the industry to make that difficult transition is to bail it out.

My optimism on this point is hardly starry-eyed. I'll say it again: there has only ever been a minority of people who read anything. And there has only ever been a minority of them who read anything good. But that minority of a minority — who want to be well-informed and who value good journalism — has always existed, and will always exist. And so far as they want to be well-informed they'll be willing to pay for it.

We don't have to completely guess at this: much the same sorting has already happened in television. In some ways TV has never been worse — all those reality shows and talent competitions — and in some

ways it has never been better: as it has often been remarked, with shows like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, TV is in something of a golden age. And it's no accident where you see each: the garbage tends to be on "free" TV — the traditional, advertising-financed networks — and the good stuff is on pay: HBO, AMC, Netflix and so on. A paying audience is a demanding audience, and a discerning one.

It took a while to get people used to paying for TV. It will take a while to get people used to paying for news. But the evidence shows people will pay for quality. The only question is whether we will provide them with it.

For all the turmoil the industry is in, for consumers of news this, too, is a golden age. It's not just the quantity. The quality is in many cases better. Not only are the new titles and new media bringing fresher, sharper perspectives, but the established media are raising their game.

One thing we have been relearning of late is that there is no substitute for professional journalists doing the job they've been trained to do. It wasn't social media that broke the Mike Duffy-Nigel Wright story. It was a veteran working reporter. And in the States, you have the brilliant reporting driven by Trump.

Some things, that is, are constants.

I remember an earlier epoch of revolutionary technological change, during the first Gulf War, widely said to mark the arrival of CNN and all-news television as a force. Like everyone else, I watched, goggle-eyed, for eight or ten hours a day. And at the end of each day I remember thinking, "I can hardly wait to read the paper tomorrow, so I can find out what happened."

Whatever else changes, certain things remain constants. One of these is time, and the processing speed of the human brain. It takes time for us to fit events together into some sort of intelligible whole. The other is narrative. The desire to have someone tell us a story is as old as human language. Sometimes we just want to leave the driving to someone else. "Tell us a story."

This, too, is a constant. And yet, the writer's maxim — *do not waste the reader's time* — has never been more pressing. Because the reader has never had more alternative ways to spend it than on your precious prose. As my old boss at *The Globe and Mail*, Bill Thorsell, used to say, "we're not in the business of selling you newspapers. We're in the business of buying your time."

And if we're going to persuade them to spend time with us, we'd better make it worth their while.

I've come to the view that much of what we value in a writer is what we value in a friend. Who do we like to hang out with? People who treat us with respect. People who interest us. People we can have serious conversations with, without being too serious. People who make us laugh, without always being flippant. But we're really not likely to spend time with people who shout at us, or lecture us, or who are always angry.

We need to make it a pleasure to read us. I say again: a pleasure. Not a duty.

But there's another sense in which reading is, or ought to be a pleasure: I mean in a physical sense. Reading is, after all, a physical experience, as much as an intellectual one. When we sit down to read, what do we do? We look for a comfortable chair. We get a good reading light. We pour a cup of coffee. It's a physical experience.

Reading the printed page is a pleasurable experience. It's a remarkable ergonomic device. By contrast, it's really not very pleasant to read on a computer.

But it's a lot better on a tablet. Part of it is the form factor: the whole lean-back versus lean-forward thing. But a lot of it has to do, I think, with something else: instantaneous page-loads.

I am now a subscriber, in addition to *The National Post*, to *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Financial Times* — papers I never used to subscribe to: because I didn't want stacks of newspapers cluttering up my house, and because I didn't want to squint at a computer screen.

But here's what happens when I read them on my iPad. I start to browse through them, the way you do a print newspaper or magazine. Because I don't have to wait for the pages to load.

And having spent that time with them, I say to myself: Okay, I'm willing to pay for that.

I know tablets are out of fashion at the moment. But that's with the crappy tablets we have today. Imagine how much better they're going to be in three, four, five years. And as they get bigger, thinner, lighter, with longer battery life and better displays — they'll be foldable before long — they're going to acquire more and more of the virtues of the printed page. And I think we're going to find people are willing to pay for that experience.

So I think better technology is one key to getting people to pay. But the key — I wish it were more complicated than this — is writing better stuff. People — some people at least — will pay for the good stuff: the writing that keeps them hooked, the writing they can't live without. They may not pay for stuff they can take or leave.

But think what it will mean if we can pull it off — if we can be in the business of selling content to readers, rather than readers to advertisers.

That really would be a golden age.