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News Media Outlook 2016: The Dimension Behind the Façade

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About the Author

Earl J. Wilkinson is executive director and CEO of the International News Media Association (INMA). During his 26-year career with INMA, Wilkinson has written books and reports related to the future of media, marketing, and the strategic outlook for the media industry – notably the annual News Media Outlook report. The Texas native is the author of The Earl Blog at INMA.org, as well as a frequent speaker at media industry conferences worldwide. For INMA, he has visited more than 400 media companies in 55 countries. His views on where newspapers, magazines, and digital pure-plays fit into the new media landscape are sought after by the world’s leading media companies. He is widely quoted in trade magazines, newspapers, and industry Web sites.



The International News Media Association (INMA) is a global community of market-leading news media companies reinventing how they engage audiences and grow revenue in a multi-media environment. The INMA community consists of 7,000+ executives at 600+ news media companies 80+ countries. Headquartered in Dallas, INMA has offices in San Salvador, São Paulo, Antwerp, and New Delhi.

Foreword

Every year for the past 15 years, I have been charged with trying to capture in a single report the health, well-being, and direction of the news media industry — I suppose, by today’s lexicon, the *legacy* part of that ecosystem.

While I rely on data and external sources, the vast majority of my outlook comes from what I’m exposed to. In the past year, my interactions have been disproportionately influenced by what’s happening in Silicon Valley, New York, and London. They are conversations, interviews, and speeches — some on the record, some off the record.



A five-day INMA study tour of Silicon Valley and San Francisco included a stop at Twitter. Much of the Outlook report comes from what is happening in Silicon Valley, New York, and London.

To be blunt, I worry a lot these days:

- About the next big economic downturn. What we have witnessed the past two years is in the context of a generally good economic environment. My goodness, how will media perform in the next global downturn?
- About whether there is a consistent enough sense of urgency to change, transform, and re-think business models below the ranks of the Top 5 executives at most media companies.
- That there is too much time spent on extending the print runway and not enough time on actually making local media work.
- That there is a disproportionate number of companies under a debt burden so onerous that something is about to pop.
- About the spillover effects, industry-wide, when bad business decisions by one company — having nothing to do with transformation — affect perceptions of all companies within the media sector.
- About the number of executives at news media companies that don't receive in-career training and have few connections to our industry.
- About the lack of highly qualified young people coming into legacy media companies and not being fast-tracked to management positions.
- That media companies don't pool resources enough to tackle many of the issues related to transformation.

I worry that INMA is not doing a good enough job of surfacing the stories from our international membership network that push back against some of these concerns. I worry whether we are connecting with members and making a big enough difference.

Worry can be a good thing. This is not a complacent era. In this report, I aim to channel these worries into some kind of grand vision of where things are going and which companies are doing standout work in a few priority areas.

Most readers of this report are going through what seems like a perpetual mid-life career pivot as we un-learn the exclusivity of the print business model and learn the multi-headed Hydra of media companies barreling toward a future of infinite information at infinite speed.

Yet I sense throughout the INMA network a need to slow down and circle back. We continue to add, add, add — even as our business slows down or shrinks. 2016 feels like the year to optimise what we have spent seven years adding.

The business of transforming takes incredible leadership to create space within the company and focus by management — not just to lay out a vision, but to circle back on the operational details to make that happen.

That is not a particularly sexy lead to the story. Yet it is where we are in 2016.

I am passionate about journalism and its centrality to functioning democratic societies — now more than ever — in an ecosystem that desperately needs signals amid the noise. And I believe fervently that whatever technological twists lie ahead, we have at our fingertips the puzzle pieces to create audiences and revenue to fund that journalism at a very high level — in print, in digital, in whatever format comes next.

We just need to step back from time to time and see the broader canvas. That's what I intend to do with this report.



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