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Journalists not dying, just changing

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The ever-evolving journalist

By Sara Cody

As a journalism major in my final semester, I often find myself confronted with a lot of pessimism regarding my career choice. According to statistics published in the New York Times from the Audit Bureau of Circulations on Oct. 27, 2009, 21 out of the 24 major newspapers reported a significant decline in the number of paid circulation of newspaper subscriptions, some as much as almost 26 percent.

Two of the remaining three newspapers reported an increase due to their competitors folding, and the last newspaper, The Wall Street Journal, has a loyal online following that requires a paid subscription. I can't tell you how many times I have heard about the so-called impending doom of journalism, whether in my classes or by the media itself.

But I can't help but disagree. As an aspiring science writer, I know more about Darwin and the theory of evolution than what is probably socially acceptable. And while I don't condone anthropomorphizing Darwin's theory of natural selection (social Darwinism and eugenics, anyone?), but I can't help but think of certain aspects of evolution, particularly the Red Queen hypothesis and apply it to what the field of journalism seems to be experiencing these days.

Natural selection, in regards to biological evolution, refers to how nature tends to favor organisms with traits that are best suited to a particular environment. This is the basis for evolutionary change. Over time, the population will exhibit these traits once the organisms with the less-favorable traits die off. This, in a very basic nutshell, is how evolution happens.

In 1973, evolutionary biologist L. Van Valen came up with the Red Queen Hypothesis, which is based off of a quote from Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking Glass." The Red Queen tells Alice, "It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!" Van Valen thought this was a great example that explains the evolutionary arms race she was witnessing as an evolutionary biologist. The quote explains how when a fox evolves to run faster, the rabbit it hunts must evolve in turn to run at least twice as fast, or face extinction.

Journalism is evolving. There is no question about this. In all of my classes, I have heard about journalism going digital and the big race to create a web presence. Print media seems to be on the endangered species list. Readers have opened their eyes to the different ways of consuming news. From RSS feeds to podcasts to subscribing to newspapers via Amazon Kindles, the most popular forms of news distribution have changed dramatically in the past decade.

The key thing I'm trying to point out here is that journalism is not dying. There will always be a need to know what exactly is going on in the world. The only thing that is in danger of dying out is the print medium by which we distribute it. The advent of the Internet has brought with it revolutionary ways to consume the news.

As journalists, we need to recognize that our environment is changing. Therefore we need to change with it as per the Red Queen Hypothesis. As students in college studying journalism right now, we have an advantage to learn about all of the different methods people are using to deliver the news. We need to foster the skills, or traits, if you will, to think outside the proverbial box and brainstorm different techniques to present the news.

Video, blogs and social media like Facebook and Twitter have become so integrated in our daily lives that these outlets tend to be overlooked as viable news sources. As journalism students, we shouldn't be afraid to experiment with the Internet and learn multimedia. This is how we will survive in this ever-changing field of journalism.

From my experience, journalists seem to possess an innate curiosity, much like scientists. It's important to maintain this mentality, even when you graduate from the classroom. As a journalist you are a student of the world, and you should never stop exploring. Especially when it comes to the most effective way of delivering the news.

Print journalism is the common ancestor from which multimedia journalism descended. But in today's world, multimedia journalism is proving to be the fittest contender. Like the fox, the Internet has evolved to make delivery of news and information much faster and more efficient. Journalists in turn need to evolve to be twice as efficient in order to outsmart the fox. But as long as you evolve and develop the multiplatform traits needed to survive as a journalist, your career won't go extinct.