

Consider me somewhat skeptical of the arguments, [well-presented by Jayni](#), that *The New York Times'* killing of the Green blog will somehow enhance the paper's environmental coverage. It reminds me a little of the attempts of law schools to teach ethics not with a specific class but with the suffusion method: it's an easy way to avoid doing what you don't want to do. And there are grounds for a strong suspicion as to why the Times no longer wants to run the blog or pay the reporters to cover these issues: there isn't any money in it. As Jayni observes, the paper is happy to run blogs on the Red Carpet and automobiles.

This isn't pure cheapness on the Times' part. Even the nation's Paper of Record is staring at its own fiscal cliff. Consider the following graph, [assembled by economics professor Mark Perry](#):



Media critic Jay Rosen points out that the advertising peak came when blogging software became available, but I don't think that that is it. It's that the internet so vastly expanded the media universe that the advertising money has so many other places to go.

This collapse in newspaper sustainability should really worry anyone committed to democracy: simply put, newspapers generate information necessary to governance and progress (however you want to define the latter term). Without them, meaningful public participation is really impossible.

What to do? Many have proposed that newspapers — which are generally for-profit entities — [should start seeking philanthropic dollars](#). That's tricky, because it is hard for foundations to give grants to for-profits. In any event, the green shoots (so to speak) of strong non-profit journalism are emerging, with entities such as ProPublica, the Center for Public Integrity, or the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. It seems to me, however, that one is looking for the natural locus of unifying philanthropic dollars with serious journalism, there is one place to go: the university.

In many ways, serious journalism and serious scholarship are two sides of the same coin. They both exist to produce knowledge. To say this in an academic audience is akin to heresy: if a stuck-up academic wants to insult someone, he or she will call their efforts "journalism." And of course there are differences. Academic scholarship will try to put information in a theoretical framework that can explain and predict events and advance new hypotheses. Journalism generally doesn't do that; it is generally more at home in the relentless acquisition of facts (when it is doing its job, of course).

But one can easily over-emphasize these differences, and most academics do, because of the need to justify our position and professional prestige. Many scholarly articles — particularly from law professors — rely heavily on journalistic accounts of the world. To the extent that we are assembling our own facts, we really *are* doing journalism — *and there is nothing whatever wrong with that*. Think of scholars such as Sudhir Venkatesh, Elijah Anderson, or Theda Skocpol as outstanding instances. Conversely, the best journalism takes a theoretically informed approach and then tries to identify broader patterns and causal connections that mere fact-gathering will not reveal. Nicholas Lemann, Elizabeth Kolbert, and James Fallows come to mind as outstanding examples.

Journalism embedded within a university not only dovetails nicely with the scholarly mission but also has some promise for creating better journalism and better scholarship. By working together, academics can generate a set of good questions that need to be answered in order to understand social reality, and journalists can provide the sort of rich factual basis to determine whether these theories have purchase as well as generating new theoretical questions. Nowhere would this work better in my view than in the environmental field, which often involves complex scientific questions but meta-question about what the science actually *means*.

Already, some universities are beginning to pioneer the new approach. There's the [New England Center for Investigative Reporting at Boston University](#), Chuck Lewis's [Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University](#), and the [Schuster Institute](#) at Brandeis. In education journalism, Columbia houses the [Hechinger Report](#), which is a sort of pro publica for schools coverage.

The Times' decision to de-emphasize environmental coverage is just the sort of prod to bring this new thinking to environmental centers in universities. The old expression about the weather is that everyone complains about it but no one does anything about it. The same must be said for reporting on the environment. And that is even more true because so much environmental reporting is now *about* the weather. The time is now to get out of the box and embrace the new challenges posed by the radical restructuring of American journalism.