

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2020

OTM

ON THE LEVEL

A Rider's
Take on the
New BMW

F 900

XR



THE STATE OF MOTO-JOURNALISM

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So far this year, 2020 has been a real kick in the teeth, what with a major pandemic killing masses of people and all of the associated personal and economic destruction that's followed. Perhaps no industry is in as much flux right now as traditional print media, and journalism in particular.

I've been a moto-journalist since 2003 and have over 165 articles published in national and international motorcycle magazines, including *On The Level*. Nearly all of the "newsstand" magazines I've been writing for have disappeared this year. *Motorcycle Consumer News*, in print since 1969 (and for whom I've been writing since 2004) folded in February. *American Iron* (where I've been published a few times) recently ceased publication after 31 years. Last year, the print edition of *Motorcyclist* magazine disappeared after over 100 years

in publication. Even the mighty *Cycle World* got chopped down to quarterly editions instead of monthly. I could go on, but you get the point.

What does this mean for enthusiastic riders, for manufacturers of motorcycles and related goods, and for the industry as a whole? I would argue that the effects for all of these stakeholders are almost entirely negative.

Some riders appreciate doing a thorough investigation before parting with their hard-earned money for bikes, gear, and accessories. Where exactly is this research going to come from now? From experienced journalists who truly put a product through its paces over thousands of miles and multiple seasons and then report as objectively as they can about the results? Or from bloggers who are on a quid-pro-quo model of getting free product in exchange for flashy, glowing reviews? Does anyone else notice (or care)

that so much "reporting" today reads like a thinly veiled regurgitation of a given product's press release? Now you know why...

The days of an editor insulating the reviewer from the manufacturer of the goods, holding the reviewer's feet to the fire for the quality of her work, and returning or donating the product when finished to prevent a conflict of interest—the model I became accustomed to in writing for *Motorcycle Consumer News*—is long gone. Today, it's quite literally a virtual free-for-all and the old walls separating advertising from reviewing from editorializing have been obliterated. And we're all the worse off for it.

Riders are worse off because the media sources they trusted have vanished. Everything is going to get a great review when the only criteria is the reviewer getting "free stuff." Manufacturers are worse off too, because without a demanding press corps, the standards they aim for are inevitably lower. And journalists are worse off when people are conditioned to expect content for free.

That's not to say all digital content providers are bad. Not at all! I rather enjoy some of them, but there's something that should fundamentally disturb everyone about the prevailing concept that quality content should be free. There is no free lunch! What is sold down the river for "free content" are standards, integrity, and in many cases an honest appraisal of the product.

Of course, there will be those that cavalierly dismiss all of this as the rantings of a failed business. They will say that print media, as well as journalism, deserve to fail because they could not survive in the market. I posit that they couldn't survive because too few readers understand exactly what they're trading off in the long term. Readers en masse are in the process of transitioning to a steady diet of proverbial junk food that tastes good in the short term, without thinking about the stomachache that's inevitably going to follow. Alas, the latest casualties are print magazines that motorcycle enthusiasts have cherished for generations. I think that is surely something to lament.

