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Newspapers Under Siege

Ethics on the Firing Line

By

Tim J. McGuire

The newspaper industry has been a lot like a gossip victim the past few years. First, people whispered forecasts of gloom behind the industry's back. Then the hints of doom became louder and more obvious. Now, it seems as if no one is reluctant to shout from rooftops that the newspaper industry is dying and there is nothing that can be done.

The magazine, *The Week*, published a full page of angst entitled "The Decline of the American Newspaper." *The Economist* avoided subtlety completely last year when its cover impolitely inquired, "Who Killed the Newspaper?"

Critics lament declining circulation and a dramatic loss of advertising, especially classified ads. They scold the newspaper industry for an assortment of sins, including the failure to recognize the digital revolution, journalistic self-indulgence, greedy harvesting of profits, and arrogance.

The circulation declines are undeniable. Some metropolitan newspapers have lost 10 percent of their circulation in the last three years. Classified revenues at some big newspapers are off by \$50 million to \$100 million in the same period. Layoffs and newshole reductions are breathtaking. Short-sighted corporations are trying to cut their way to better profit margins.

The bad news is clear, but there are some deeper complexities which must be considered, some good, some bad.

- The largest newspapers are suffering the steepest declines. (But the one you are holding in your hands fares better than most.)
- Community newspapers serving their readers well are, for the most part, thriving.
- The digital and global revolutions beleaguer every industry, including television.
- Media companies used to "push" information to consumers with morning newspaper delivery or the 6 p.m. news. The Internet and 24-hour television news offer consumers the capability to "pull" news whenever they want it so the consumption of news is increasingly fragmenting. Consumers are now in control.
- Advertising is fundamentally changing. In addition to the push/pull problem, the Internet allows advertisers to narrowly target their messages to potential buyers rather taking a scattershot approach to the masses.

- While declines are evident, the amount of advertising in a Sunday newspaper is still formidable and profits at most big newspapers remain admirable.
- The business model of newspapers based on mass advertising is under assault, but if the death of newspapers is inevitable it does not appear that it will be swift.

There is a temptation to view all of this as just one more 21st century reality that does not affect us until we consider the last month of news coverage. The bizarre wall-to-wall coverage of Anna Nicole Smith and Britney Spears may be the “canary in the coal mine” for what weaker newspapers might mean for society.

If you are disgusted about the obsession with Anna Nicole and Britney, reflect for a minute on how much coverage of those two stories you saw in the Republic, the East Valley Tribune and the New York Times. The answer is not much.

No matter how much you enjoy beating up the print media, and no matter how many times the newspaper industry shoots itself in the foot with plagiarism, fabrication and conflict-of-interest scandals, for the last 50 years American newspapers have been our news-gathering stalwart. It is newspapers that uncover scandals like the one at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. It is newspapers that have been out front on social change, repeatedly holding government accountable and *attempting* to avoid celebrity obsession.

Newspapers under siege create a profound ethical hazard for journalists. Concern over profits and abject fear over ubiquity of the Internet threaten newspaper ethics.

In the new media world concerns such as harm to story subjects, treatment of identified but not charged suspects, privacy, balance, fairness, taste and accountability stand to get steamrolled by a desperate search for profitable audiences and the chaos of the Web where knee-jerk immediacy and irresponsibility often stretch ethical boundaries.

Newspaper journalism fails too frequently in its ethical quest, but an America without solid newspapers protecting and leading civil discourse is an America that would make the framers of our Constitution despair.

If you are a discerning reader who recognizes the role journalism plays in fortifying our democracy, the raging discussion about the future of newspapers matters to you.

The author is the Frank Russell Chair for the business of journalism at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications at Arizona State University. He was the editor of the Minneapolis Star Tribune from 1992-2002 and served as the president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 2001-2002. McGuire will be part of a panel entitled “Newspapers Under Siege: Ethics on the Firing Line” at the inaugural Paul J. Schatt Memorial Lecture Wednesday, March 21, at 7:30 p.m. at the Evelyn Smith Music Theatre. McGuire will be joined on the panel by Jim Crutchfield, the Visiting Gaylord Ethics Professor at the Cronkite School and former publisher of the Akron Beacon Journal and Jennie Buckner, the retired editor of the Charlotte Observer.