



WHAT WILL BECOME OF NEWSPAPERS?

BY NEIL SKENE

What will become of newspapers? More important, what will become of those of us who rely on newspapers to fulfill the role that writer Thomas Carlyle described as “the Fourth Estate,” more powerful in a way than the branches of government? The answer is that we will miss them. We will have lost another tool for meeting that challenge posed by Benjamin Franklin when he told Mrs. Powel that the delegates to the Constitutional Convention had made “a republic, if you can keep it.”

This is not to predict the end of newspapers. In March 1996, when

I was president of a 50-year-old company that published magazines and newsletters, I made a speech in New York urging traditional publishers to embrace the opportunities of electronic publishing, and even cannibalize their print products (“Somebody’s going to eat your lunch, so it might as well be you.”) I added, though, that publishers also needed to “nurture” their traditional products because “they have a long life yet.”

I believe that’s still sound advice. Too bad many newspapers publishers didn’t take it. Newspapers were lulled into complacency when the

“tech bubble” burst in 2000. As Yahoo fell from \$125 a share at the end of 2000 to \$4 a share in 2004, Gannett stock was running from \$50 to \$90. Happy days were here again for the Dead Tree Society.

Alas, by the end of March 2009, Gannett had dropped below \$2 a share. McClatchy, whose hubris exceeded all others as it swallowed the larger Knight-Ridder near its all-time high, once topped \$76 but by 2009 was dragging along Wall Street at 35 cents. You could buy a share of the company cheaper than you could buy the daily paper. (McClatchy owns the daily papers in Miami and Bradenton. Gannett owns the dailies in Tallahassee, Pensacola, Fort Myers, and Cocoa.) Yahoo by then had made it back to \$14. And something called Google was at \$359 on its way back to \$500.

But now Gannett is back around \$14, too. The market hasn’t entirely written the newspapers off—yet—and neither should we. But they recovered their financial value in part with drastic cuts, including news. Which leads to the question about whether those cuts will reduce their role as the Fourth Estate. The answer is “Yes,” but there’s nothing new in that. Journalism quality has been in retreat for most of this decade. The coin of the realm now is hourly scoops

and clever little blog posts.

And yet, we have at least three strong and very different national newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*. National magazines, from *Atlantic* to *Vanity Fair*, offer serious work on national and international issues. The problem we are talking about is not really at the national level.

The problem is really at the state and local level. There is only one daily newspaper covering Pinellas County, or Orange County, or Miami-Dade County, or Escambia County. You could thin out the oversized crowd at White House press briefings without any problem; their stories are often indistinct variations of each other. But there is

no herd at City Hall to be thinned. It’s the local paper, and maybe a TV person, who drops in for a few minutes.

I won’t make my journalist friends happy in saying this, but staff cuts are not the threat here. The challenge is in what you do with the ones who remain. If newspapers continue to insist on frequent blog updates and hourly scoops, their decline will continue. Those of us concerned about the “Fourth Estate” role have been badly served by this the past decade and will be badly served in the future.



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But if the media decide that they are going to provide more context than conflict, more analysis than entertainment, more depth and understanding on issues rather than a regurgitation of the sound bytes (new spelling) of political hacks, they will continue to be central to the life of their community.

And if they don't? Someone else will step in. Already we are seeing non-profits devoted to serious journalism. Pro Publica was funded by Herbert and Marion Sandler, longtime supporters of the Berkeley Journalism School who owned Golden West Financial before selling it to Wachovia; former *Wall Street Journal* managing editor Paul Steiger, who was once on the Berkeley J-school advisory board, runs it.

Carol Marbin Miller, an excellent investigative reporter once at the *St. Petersburg Times* and now at the *Miami Herald*, used to write exposes about the Florida Department of Children and Families. Now she doubles as an editor. Since I serve part-time as a special counsel at DCF, you might think I'd be happy. I'm not. Newspaper headlines inspire a sense of urgency about fixing things. Even DCF Secretary George Sheldon, who says critical stories may not make us look good but can help us *be* good, talks frequently to reporters and views them as part of the accountability the agency owes the public. Stories also motivate legislators. Having fewer stories is not a good thing for the people of Florida or the children we serve at DCF.

A *Palm Beach Post* reporter who pursued DCF's flaws in competition with Miller left the paper a few months ago. He's among the many experienced journalists who have left the state's newsrooms in the wake of the newspapers' relentless downsizing.

Despite my fond experiences in the Tallahassee press corps, I have to say that I'm not so alarmed about the cuts there. There might be a dozen reporters in the press "gaggle" around the governor or a legislative leader, but I swear that most of the reporters lost their notebooks on the way back to the office. The stories were rarely distinctive. When the *St. Petersburg Times* bureau was a mere two reporters, we were perfectly content to use wire services for daily stories. We concentrated on stories that took more time and made more of a difference.

Today, they're still wasting too much time just getting their own byline on the daily story, but Alex Leary of the *St. Petersburg Times* was still able to spend weeks in pursuit of House Speaker Ray Sansom's \$6 million turkey for his generous constituents. More stories like that would provide readers with a good reason to hope that newspapers survive in some form. ☞

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