

Remembering Newspapers

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Memorial Day traditionally has been associated with remembering those Americans who have lost their lives in military service and the many sacrifices made to gain and sustain American liberties. And it has rarely seemed more appropriate to do that than the times in which we live. But perhaps this Memorial Day it would also be timely to remember another tradition responsible for defending national freedom and guaranteeing continuing liberties - a tradition now endangered, possibly fatally wounded, and almost certainly grievously in trouble.

We speak of the American newspaper, and more particularly of the venerable American tradition of investigative journalism. The record is a long and noble one. Since at least 1690, when Boston publisher Benjamin Harris exposed egregious mistreatment of Indians, the American press has ventilated an endless array of public wrongdoing by governmental officials. By the early 20th century "muckraking," as Theodore Roosevelt called it, was firmly established as iconic American journalism.

But now that type of journalism may be severely curtailed.

It is true that all forms of journalism have undergone transformative change in the last decade. However, it is the newspaper that has borne the brunt of change. Newspapers have been challenged before by changing technology, most notably by radio, followed by television. But the advent of the internet, the rise of "blogger" journalism, and the inexorable decrease in print readership have combined to deliver a body blow to traditional print media. The current recession has only hastened the change.

The most recent statistics paint a dismal picture. Just from last October to March, daily newspaper circulation declined a sharp seven percent while Sunday papers dropped five percent. Both declines continued losses from the previous year.

Storied newspapers have ceased publication while draconian staff reductions at others threaten the viability of many papers. The very function of the press seems threatened. Worse perhaps is the apparently chronic nature of the problem - efforts to find a financial model that allows newspapers to survive have mostly been elusive.

Public discussion of these trends has been abundant. Considerable attention has been paid to developments such as the decline of print circulation, personnel layoffs, position eliminations, bankruptcy filings, and even bonuses for newspaper executives. And indeed the economic and business consequences of journalism's travails compel attention.

But something of transcendent importance is missing from the discussion: the price to our political system, should these trends continue. In all the attention paid to the business aspects of journalism's decline, precious few analyses have attempted to assess the societal implication of this decline. And little has been written or said about the long-term effect on our democracy.

So what might those consequences be?

Clearly the staff reductions, especially of editors and reporters, will translate into a diminution of journalistic quality and result in a lack of coverage of all kinds. Without doubt many of the activities of public officials will go without adequate scrutiny. Public accountability will be a major casualty of this trend.

State and local government seem especially vulnerable. Already print press coverage of governments outside Washington has been modest - and sometimes less than modest. Volumes of studies have confirmed that citizens are poorly informed about their local governments and often unaware of basic issues that critically affect them. Further pullbacks can only aggravate this situation.

Particularly troubling will be the growing failures of the local press to cover events back home - in the city hall, the county governments, and school boards. Much of this reporting seems often mundane, but unimportant it is not. Imagine the implications for local government accountability if press coverage ends for zoning decisions, property tax increases, or the decisions affecting police and fire protection.

In Pennsylvania alone, it is hard to imagine that the public corruption scandal known as "Bonus-gate" would have achieved its currency without the reporting of such newspapers as the Harrisburg Patriot News, the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, and the Pittsburgh Tribune Review. Nor would the high profile investigations of former state Senator Vince Fumo on public corruption charges have occurred without the reporting of the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Daily News. The lesson is clear: newspapers without resources will no longer do the extensive investigative stories that dig into and ferret out instances of public wickedness.

Some Pollyanna's believe that the current state of affairs might all turn out for the best. The democratizing character of the web and the rapid diffusion of information facilitated by the internet might fill the vacuum left by the print press and investigative journalism. Or some believe that the electronic media may themselves fill the shoes of their fellow journalists.

Don't bet on it. Electronic media does what it does superlatively. And many working journalists have their work published on their newspapers' websites. But generally net journalism does not trade in the hard facts, gritty details, and exhaustive stories that print media journalists handle. In fact, the electronic sites most often follow the lead of the print press on the investigative journalism that is published.

As for the web, its role in journalism is still a work in progress. It's clear that the internet is, in newspaper parlance, a great "source." It's good at generating material and disseminating information. It is not at all clear that it's as capable at getting its facts straight, focusing its resources on asking probing questions, and getting thoughtful answers. Ultimately the issue is one of accountability. A journalist without a source has a problem. But a source without a journalist is a problem.

For now we seem stuck somewhere between the age of print investigative journalism ending and the beginning of whatever is to succeed it. It seems unthinkable that the watchdog function carried on for over three hundred years of American journalism may be ending. But it may be.

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