



BLACK AND WHITE AND TROUBLED ALL OVER:

*The newspaper industry's
terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year*

*If you were making a
list of what went
wrong, where would
you start? How about
with the loss of public
trust?*

by **NANCY NALL DERRINGER**

Even in the newspaper business, an industry toughened by decades of bad news, the events of 2005 still had the power to wound. Staff and budget cuts continued at a terrifying pace, continuing a trend of several years' running, even reaching such monoliths as *the New York Times*. The editor of *the St. Louis Post-Dispatch* resigned in despair, saying she couldn't come to terms with the paper's new owners over "financial considerations." Circulation figures, in decline for years, sharply accelerated their pace, exacerbated by a growing number of admissions that the numbers were cooked in the first place. Ad revenues stayed flat at best. And in one of the more ominous moves, the largest stockholder at Knight Ridder, the newspaper chain that owns *the Fort Wayne News-Sentinel* and a controlling interest in Fort Wayne Newspapers, pushed the company to put itself up for sale, to correct a stubbornly low stock

price. In March, it agreed to turn the keys over to the much smaller McClatchy newspaper chain, ending with a whimper what was once one of the strongest and proudest companies in American journalism.

Judith Miller went to jail to a chorus of yawns inside and outside the business, and the unmasking of Deep Throat all these years later seemed as much one last hurrah for the good old days — when we were played by cool movie stars, not the ones with the sweaty upper lips who get humiliated in the second act — as it was an excuse to relive history.

Just how bad are things in the newspaper business? Plenty bad. *Editor & Publisher*, the industry's journal, estimated 2005's job losses at 1,900, but that was in mid-November, before the Tribune Company hacked away dozens more at its newspapers in Chicago, Los Angeles and Orlando. If any Christmas parties survived the budget-cutting ax, you



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Not only is the playing field more crowded, the spectators are throwing things. It is, indeed, a whole new ball game, even compared with five years ago.

habit, once they become tax-paying “stakeholders” in their communities. They’re picky eaters at a table groaning with information choices, while their hometown newspapers hover like a despairing mother offering tofu-wheat germ casserole.

And not to torture the food metaphor too much, but that competition is eating newspapers’ lunch. The industry had its last significant shakeup in how it presents its content when *USA Today* led — or forced — newspapers into following its formula of shorter stories, brighter colors and graphics-strewn pages. And that was 25 years ago. It’s safe to say many editors today are bewildered by an information revolution that has people reading news off their cell phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs). How do you edit for cell phones, anyway?

But it’s the Internet that’s most frightening to them, because that’s where the readers are going, particularly younger ones. And it doesn’t make editors feel any better to know that those readers are getting newspaper content online, not when the way they get it has so upended their business model. Those Soviet department-store days seem almost impossibly quaint in a world where anyone

“The pattern of a newspaperman’s life is like the plot of Black Beauty. Sometimes he finds a kind master who gives him a dry stall and an occasional bran mash in the form of a Christmas bonus, sometimes he falls into the hands of a mean owner who drives him in spite of spavins and expects him to live on potato peelings. The Sunday World was a dry-stall interlude in my wanderings.”

— A.J. Liebling

with a dial-up connection can read bits and pieces of 20 different newspapers daily, from all over the world — and block the pop-up ads along the way. The Internet accelerated a trend of fragmentation that began when television came into its own as a news source decades ago.

For most of those decades, print journalists told themselves they were giving the public something television couldn’t — and they were. Television has only rarely shown itself to be a medium that can offer the sort of depth newspapers do, and in recent years much television news has become as vulgar and superficial as the basest tabloids. Editors know the days of competing just with local television or a chain of suburban weeklies are over. They not only have to compete for a

readership accustomed to picking and choosing, they’re likely to launch their Web browsers in the morning only to confront a jeering host of critics with their own weblogs, holding up a precious page-one story for ridicule, or teasing apart an editorial or column line-by-line, often with hilarious, profane commentary.

Not only is the playing field more crowded, the spectators are throwing things. It is, indeed, a whole new ball game, even compared with five years ago.

Dead Trees

For years, the newspaper business has been, any publisher will tell you, “mature.” Although fundamentally healthy and profitable at a level double that of the Fortune 500 — ask any retailer if he’d be panicking over a 20 percent profit margin — newspapers stopped growing long ago and have concentrated in recent years on maintaining the readers they have. Ad lineage is flat or declining, as companies either stop advertising in newspapers or diversify their spending among all the industry’s competitors. Classified advertising has been a particular disaster, as employers and job-seekers alike abandon their local papers for easy-to-use, searchable online services. And those who just want to get customers for a garage sale or a date for Saturday night are flocking to Craigslist, where free ads can be placed in moments via e-mail.

But one number is up, and it’s been rising relentlessly for some time. It does not bring editors joy. Today it stands at 55.

That’s the average age of a daily newspaper reader in the United States. Five years past AARP membership, a decade in front of retirement, but still plainly in bifocals country. Fifty-five.

“Everybody knows the same facts,” says Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at New York University, and a vocal press critic. “Not only is circulation off, but people who actually like the paper are abandoning the subscription method and going to the Web.”

“Every editor’s goal, as far as I can see, is to put out a newspaper for people who don’t like to read,” echoes Jack Lessenberry, who teaches journalism at Wayne State University and writes the ombudsman’s column at the *Toledo Blade*. “And the younger they are, the less they like to read.” Yes, everybody knows the same facts,

and they hang like a pall over newsrooms. Which has led to the biggest loss of all — its mojo. Newspaper editors are, as a group, profoundly afflicted by a loss of confidence. All through journalism school, through many romantic late-night viewings of “All the President’s Men,” in barstool conversation with colleagues, journalists believed they weren’t just in the business to make a living. They were making a difference. They believed — many still do, the fools — that they weren’t so much taking a job as answering a call, a call to serve the public, to participate in the public life of their communities, to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. And now they face a public ranging from indifferent to hostile, largely unimpressed with their work, lining up to complain. In my gloomiest moments, I see newspaper editors as battered spouses. The more readers beat them up, the more they cringe, trying to

please at all costs. The thought that a constituency might be angered enough to picket the building or cancel subscriptions can too often send them to the fainting couch. Look at the chorus of not-in-my-paper refusals to print the Danish cartoons that got half the Islamic world in an uproar earlier this year. (Of course, you could find those cartoons all over the Internet with about 10 seconds of Googling. Way to go, editors. Way to keep your readers away from your scariest competitor.) Instead of leading with confidence, knowing they’re producing a valuable product that you’d have to be a fool not to want, they run to research and focus groups: *What do you want? How about some chicken recipes? How about more maps? Are we snotty? Do you think you might like us if we weren’t? Please, just don’t hit us again.*

Anyone who’s done time in a newsroom knows what the crisis of confidence means.

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Unasked Questions, Squandered Trust

The 50 or so senators, staff and onlookers in the state Senate chambers last week for a hearing of the Marion County Consolidation Study Commission got a profound, albeit negative, lesson in why vigorous, inquiring media are so important to the democratic process. The news that day was there was no news. The leads were not followed to the public records patiently assembled by the commission, records that would have shown how far the political debate had wandered from the verifiable.

The commission was charged with studying “IndyWorks,” the proposal of Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson to consolidate local government. When the plan was unveiled, the mayor projected significant savings and efficiency. His numbers were accepted unquestioningly at the time. Indeed, some in media and business circulated the mayor’s graphics showing supposed property-tax benefits of consolidation. The overall public impression was that the merits of consolidation were obvious to all but the uninformed. After all, who could be against a plan that saved money and lowered property taxes?

Fortunately, Sen. Mike Young, the commission chairman, insisted on asking a few questions. The commission’s accounting found that the city projections were more than just rosy, they bordered on malfeasant. For the first 18 months of consolidation, the mayor would have been nearly \$31 million off — enough to make the project marginal for all but the most exuberant Indy booster. And those graphics showing property-tax reductions . . . well, they weren’t built on any actual data (merely “illustrative,” the mayor’s office later explained).

Please know that more than half of the mayor’s shortfall, which some believe would have required a surprise tax increase soon after consolidation, was not a matter of interpretation. Any citizen — or reporter — could access public records to determine who had the facts straight. Young, to no avail, had carefully noted where each record could be found.

— Craig Ladwig in the *Indianapolis Star*, Nov. 22, 2005

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Instead of being told to pay attention to their communities, participate fully in those communities' affairs, trust their instincts and edit accordingly, our newsroom leaders were encouraged to "test for tone through smart and systematic use of reader research."

Periodically you're herded into a conference room to be introduced to the latest focus group-tested, revealed wisdom, Moses back from Mt. Sinai with a rewrite of the Ten Commandments of journalism. Here's a memo from my later years in the business, condensed to "four areas that will help support readership growth." If you can summon the voice of God, or at least Charlton Heston, do so as I reveal them to you now: the master narrative, tone, utility and writing for impact.

While it had its comical moments — the first line under the "master narrative" section was, "Ensure that you have one" — it was impossible to read without a sinking heart. Instead of being told to pay attention to their communities, participate fully in those communities' affairs, trust their instincts and edit accordingly, our newsroom leaders were encouraged to "test for tone through smart and systematic use of reader research."

Chain-owned newspapers are particularly avid practitioners of this sort of thing. The Gannett "tip box" is that chain's version of "utility," a little bit of information for readers who need "useful takeaways" to justify investing their time in something so frivolous as a newspaper story. It is notorious for its relentless dumbing-down of the simplest information. No doubt proposed with good intentions — in a story about domestic violence, it makes sense to run the phone number of the local battered-spouse shelter — it's frequently so moronic as to make you wonder just who's in charge down there.

An ex-Gannett friend of mine explains: "They include the quasi-useful (how to talk to your children about the images of 9/11 they're seeing on television) to the inane. Every year we write tip boxes for stories about the first cold snap (dress in layers); first heat wave (stay in the shade, drink fluids); and for a few years when we had a managing editor who commuted to work on an east-west freeway, tips for keeping the sun out of your eyes. These tips, I swear, included using the sun visor, wearing sunglasses and changing the time of day you travel the road."

Is it any wonder an outfit like this is losing readers?

Are you more surprised that they had any in the first place?

Death by a Thousand Cuts

So what happened? How did an institution that's been providing news, imperfectly but valiantly, for hundreds of years come to this pass so quickly? Lots of newspapers are pretty mediocre, but the best ones are still doing heroic work, and they're worried, too. There's no one answer. But, again, you could make a list.

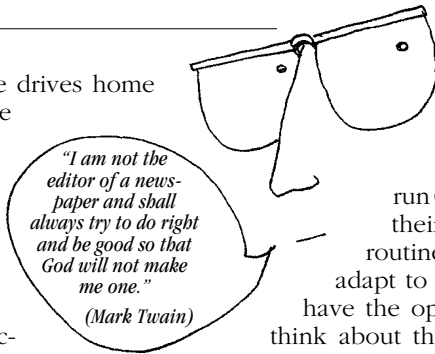
The biggest change is cultural, the stinging of a thousand gnats, each of which draws a drop of blood that is slowly exsanguinating the patient. There are all those new choices for information delivery. Readers' lives are more complicated; they commute longer hours to jobs that keep them at the office longer. The idea of spending even 20 or 30 minutes of a weekday morning, much less evening, in leisurely reading of the daily newspaper is a laughable pipedream for too many would-be subscribers today.

"I went from reading the paper to reading the paper online to reading a few blogs that tell me what the interesting stories are, and even then, I just read the summaries," a friend tells me. He's the human illustration of the newspaper industry's central problem.

But every business has to handle competition, and newspapers are no different. In the cacophony of voices that is today's media choir, how are newspapers trying to distinguish their voices from others? I don't know that they are — for now, they're too focused on cost-cutting and retrenchment, the better to serve Wall Street. Only the sunniest optimist can see a future for newspapers that's brighter than its present.

Rosen is, if not an optimist, certainly capable of looking on the bright side. "The cost of printing and distributing the paper is greater than subscriber revenue," he said. "When people say no one will pay for content on the Internet, they're overlooking this fact, that it's not a disadvantage, but an advantage, because you've eliminated that expense." The problem, he said, is not that the future is grim, but unknown: "Web advertising is growing, but starting from such a small place that it's not equal to the ad revenue being lost on the print side. . . . Everyone knows (newspapers') future is on the Web, but no one knows how you get there from here."

OK, fine. Everyone drives home at night not being able to see beyond their headlights' reach, but somehow they make it. Much of the industry's problems, Rosen said, come from its unwillingness to change. It's not necessarily an attitude problem, but a response to having done it the same way for so long. Some years back, Rosen was an outspoken advocate of another big industry trend, "civic journalism" (earlier called advocacy journalism), which posed the idea that papers shouldn't just report on problem in their communities, but actively investigate solutions, too. The idea got a mixed reception, but Rosen said



the experience of advocating it taught him something important: "The professionals who run (newsrooms) have adapted their minds to their production routines, and only seemed to adapt to those routines. We didn't have the option of saying, wait, let's think about this. Lots of things you do because you have to, and that necessity starts to drive imagination. Many people showed a total inability to imagine how (things) might be different." In other words, we can't change because we do it this way. We do it this way because we've always done it this way. We can't do it another way because the paper has to get out tomorrow. And the way the paper gets out tomorrow is . . . we do it this way.

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Political Bias in News Coverage

I got the transcript of the president's speech and read the entire document. Then I read *the Star's* report, with commentaries. Rarely have I read such brazenly biased coverage of a news story of national importance.

The first words, over the picture, are, "President urges stay-the-course strategy . . ." The third paragraph begins, "Democrats dismissed his words as a stay-the-course speech . . ." The first paragraph of the story refers to a strategy for victory, but puts those words in quotes with the nudge, nudge, wink, wink connotation that action carries.

A small inset headed "Analysis" reads as follows: "Bush uses speech to try to reassure a weary public." It is certain that anyone accepting that analysis will need reassurance. Attack would be a more descriptive word than analysis, it having been written by an agent of a bastion of Bush bashers, *the Washington Post*.

A few of his many negative phrasings: "Bush offered specific examples of what he called progress." ". . . in a rare move for a president loath to admit mistakes . . ." "He (Bush) dropped the acrid rhetoric . . ."

You offer a "Fact Check" by an Associated Press (AP) reporter, who picks four points to attempt to refute, the last of which is entitled "Iraq's link to terrorism." His last sentence is, "Iraq was not, however, the terrorists' chosen battlefield until Saddam was defeated and extremists poured across unsecured borders."

He got that right. The chosen battlefield was New York City, Washington, D.C. and a farm field in Pennsylvania where more than three thousand Americans were massacred one bright sunny morning. If the gentleman bemoans the fact that we're fighting the terrorists in Iraq instead of here, maybe we can direct the next suicide planes to the buildings housing the AP and *the Washington Post*.

With this kind of coverage in the so-called mainstream media, it's a miracle that polls show Bush's approval rating anything over one or two percent. Shame on you.

— Fred McCarthy

in a Dec. 2, 2005, letter to Dennis Ryerson, editor of the Indianapolis Star

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As family-owned dailies passed from their passionate founders to their less-interested offspring, as estate taxes made inheriting a newspaper a ruinously expensive proposition, corporations were there to snap these cash cows up.



"All I know is what I see in the papers."
(Will Rogers)

"They're adrift, but it's a culture they created that got them to this point," Rosen said. "It's anti-innovation, cynical about itself. They don't develop their people. They have no grasp of intellectual capital." He'd like to be sunnier about the future, but really, "what is the possibility that a business unaccustomed to innovation can survive without innovation?" And innovation, obviously, is what newspapers need right now, and badly.

If the industry were light on its feet, it might be capable of that innovation. But it is anything but. Corporate ownership — big, publicly traded corporate ownership — has been a fact of the newspaper business for some time. As family-owned dailies passed from their passionate founders to their less-interested offspring, as estate taxes made inheriting a newspaper a ruinously expensive proposition, corporations were there to snap these cash cows up.

The Fort Wayne News-Sentinel, in the 1980s, and *the Indianapolis Star*, in the '90s, were only the more recent Hoosier acquisitions for the major newspaper chains — in this case Knight Ridder and Gannett, respectively. Both lost no time installing their own company men and women in positions of power. While many people who hold or held these jobs were well-meaning and well-intentioned, it's undeniable that they serve two masters— their readers and their corporate overseers— and equally undeniable whose interests come first.

In January, *the New York Times* reported on the closing of *the Louisville Courier-Journal* bureau in Hazard, Kentucky, in the state's coal country. The story noted the *C-J*'s long presence in eastern Kentucky, and the relentless attention it paid to mining deaths and the working conditions in mines. But the time had come for the bureau to close, the executive editor, Bennie L. Ivory, told *the Times*: "We were not growing in the state, and there's real potential to grow our suburban market." The suburbs are home to the readers advertisers most want to

reach. Barry Bingham Jr., the last publisher before his feuding family sold to Gannett, has another theory: "I hate to see it happen, but Gannett has profit-margin demands that the Bingham's never dreamed of. My grandfather said he saw the paper as a public trust, and we ran it that way. We made a marginal profit, maybe five or six percent, and other publishers would laugh at us and say 'you have to be an idiot not to get 20 percent margins from a monopoly paper.' It's sad, but this is happening all around the country."

Yes, it is. Large, publicly held newspaper companies like Gannett and Knight Ridder set profit goals far from their member newspapers. Davis Merritt, former editor of *the Wichita Eagle*, writes in his book "Knightfall" of pinching every penny from his 1996 budget to produce a profit margin above 20 percent, only to be told it had to reach 22.5 percent. He chose to slash "outstate" circulation, the costly routes that bring a big-city daily to small-city readers. Such cuts make short-term economic sense — they work when you're under the gun to make this year's profit goal — but are counterintuitive to everything journalists are taught about producing a newspaper. Cut circulation? Voluntarily? For people accused of all manner of low behavior "to sell newspapers," not selling them comes as a shock.

The Dreaded Rusty Cleaver

When a newspaper is purchased by a chain such as Maggad-Feist, the first order of business is to assure worried employees that their jobs are safe, and that no drastic changes are planned. The second order of business is to attack the paper's payroll with a rusty cleaver, and start shoving people out the door.

Carl Hiaasen wrote that, in his comic novel "Basket Case." But Hiaasen is also a columnist with a long career at *the Miami Herald*, owned by Knight Ridder, and everyone who can call him a colleague knows he's having a little revenge fantasy. Knight Ridder's woes have been well-documented as its humiliating sale process dragged through the business press — the cuts upon cuts that still didn't satisfy Wall Street.

An embarrassing *coup de grace* came late in the year, when an internal memo from *the Akron Beacon Journal* was released to a

Charles Foster Kane, Where Are You?

Because newspapers have enjoyed such healthy operating margins, buyers have traditionally been willing to pay a fairly high price to acquire them. Now, with growing threats to those fat margins, some analysts and investors think the price that prospective buyers should be willing to pay for Knight Ridder and other newspaper companies needs to come down. The problem, as James Rutherford sees it, is that some investors still want to see newspapers valued like high-growth Internet companies, driving up the price and all but insuring that any buyer would have to strip the operation clean to make the deal pay off. That, he says, is shortsighted. "Getting people's expectations adjusted is key," says Rutherford. "You can streamline the production and delivery, but if you don't have a good product no one will buy it. To do that on a daily basis takes good reporters and editors and some vision of what people want."

What newspapers really need, above all else, is ownership that values journalism and understands that the work of gathering, writing, and publishing the news is an inherently inefficient business that is in a period of profound transition. The private press baron of the past might have been a blowhard propagandist with the ethics of a wharf rat, but at least he loved the trade. Compared with the lineup of bloodless managers and mandarins currently squeezing the life out of journalism, Charles Foster Kane looks pretty damn good. So while there is no guarantee that the private ownership of today would recognize the value of journalism, it has already been established that Wall Street does not. Maybe it's time we took our chances.

— Douglas McCollam, *the Columbia Journalism Review*, February 2006

local weekly. It asked reporters to please share notebooks and pens, as some departments had already run dry — the photo department was out of paper and batteries — and no more would be ordered until after January 1.

"It's been a tough year," the managing editor told *Cleveland Scene*. The Poynter Institute — a journalism training and research center — responded by sending a case of notebooks.

You can find a lot of observations like Hiaasen's when you start looking for them. Here's Peter Woodall, writing in *the Philadelphia City Paper* about his former employer, *the Biloxi Sun-Herald*:

The Sun-Herald was a decent newspaper until Knight Ridder started in with the scalpel. Our lone education reporter quit and we didn't hire a new one. They forced out our ace statehouse reporter and put in a clueless rookie to save money. The amount of space devoted to news shrank.

Here's Tom Ferrick Jr., of *the Philadelphia Inquirer* quoted on *Neusthinking.com*:

They say Knight Ridder doesn't have a plan. Actually they do. They are going to jettison the old, shoot the young and . . . torture the survivors, which, come to think of it, seems to be an industry-wide plan.

What happens when you cut staff? Simple: News doesn't get covered. Maybe the city council still has a reporter watching its activities, but a suburban town board might not.

The next time miners are trapped in a cave-in, *the Louisville Courier-Journal* reporter will be 200 miles away. Corners get cut, workarounds are designed. Staffs do more with less, and then they do even more with even less. This may look like efficiency from some angles. But things are lost, too.

Here's a small example from my last days in the business, when I was working as a copy editor in Fort Wayne; let's call this next section:

How I Booked the World's Most Boring Business Page

As the earliest-arriving copy editor, I handled the earliest-closing pages — usu-

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COVER

I still remember my Holy Grail moment, when I was able to run a wire feature about a financial literacy class for children. Not only were the children pictured wearing bright green sweatshirts, but they were all African-American, who tended to be rarely seen on the biz wire. I got diversity points. I felt like high-fiving someone.

ally sports and business. I also had to “book” the single daily business page, that is, select the stories and “art” — graphics and photos.

Normally, this job would be done by the business editor, but the previous editor had quit months earlier and the position was frozen open. It was a pretty rote job, most days, something I could finish inside of half an hour. I checked the wire for breaking stories, noted the AP calendar’s tracking of economic report releases, kept an eye out for any Indiana companies or connections to local or national news, and always, always looked out for art.

The page had a template. A syndicated column ran down the left side of the page, or rail, with a digest of brief items on the right. At the top was the “strip” story, usually the hardest-news story of the day, or the locally written one, and with only two reporters putting out a daily page and a weekly section, we rarely had more than

one local story. At the bottom, also stripped horizontally, was a secondary newsy story. And in the middle of it all was the centerpiece, the story with the picture, the “play” story, my personal albatross.

The problem was the template. The space was tight, but the centerpiece had to have art, no exceptions. I was constantly on the lookout for that elusive combination of newsworthiness, brevity and a good picture that made a decent centerpiece. I combed the graphics banks for suitable illustrations for stories that had no art, which were searchable by keyword and tended to be pretty generic. For a story on credit-card debt, for instance, I might use a cartoon of a stressed-looking man carrying an enormous dollar sign on his back, which could also work for a story on the deficit, or economic problems caused by a strong dollar.

Business news doesn’t always lend itself to great photography, and so the days when

Economic Bias in News Coverage

Our results suggest that newspapers do not treat all news the same. Given the same news, Republican presidents receive about 20 to 30 percent less positive coverage from all newspapers and 20 to 40 percent less positive coverage from the top 10 papers than was provided on average for Democrats and these results are quite statistically significant. This partisan bias is associated with about a seven to nine percent increase in respondents viewing the economy as getting better.

However, newspapers don’t treat all economic statistics the same way nor do all newspapers have the same partisan gap, but the vast majority of newspapers cover any given economic news more favorably under Democrats. Only one newspaper treated one Republican administration significantly more positively than the Clinton administration: *The Los Angeles Times*’ headlines were most favorable to the Reagan administration, but it still favored Clinton over either Bush administration. When that is combined with how *the Houston Chronicle* treated both the Bush administrations, there is at least a possibility that Republican presidents receive at least some home-state backing.

There is modest support for the hypothesis that newspapers find it more difficult to negatively report on Republicans when Republicans control both the presidency and the Congress, but even when Republicans control both branches the implied effect is that they still receive less positive coverage than Democrats. Despite the common perception, newspapers actually provide more coverage when the news is good and at least the top 10 papers are not monolithic in their biases. More durable goods, GDP growth, retail sales and jobs and less unemployment all produce more positive news coverage.

— “Is Newspaper Coverage of Economic Events Politically Biased?”
A study spanning 14 years by John R. Loft Jr. and Kevin A. Hassett,
the American Enterprise Institute, July 20, 2004

the press setup made it possible to print a full-color picture were particularly stressful. I'd page through the electronic photo pool, looking for any splash of brightness to justify the ink. I still remember my Holy Grail moment, when I was able to run a wire feature about a financial literacy class for children. Not only were the children pictured wearing bright green sweatshirts, but they were all African-American, who tended to be rarely seen on the biz wire. I got diversity points. I felt like high-fiving someone.

But what I mostly did was cut. I hacked huge swaths out of stories that had run 35 column inches in their original form, in their original newspapers. It was not uncommon to cut a story by two-thirds, to get it to fit.

"This is a good story. Why can't we throw out the bottom story and just run the centerpiece longer?" I asked my page designer one day.

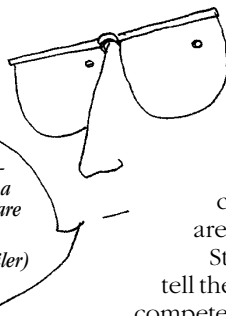
"Because we have a template we have to follow," he replied, equably.

"So throw out the template," I suggested. He said he couldn't. I asked why.

"Because this is how you put out a paper with three page designers," he said. "You keep it simple." Templates, with predictable holes to be filled day after day, were one way to do so. And filling the holes with wire-service material was how you put out a paper with two business reporters and a photo department that could barely keep up with breaking news.

This is also how you put out a paper that will rarely surprise its readers, or give them any reason not to let them accumulate, still rolled up in their plastic bags, by the front door. Business news is important, as important as sports. Letting the department atrophy for lack of resources redefines cutting off your nose to spite your face. What reader, I sometimes thought, looking at my attractively designed, utterly boring page, would find this compelling?

(A postscript: The last I heard, both of the paper's business reporters had resigned to work at a weekly business journal. They weren't replaced, either. The editor hired to replace the business editor — on a half-



time, "team leader" basis — quit within months.)

Buck Up

Every industry faces change, and newspapers are no different.

Stop whining, you want to tell them, and figure out a way to compete. Can they? It depends who you ask.

Lessenberry, journalism professor and ombudsman, is pessimistic. In Detroit, where he lives, two lively competing dailies became two less-lively dailies in a JOA (joint operating agreement), only to become, in a baffling sale-swap-partnership deal last summer, one daily owned by Gannett and another daily owned by MediaNews Group, still in a JOA, but with the latter as doomed as the guy in the war movie who shows his buddy a picture of his sweetheart. Lessenberry thinks we'll arrive at the future of newspapers via a detour to the 1830s, before the penny press, when newspapers were written by and for the elites and cost the equivalent of a mass-market paperback book does today. In other words, we'll always have a *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, but "what will die is the middle-brow newspaper."

Or maybe not. Ken Sands is more optimistic. Online publisher of *the Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Washington, he's among the editors who are really thinking about the newsroom of the future, and how newspapers can craft Websites that are complementary of their print foundations, not vampire bats sucking the life out of the place. (Note that he works in Spokane, not New York City. Much of the leadership in this area is being done in out-of-the-way spots like eastern Washington and North Carolina, where *the Greensboro News-Record* is taking similar thoughtful steps toward figuring out a new way of doing things.)

"We're a local, family-owned paper with a publisher (Stacey Cowles) who's forward-thinking, open-minded and willing to tolerate experiments," he said. The paper's experimentation has led it to try a number of new things, not just blogs, which newspapers are throwing online like coal to a speeding locomotive, but aggregating non-

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newspaper blogs from around the community — harnessing the community's individual voices — and thinking beyond blogging to the whole information-delivery model. The newsroom of the future, he believes, will be truly multi-platform, using the strengths of print and online for what they do best.

The hope is that providing two distinct and complementary halves will preserve the whole. — “Print should focus on only the things it does best and better than the others,” he said, such as carry longer, investigative or analytical stories and nice photography. Breaking news, wire-service news, interactive features for readers — those will go on the Web. Reporters will be expected to file for both print and the Web and understand the difference between the two. He can go on at some length about the newsroom of the future, which — bad news, reporters — he envisions with half its current staffing, although smartly deployed. You can almost believe that with enough smart, focused guys like him, we might come out smiling, if bruised, on the other side.

Then I think about someone else I've been paying attention to lately — a young Fort Wayne native, Nathan Gotsch. In late spring of 2005, he started a weblog he called *Fort Wayne Media Notes*. A few months later he changed the name to *Fort Wayne Observed* (now edited by Mitch Harper) and widened the focus accordingly.

Like most blogs, he started out slow and tentative, linking to published reports and adding a few comments. Soon, though, he was finding and breaking stories — not every day, but often enough that you wanted to check the site daily, just in case. He had a fresh and clear writing style, an eye for a story and obviously knew how to cultivate sources.

Plainly he understood the Internet. And he was unemployed, in the ebb tide after college graduation. In other words, he was the sort of bright young man a newspaper editor should be wooing with candy and flowers. It so happens that as a film school grad, Gotsch was more interested in making movies in Hollywood than journalism in Fort Wayne.

But there he was, low-hanging fruit, doing, for his own amusement, what two Fort Wayne dailies and two more television stations were paying reporters to do. I asked him if any Fort Wayne editor ever made overtures toward him, taken him to lunch, felt him out about maybe coming to work in their newsrooms.

Nope, he said, although “I often wonder what they think when they see me scooping their own reporters.”

I do, too.



Additional Reading

David T.Z. Mindich. *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News*. Mindich, Oxford University Press, 2004.

Davis Merritt. *Knightfall: Knight Ridder And How The Erosion Of Newspaper Journalism Is Putting Democracy at Risk*. AMACOM, 2005.

Dan Gillmor. *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, For the People*. Dan Gillmor, 2004.

Weblogs:

Jay Rosen's PressThink:
<http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/>

The Spokesman-Review's Ask the Editors (Ken Sands, contributor):
<http://www.spokesmanreview.com/blogs/editors/>

The Lost Readers

Newspapers missed a chance to move first to use the Internet in innovative ways to connect local businesses with local audiences the way Yahoo, Google and Amazon have done with their national audiences and are starting to do local-to-local too. Publishers lament that young people just don't read newspapers, but young people do visit newspaper Web sites, and in growing numbers. Young people also get older: They buy property and put down roots and get nosy about their neighbors and communities — exactly the appetite that local papers are supremely well-adapted to serve. Sadly, the industry has locked itself into a mode of trying to cut its way to prosperity rather than invest its way to prosperity. — *Holman Jenkins, the Wall Street Journal, March 22, 2006*