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Does the News Matter To Anyone Anymore?

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By David Simon

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Is there a separate elegy to be written for that generation of newspapermen and women who came of age after [Vietnam](#), after [the Pentagon Papers](#) and Watergate? For us starry-eyed acolytes of a glorious new church, all of us secular and cynical and dedicated to the notion that though we would still be stained with ink, we were no longer quite wretches? Where is our special requiem?

Bright and shiny we were in the late 1970s, packed into our bursting journalism schools, dog-eared paperback copies of "All the President's Men" and "The Powers That Be" atop our [Associated Press](#) stylebooks. No business school called to us, no engineering lab, no information-age computer degree -- we had seen a future of substance in bylines and column inches. Immortality lay in a five-part series with sidebars in the Tribune, the Sun, the Register, the Post, the Express.

What the hell happened?

I mean, I understand the economic pressures on newspapers. At this point, along with the rest of the wood-pulp Luddites, I've grasped that what was on the Internet wasn't merely advertising for journalism, but the journalism itself. And though I fled the profession a decade ago for the fleshpots of television, I've heard tell of the horrors of department-store consolidation and the decline in advertising, of [Craigslist](#) and [Google](#) and [Yahoo](#). I understand the vagaries of [Wall Street](#), the fealty to the media-chain stockholders, the primacy of the price-per-share.

What I don't understand is this:

Isn't the news itself still valuable to anyone? In any format, through any medium -- isn't an understanding of the events of the day still a salable commodity? Or were we kidding ourselves? Was a newspaper a viable entity only so long as it had classifieds, comics and the latest sports scores?

It's hard to say that, even harder to think it. By that premise, what all of us pretended to regard as a viable commodity -- indeed, as the source of all that was purposeful and heroic -- was, in fact, an intellectual vanity.

Newsprint itself is an anachronism. But was there a moment before the deluge of the Internet when news organizations might have better protected themselves and their product? When they might have -- as one, industry-wide -- declared that their online advertising would be profitable, that their Web sites would, in fact, charge for providing a rare and worthy service?

And which, exactly, is the proper epitaph for the generation that entered newspapering at the very moment when the big-city dailies -- the fat morning papers, those that survived the shakeout of afternoon tabloids and other weak sisters -- seemed impervious, essential and ascendant? Were we the last craftsmen prepared for a horse-and-buggy world soon to prostrate itself before the god of internal combustion? Or were we assembly-line victims of the inert monopolists of early 1970s [Detroit](#), who thought that Pacers and Gremlins and Chevy Vegas were response enough to Japanese and European automaking superiority?

My own experience is anecdotal, I admit. I was hired out of college by the [Baltimore Sun](#) in 1983 and worked there until the third round of newsroom buyouts 12 years later. When I came to [Baltimore](#), the Sun was a dour gray lady, but one of unquestioned substance, and there were two competing evening papers. When I left in 1995, we were the last game in town, and the newsbeat-by-newsbeat attrition of veteran talent was well underway.

City to city, paper to paper, your mileage may vary. But I'm willing to trust in the Baltimore story enough to offer it up as an argument for the Detroit analogy.

Here's Baltimore in the mid-1980s:

The family-run A.S. Abell Co. owns the Sun and its sister publication, the Evening Sun -- an afternoon edition that is in direct competition with the dying Hearst paper, the News-American.

In terms of circulation and advertising, the morning Sun is ascendant, as all morning papers seem to be, and it's clear that the publishers are holding on to the evening edition just long enough to drive the last nails into the Hearst coffin. Sure enough, once the News-American folds, the Sun undertakes to lure as much circulation as possible to its evening edition before combining the two

news staffs and making the Evening Sun merely a late edition of the morning paper.

Similarly, the Sun spends the 1980s publishing, in every surrounding county, a "zoned" tabloid -- a locally oriented insert largely devoid of hard news or sophisticated storytelling, but filled with the hope that more people will subscribe to a newspaper that manages now and then to run a photo of someone's kid at the county fair.

The "tab" inserts are the last piece of the monopoly puzzle -- an effort to mitigate against the growth of smaller county papers, and ultimately, when they don't achieve all they should, the Sun simply sets about buying up smaller papers in Baltimore, Howard and Harford counties.

At the apogee of its power and influence, the Baltimore Sun, with the Evening Sun and the tabloid Suns, employs close to 500 newsroom personnel. It is a massive operation, and as the monopoly is consolidated, it is profitable.

So there we sat.

Then came the key moment in the early 1990s, when the Sun junked its tabloids and merged the evening and morning staffs, and the prevailing wisdom became that the newsroom of the remaining morning edition was now too large, that attrition was the order of the day. And so it began -- a buyout of newsroom veterans, then a second buyout of older editors, then a third buyout of more veterans.

It was, I will argue, the precise moment when the post-Watergate future of newspapers -- the one that so many of us had sold ourselves -- was made a lie. When I was in J-school, the argument was that the siren-chasing would be ceded to television, but newspapers, to thrive, would become magazines -- thoughtful, stylish, comprehensive. And magazines? To compete with newspapers they were going to be recruiting literary and investigative giants.

Better was the watchword. Chevrolets would become Buicks, and Buicks were soon to be Cadillacs. And all of them were going to be well-built, well-tuned automobiles, offering readers more each day. In order to provide something more than the simple immediacy of television, newspapers would become organs of sophisticated, unique storytelling. They would need to deliver a complex world, to explain that world, challenge and contend with it. That's what they told us in the Introduction to Journalism lectures, anyway.

Yet here were the veterans -- the labor reporter, the courthouse maven, the poverty-beat specialist, the second medical beat guy and the prisons and corrections aficionado -- damned if they weren't walking out the door forever. There would be fresh hires, and some serious players would remain, of course. But no longer would it be practical to argue that newspapers were going to become more comprehensive, and better written -- the product of experienced and committed people for whom print journalism was a life's calling.

At the moment when the Internet was about to arrive, most big-city newspapers -- having survived the arrival of television and confident in their advertising base -- were neither hungry, nor worried, nor ambitious. They were merely assets to their newspaper chains. Profits were taken, and coverage did not expand in scope and complexity.

In my newsroom, I lived through the trend of zoning (give the people what's happening in their neighborhood), the trend of brevity (never mind the details, people don't read past the jump) and ultimately, the trend of organized, clinical prize-groveling (we don't know what people want, but if we can win something, that's validation enough), not to mention several graphic redesigns of the newspaper.

I did not encounter a sustained period in which anyone endeavored to spend what it would actually cost to make the Baltimore Sun the most essential and deep-thinking and well-written account of life in central [Maryland](#). The people you needed to gather for that kind of storytelling were ushered out the door, buyout after buyout.

So in a city where half the adult black males are unemployed, where the unions have been busted, and crime and poverty have overwhelmed one neighborhood after the next, the daily newspaper no longer maintains a poverty beat or a labor beat. The city courthouse went uncovered for almost a year at one point. The last time a reporter was assigned to monitor a burgeoning prison system, I was a kid working the night desk.

Soon enough, when technology arrived to test the loyalty of longtime readers and the interest of new ones, the newspaper would be offering to cover not more of the world and its issues, but less of both -- and to do so with younger, cheaper employees, many of them newspaper-chain transplants with no organic sense of the city's history.

In place of comprehensive, complex and idiosyncratic coverage, readers of even the most serious newspapers were offered celebrity and scandal, humor and

light provocation -- the very currency of the Internet itself.

Charge for that kind of product? Who would dare?

Is there still high-end journalism? Of course. A lot of fine journalists are still laboring in the vineyard, some of them in Baltimore. But at even the more serious newspapers in most markets, high-end journalism doesn't take the form of consistent and sophisticated coverage of issues, but of special projects and five-part series on selected topics -- a distraction designed not to convince readers that a newspaper aggressively brings the world to them each day, but to convince a prize committee that someone, somewhere, deserves a plaque.

And so here we are.

In Baltimore, the newspaper now has 300 newsroom staffers, and it is run by some fellows in [Chicago](#) who think that number sufficient to the task. And the locally run company that was once willing to pay for a 500-reporter newsroom, to moderate its own profits in some basic regard and put money back into the product? Turns out it wasn't willing to do so to build a great newspaper, but merely to clear the field of rivals, to make Baltimore safe for Gremlins and Pacers. And at no point in the transition from one to the other did anyone seriously consider the true cost of building something comprehensive, essential and great.

And now, no profits. No advertising. No new readers. Now, the great gray ladies are reduced to throwing what's left of their best stuff out there on the Web, unable to charge enough for online advertising, or anything at all for the journalism itself.

Perhaps it was all inevitable. Perhaps the Internet is so profound a change in the delivery model that every newspaper -- even the best of the best -- is destined to face retrenchment and loss. Perhaps all of this was written in stone long before I was ever wandering around a student newspaper office with a pica ruler sticking out my back pocket. Perhaps everything written above is merely Talmudic commentary.

Well, what do I know? I have a general studies degree, I didn't even meet the J-school requirements, and this [HBO](#) gig I've got now doesn't exactly qualify me for a grad program at the [Wharton School of Business](#).

But one thing I do know:

A great newspaper is a great newspaper. And a good newspaper isn't great.
And a Chevy Vega by any other name is, well, a Chevy Vega.

David Simon, a Baltimore Sun reporter from 1983-95, is executive producer of HBO's "The Wire." The final season of the drama depicts the struggles of a present-day newspaper.

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