



Michigan COMMENTARY

News Without Newspapers

by Craig Ruff, President

Times are tough for daily city newspapers. Readership and profits are down. Competition is stiff: Print cannot compete against the instantaneous news coverage of radio and television. Although it is not certain that dailies will disappear entirely, the onslaught of certain social, economic, and technological factors makes their demise conceivable. This paper traces the decline of the metropolitan daily newspaper and offers commentary on the consequences of "news without newspapers."

THE LONG GOODBYE

In the 1800s the daily metropolitan newspaper bound its readers together in a single experience: the discovery of the new urban world and the society beyond. The scope of the daily newspaper, which ranged from subjects local to international, placed in each reader's hands a complete and relatively ordered universe to which s/he could belong. Through the newspaper the diversity of people, places, and phenomena became understandable and manageable.

The newspaper helped city inhabitants make sense of their baffling, chaotic environment. Tough-minded editors crusaded for causes (and sales), while reporters painted the city's dazzling, complex life in bold strokes. The newspaper provided commonality, a mirror in which all who read it could recognize themselves and their urban world. Alvin Toffler describes the mass media of the time—the Industrial Age—as giant loudspeakers. "Their power," Toffler writes, "was used across regional, ethnic, tribal, and linguistic lines to standardize the images flowing in society's mainstream."

Then, as historian Gunther Barth has noted, early in this century advances in technology started to weaken the ties binding the daily newspaper and urban life. The automobile began to carry people away from the city, contributing to suburban growth, sprawl, and a diminished interest in city news. At the same time, the nation was assuming a larger role in world affairs, relegating the city to just another story in a universe of news. Eventually, newspapers were joined in most every home by radio and then by television, both of which are alluring alternatives to reading the paper.

Now we are in the Information Age. In addition to the mass media, we have—to use Toffler's term—*demassified*, or specialized, media. Examples are local weekly newspapers, mini-magazines, radio stations targeted to specific audiences, cable television, video games, and video cassettes, all of which undermine loyalty to metropolitan daily newspapers. Furthermore, Toffler concludes that "today's mass media, both print and electronic, are wholly inadequate to cope with the communications load and to provide the requisite cultural variety for survival."

DECLINING READERSHIP

In the 1800s those who did not read newspapers could not—they were illiterate. Today, fewer than half the literate adults in the United States regularly read a paper.

For many metropolitan dailies, subscription revenues, which are tied directly to readership, are stagnant at best; in many cities, subscriptions are down. At the end of World War II most households subscribed to a morning *and* an afternoon paper. Market penetration was an astounding 135 percent, meaning that more papers were sold every day than there were households. By the late 1960s circulation levelled off at about 62 million nationally (a market penetration of about 100 percent). But while the population kept growing in the 1970s and 1980s, daily newspaper circulation stayed the same. Today market penetration is about 67 percent, half what it was at the end of World War II.

Regular readership has become sporadic as well: In 1967, 73 percent of Americans read a paper every day. By 1989 that number had dropped to 50 percent. Many people today pick up a newspaper on Thursday



or Friday to check out weekend entertainment options, or they buy a Sunday paper to fill leisure time on the one day of the week they have time to read, or they buy a weekday paper for grocery ads and recipes. But they are not regular readers.

Are newspaper prices discouraging readership? Twenty-five or thirty-five cents for a weekday paper and \$1.50 for the Sunday edition strike most people as reasonable. A month's subscription—two thousand pages or more of newsprint—costs about fifteen dollars, only \$3.40 in 1960 terms. But readers are fickle, and economists describe newspaper pricing as very elastic: Every increase, even a nickel a day, causes a dropoff in buyers.

In particular, newspaper price increases lose younger readers, who grew up with television, and who have less leisure time, disposable income, and interest in community news and events than do their parents. A recent Newspaper Advertising Bureau study finds that among people aged thirty to forty-four, daily readership has fallen from 75 percent in 1972 to 45 percent in 1989.

DECLINING ADVERTISING

For many newspapers, the sale of advertising brings in more revenue than the sale of papers. Advertisers, however, now often find that such alternatives as direct mail, cable and broadcast television, and radio give them more bang for the buck in reaching their audiences. One full-page weekday ad in a medium-sized daily newspaper in Michigan costs about three thousand dollars. For this same outlay, seven thousand direct-mail pieces can be printed and sent to carefully targeted prime consumers. For some businesses, their hottest targets (people aged thirty to forty-five living in two-career households) are becoming hard to reach by newspaper because readership is falling.

Until 1990 newspaper advertising revenue had increased an average of 9 percent annually for twenty years. In 1990 it actually dropped below the previous year, and the Newspaper Advertising Bureau projects only 2 percent growth this year.

To be noticed, an advertisement must grab attention, and newspaper ads pale in comparison to the dazzle of television. On an average day an American hears or sees fourteen hundred marketing messages; only about forty sink in. A televised advertisement might air several times in one day, with the advertiser's intent that it will stick with you once. A newspaper advertiser must hope that you will catch an ad during a single exposure, and the message cannot grab the potential customer in the same way a TV or radio spot can—if by no other means than by having its volume cranked up.

THE COMPETITION

The most compelling reason for the decline in daily newspaper readership may be competition from radio and television. At best, the news delivered by a morning daily is eight hours old. Awakening at 6:30 a.m., a person hungry for overnight news can turn on the television and get national and international news as well as local news updates. Or one can get an earful of radio news. A radio promo I heard recently says, "The fastest way to read your morning newspapers is to tune into National Public Radio." Instantaneous news beats an eight-hour lag any day. And listening is easier than reading.

Consider, for example, the Persian Gulf war. In its first days, fans of Cable News Network (CNN), which provides news around-the-clock, became addicts. A lodging industry analyst at Wertheim Schroder & Company, a New York investment firm, commented in mid-January, "Restaurants, hotels, and gaming establishments seem to be suffering from the CNN effect. People are intensely interested in the first real-time war in history, and they are just planting themselves [at home] in front of the TV."

In addition to timely coverage and day-long convenience, television has the advantage of visuals. Research shows that a moving image promotes the retention of information far better than does text with—perhaps—a black and white photograph. There also is the issue of credibility: To many, the visual presence of the television newscaster or newsmaker—with his or her tone of voice, facial expression, and body language—lends TV news a magnetic credibility that faceless newsprint cannot match.

Competition to metropolitan dailies also comes from other print media, including publications specializing in particular issues (business, health), leisure time pursuits (tennis, scuba diving), segments of society (career women, teens), or communities (suburbs, cities within a metropolitan area). With the mass media

cutting such a wide swath, new publications have had to develop niches in the market. They are not *mass* media; their audiences are like-minded.

One niche in this segmented environment is served by a national newspaper, *USA Today*. In four sections (national and state-by-state news, sports, money, and lifestyle/entertainment), it covers a little bit of everything. Unlike traditional newspapers, however, *USA Today* relies heavily on graphics to convey information. A parallel with *Cliff's Notes* comes to mind: Both summarize at the expense of detail and nuance.

Expedience, immediacy, and visuals are the appealing hallmarks of the electronic media. Specialization is offered by weekly publications, magazines, and newsletters. General, international, and national news can be obtained from *USA Today*, such weekly news magazines as *Time* and *Newsweek*, and television. The metro daily cannot compete.

News And Entertainment News and entertainment are blurring in many people's minds, and this is hurting newspapers. The blurring has been spawned largely by technology: Newspapers cannot compete against the visual and aural stimulation of television. In other words, newspapers cannot make news as entertaining as TV can.

It is difficult to distinguish "hard news" from "features" (a celebrity profile, a human interest story, a recipe, a gossip column). They both inform, but the latter is more likely to entertain. Most people prefer to be entertained while being informed, hence the popularity of editorial cartoonists and sports columnists: As a rule, they do not *break* news, they just make it *enjoyable*.

The newspaper originally was intended to communicate news and, like the medium on which it was based—the pamphlet—to opine. Along the way, publishers invented entertaining features, such as editorial cartoons, crossword puzzles, and comic strips; these add much to the reader's enjoyment but little to the coverage of politics, the economy, or world affairs. Many readers have become so attached to such features that even changing the placement of, let alone dropping, certain of them causes an avalanche of critical mail. I suspect that many people buy newspapers primarily for their entertainment features, not their news coverage.

But newspapers cannot entertain as can motion pictures, television, or even radio. These media were invented not to opine or to cover news, but solely to entertain. It was years after TV was invented that producers began to experiment with news coverage. Now forty years old, television devotes very little of its daily schedule to news, and that which it does present is blended unmercifully with warm fuzzy celebrity interviews and human interest stories.

Notwithstanding TV's limited news agenda, the medium engages and entertains the viewer so effectively that it now is perceived by 70 percent of Americans as their primary source of news and information. Americans have weaned themselves from the written word and become glued to the screen. Nearly 60 percent of adults never have read a book, and most of the rest read only one a year. Reading is ceasing to be a primary way of knowing something in our society, writes Princeton University professor Alvin Kernan.

Television inextricably has linked news and entertainment. It has shown all ages, but particularly those under age fifty, who grew up under its spell, just how politics, economics, world affairs, and even human suffering can be made shockingly real and engrossing. Particularly for those aged forty-five and under, television is *the* medium both for enjoyment *and* news. In their knowledge of the world, TV is as influential as their schooling, and it certainly is the young's primary entertainment medium.

Between entertainment and news, most people, most of the time, prefer entertainment. It is big business and profitable to those who sell it. Entertainment accounted for \$300 billion in sales in 1989 (half what the nation spent on health care), 20 percent of that from overseas markets. Entertainment is this country's second biggest export (aerospace is first). Of the world's home video revenue, 55 percent is earned in the United States. Of the world's television revenues, 75 percent is earned here.

Given such desire for entertainment, it is not surprising that television—the entertainment medium—would usurp newspapers' role as the primary news conveyer. It has developed a loyal following, offers instantaneous reporting, and—more effectively than newspapers—blends entertainment with news.

In the financial war for clients, there is no contest between television (entertainment first, news second) and newspapers (news first, entertainment second.) No matter how hard they try, newspapers cannot create enough one-dimensional, entertaining features to compete against television. Even as newspapers expand features in relation to news coverage, the publishing industry is ceding more and more of its news-gathering and dissemination prowess to other media. As television perfects news as entertainment, the competition with newspapers becomes a David-and-Goliath contest, and Goliath is going to come out on top.

“Tell Me More” Technology The market’s preference for features and entertainment combines with another factor to spell continuing hardship for newspapers: the inability of newspapers to interact with readers. As television’s potential to interact with viewers is developed, its position as the medium of choice will be cemented. To entertain people raised on Nintendo and to satisfy the thirst for more information on topics of choice, television soon will offer viewers the option of asking for more.

Imagine Peter Jennings starting out a newscast, “Today, in Bolivia, one hundred thousand people marched through the streets of LaPaz.” It catches your interest, you push the TELL MORE button on your remote control, and Mr. Jennings continues with the details of the latest Latin American coup d’etat. If you are not interested in more detail, you push the SOMETHING ELSE button, and Mr. Jennings is replaced on the screen by someone else who informs you of an oil spill off Newfoundland. Or maybe you have a set with a screen within your screen, enabling you and your spouse simultaneously to watch (but listen individually through head sets) *both* news reports.

At the local level, broadcast and cable TV will team up to provide the very news and information for which one generally buys a daily newspaper. The difference will be that television will be interactive and the newspaper will not. While both may tell the consumer what time movies are showing at local theaters, only through interactive TV can the user ask if a show is sold out, and, “May I still reserve a seat at the 11:00 p.m. showing?” And, even more convenient: “Bill me.”

The advertising mainstays of newspapers—cars, homes, and groceries—will gravitate to local interactive TV. The user can ask if that 1987 Olds 98 is in good condition, what appliances are included in the property for sale at 1800 Elm Street, and what vegetables are freshest today. A viewer can call up an item, say, eggs, and ask the price per dozen at each grocery store. (What grocer would decline to advertise?)

Television already has moved beyond mere advertising. Entire cable networks are devoted to home shopping: clothes, jewelry, small appliances. Now, from the comfort of your home, you not only can comparison shop, but buy. These networks are negotiating deals with broadcast as well as cable systems. (“Air my shopping program from 2:00–3:00 a.m., and I will give you a share of the purchase receipts.”) Can newspapers compete against the onslaught?

NEWS WITHOUT NEWSPAPERS: THE CONSEQUENCES

The metropolitan daily newspaper, the evangelist of political and social change and commentator on our lives and work, may be passing into oblivion. Technology, competition, societal change, and other factors augur poorly for its continuation as a major organ for news gathering and dissemination. What will life without it be like? As a society, we must begin to assess the consequences of its diminution or absence, chiefly the loss of a common urban identity, weakened news gathering, diluted leadership, and the failure to record—and the loss of one of the means to reconstruct—our common history.

Social Myopia Modern society is fragmented and localized. Our vision is narrow, and our communities of interest are shrinking. The number of people with whom we share something in common—with whom we communicate and share experiences—is contracting at an alarming rate. In the visionary’s construct of the office in the home, the school in the home, banking at home, and shopping at home, every person is an island. The traffic jam in the neighborhood rather than poverty across town monopolizes dinner-table conversation.

The U.S. Census Bureau tells us that more and more we live in metropolitan rather than rural areas. Yet we feel less a part the metropolitan community as a *whole* and more a part of the one square mile or so of activity around our home. Moreover, the decline of the metropolitan daily newspaper and the rise of the suburban weekly helps contribute to the collapse of our universe of concern.

Let us imagine, for instance, that at some future date the *Grand Rapids Press* ceases to be a journalistic force. It is not hard to imagine its replacements: Hypothetically, they will be the *East Grand Rapids News*, the *Northwest Grand Rapids News*, the *Southeast Grand Rapids News*, the *Wyoming News*, and the *Ada Gazette*, among others. Because smaller publications cannot employ the economies of scale enjoyed by a big paper, the higher costs of printing, typesetting, and distribution may mean that subscribers will pay more for their local paper than they do for today's *Press*, and/or that local advertisers will bear a greater cost to reach narrower target audiences. The local paper will be a shopper's guide, with just enough neighborhood and city or township hall news to resemble a newspaper. Editorials will lack scope and vitality for fear of offending advertisers. The papers will fulfill our isolated needs and, at the same time, fuel greater isolation.

An extreme democratic pluralism will divide news reporting. National and international events will be carried by cable and network television; neighborhood news will be reported by local cablecasts and shopper's guides; but state, regional, county, and often even city news will be given short shrift.

The Decline of Journalism Losing the metropolitan daily means losing some of what protects, improves, and thereby unites urban society. What will become of investigative journalism if daily newspapers crumble? Of all consequences, none strikes me as more threatening than the conceivable end of the free press as political and societal watchdog. Before he became president, Thomas Jefferson said, "Were it left for me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

Television's answer to Woodward and Bernstein is "Sixty Minutes" or, less charitably, "American's Most Wanted." TV's investigative functions are voyeuristic, aimed at an audience that wants to be titillated. Television viewers are interested in, but not roused to action by, one-sided hatchet jobs on a public figure or close-up footage of a murder victim. Viewers are accustomed to window peeping into society's dark side, not participating in solving society's problems. Although nobody disputes its effectiveness in startling the eye and wounding the heart, television breeds complacency. A leap to action is not what we expect of the couch potato.

Losing the metro daily also means the disappearance of the newspaper beat reporter who maintains regular contact with public officials, police officers, business executives, workers, and average citizens. Trained in schools of journalism and hard knocks, beat reporters learn to interpret city life as it is lived day by day. Their street savvy and familiarity with urban routines attune them to subtle irregularities that may be the germ of tomorrow's headlines. They are able to observe urban progress or disintegration and link cause and effect. They respond not only to the sensational fire or murder for the captivating eyewitness report, but also to the mundane, obscure change in police practices or government services that may affect far more people but make for dull pictures. Without the beat reporter, the citizenry loses an independent observer whose eyes, ears, and word processor act as a check on misconduct and keep readers aware of the ebb and flow of life in the larger community.

The language of news, too, will change forever when the metro daily declines to second-rate importance or disappears. Newspaper reporters do not write in the glib, conversational style of TV. They worry about balance and accuracy, because their words—and those they capture of others—live on in print. Not so with television, where facial expressions can round out a story, and where the day's coverage is erased almost instantly. Some print journalists make their way into television, but most express disdain for the lack of thoroughness of the TV reporter working under a 6:00 p.m. newscast deadline. The time constraints of television permit a story only to be highlighted, not covered comprehensively; a print journalist with a hot story gets all the space needed. No matter how important a speech, for television only one or two minutes can be excerpted for airing; newspapers can print the full text.

News requires news hounds. News cannot be generated solely by the public relations wizards of companies and the press secretaries of public officials. Who will unearth the other news? If there are fewer newspapers, there will be fewer reporters, the watchdogs for the public.

The Leadership Vacuum Large daily newspapers deliver not just news, but leadership. On countless occasions the metropolitan newspaper has been the catalyst for political, social, and economic change. Its authority, drawn from its breadth of readership, has been loaned to causes. The editorial board has been the locus of disparate community interests and the broker of competing views and community

priorities. The newspaper alerts the public to hidden problems; it unearths problem-solving options; it molds opinion.

Newspapers have lost much of their crusading nature. Once, national agendas were set by personalities like Hearst and Pulitzer. Bray at the *Detroit News* and Stroud at the *Detroit Free Press* still can command attention at the state level. Lloyd at the *Grand Rapids Press* and Longstaff at the *Bay City Times* still can set a tone in their community. But multimedia empires and newspaper chains headed by distant boards of directors have taken most of the yeast and zest out of editorials. Suburbanized papers have even less sting.

Can television assume the role of opinion molder? Perhaps. But in its forty-odd years of history, TV's awe-inspiring power as a medium of communication has been curbed in the name of objectivity and balance. Such restraint likely will continue, despite the fact—as proven by nineteenth century newspapers and eighteenth century pamphleteers—that unfettered and highly opinionated media—particularly if competing—stimulate thought, provoke debate, and enjoin public discourse; in fact, the more brazen the opinion, the more active the discourse. Given the questionable continued viability of large newspapers, television must be allowed greater freedom to crusade and opine, and it must assume the responsibility of doing so. Moderation in the pursuit of fairness dulls political and social dialogue.

The Absence of Annals With the specialization and localization of information and fewer tools to monitor society, how will we learn of things beyond us about which should be concerned? Knowledge and tastes are narrowing. Such problems as the decline of cities and the plight of people and institutions far removed from us are becoming someone else's concern. Indifference is growing from the seeds of specialization.

The immediacy of television quenches our thirst to know what is happening "right now." But how will yesterday's news be organized and archived? Without the record of daily life and living chronicled by metropolitan newspapers, how will future generations learn from the past and predict the future? As a student I spent hours in the microfilm department of the University of Michigan library bringing up 1887 editions of the *New York Herald-Tribune* and the *New York Times* to learn of long-past events and newsmakers. Television stations archive only snippets of video, largely to call up on short notice if needed to fill out a story about a current newsmaker. If you want to see last Wednesday's 6:00 p.m. newscast, forget it: It has no shelf life. More important, if five years from now you want to know a 1991 newsmaker's thoughts or opinions in depth or detail, you probably will not find them if you must rely on TV footage. At best, you could review the outtakes—if they were saved—from a twenty-minute interview that was cut to fit a twelve-second sound bite. For uncut text and detailed quotations, you must look in the newspaper morgue (archives) or a library. But what if large daily newspapers no longer are published? Although there will be tapes and transcripts of interview shows and microfilm of news magazines, the mine of information will be much shallower.

A FINAL THOUGHT

The decline or demise of the daily city newspaper will leave our political, economic, and social affairs less well covered. Opportunities for investigative reporters will diminish. Much of the balance and comprehensiveness of news coverage will disappear. Repetition of news highlights will be the order of the day rather than originality and depth in reporting. A leadership vacuum will be created in many communities. Benign discourse will be fostered and forceful opinion muted. The chronicle of our times will be deficient. The gravest consequence, however may be an accelerating preoccupation with local concerns, ever more narrowly defined.

Society does not owe newspapers survival. But society owes *itself* the news coverage, social investigation, leadership, intellectual expression, empathy, and record that metropolitan daily newspapers generate.

If such vacuums occur, who and what will fill them? Think about it as you skim or skip tomorrow's paper.