

On the Death of Newspapering

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A friend sidled up to me the other day and said his daughter wanted to get a journalism degree and become a newspaper reporter. My response was that he should just loan her his Smith & Wesson. The consequences would be the same and she wouldn't be stuck with all that college loan debt.

Newspapering used to be robust fun. That's because we used to be a two-newspaper-town country.

One paper would be the calm, conservative, business-community oriented rag; the other would be the fire-breathing, liberal-bent, crusading rag. They went head-to-head every day with their coverage, and whether liberal or conservative, there would be an editor at each who said to his or her reporters, "Chill out and check your facts."

Get it first and get it right – that was the rule – because if you blew it the competition would clean your clock.

Competition: that's how we got to the root of things. The competition of ideas informed our debate about matters that were of import great or minor. Neither newspaper in a two-newspaper town got it right every morning or afternoon, but if you read both, you could arrive at a sensible middle and a conversation could ensue.

Most important, two newspapers independently owned and edited in a single circulation area kept each other honest. The publishers and editors could spin things, but they had to hew to the facts or they'd get called on it, mercilessly.

I started my newspapering career in a country with two-newspaper towns: Seattle, Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Coos Bay, Salem, Anchorage, Elizabeth, N.J. and the Silver Valley. You woke up in the morning and dashed to the front porch, picking up the papers and dying to know who had kicked whose butt. Did we get it first? Did we get it right? Or did those other guys whomp us?

As a reporter you cared because your editors would drag you into a room with rubber hoses if you blew it. "Where the hell were you when this happened?" was a pretty common question in the morning's inquisition.

In a one-newspaper town, these inquisitions don't occur. Who cares? There's nobody out there with a different version of the truth.

Do you think there aren't different versions of truth?

Try covering a murder trial sometime.

In the first week, the prosecution puts on such a powerful case that the defendant was so born to be a murderer that he bit his mother in First Grade and should have fried in Hell before kindergarten and had good reasons to commit the crime. You're convinced: he did it.

Then comes the public defender, by whose reckoning this sorry man was conducting church and handing out alms for the poor in his home while the crime happened way over there, across town. He couldn't have done it.

Truth evolves, it needs study, and it's why when only the prosecutor or the defender rules the roost, we get no truth. One version of a thing is not enough.

Hence this lamentation. Our “news media” has become corporatist and singularized. There is no more conversation. It's all about ads and the publisher's political agenda. We are down to about one dozen two-newspaper towns, from the thousands that used to exist when I got into the game in 1971.

The “new media” won't fix this. There's no internet bull-whipping in the back room to keep a reporter honest or competent, or any mechanism to recompense the good and careful ones. All of which means just a bunch of us yelling at each other. Or, as Bruce Cockburn would say, “They Call it Democracy.”