Lies Become Truths: The Demise of the Newspaper Leaves Americans Dumber, Blinder and Prone to Ideological Manipulation

The loss of print journalism is impoverishing our civil discourse and leaving us less and less connected to the city, the nation and the world around us.

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I visited the Hartford Courant as a high school student. It was the first time I was in a newsroom. The Connecticut paper's newsroom, the size of a city block, was packed with rows of metal desks, most piled high with newspapers and notebooks. Reporters banged furiously on heavy typewriters set amid tangled phone cords, overflowing ashtrays, dirty coffee mugs and stacks of paper, many of which were in sloping piles on the floor. The din and clamor, the incessantly ringing phones, the haze of cigarette and cigar smoke that lay over the feverish hive, the hoarse shouts, the bustle and movement of reporters, most in disheveled coats and ties, made it seem an exotic, living organism. I was infatuated. I dreamed of entering this fraternity, which I eventually did, for more than two decades writing for The Dallas Morning News, The Washington Post, The Christian Science Monitor and, finally, The New York Times, where I spent most of my career as a foreign correspondent.

Newsrooms today are anemic and forlorn wastelands. I was recently in the newsroom at The Philadelphia Inquirer, and patches of the floor, also the size of a city block, were open space or given over to rows of empty desks. These institutions are going the way of the massive rotary presses that lurked like undersea monsters in the bowels of newspaper buildings, roaring to life at night. The heavily oiled behemoths, the ones that spat out sheets of newsprint at lightning speed, once empowered and enriched newspaper publishers who for a few lucrative decades held a monopoly on connecting sellers with buyers. Now that that monopoly is gone, now that the sellers no long need newsprint to reach buyers, the fortunes of newspapers are declining as fast as the page counts of daily news sheets.

The great newspapers sustained legendary reporters such as I.F. Stone, Murray Kempton and Homer Bigart who wrote stories that brought down embezzlers, cheats, crooks and liars, who covered wars and conflicts, who told us about famines in Africa and the peculiarities of the French or what it was like to be poor and forgotten in our urban slums or Appalachia. These
presses churned out raw lists of data, from sports scores to stock prices. Newspapers took us into parts of the city or the world we would never otherwise have seen or visited. Reporters and critics reviewed movies, books, dance, theater and music and covered sporting events. Newspapers printed the text of presidential addresses, sent reporters to chronicle the inner workings of City Hall and followed the courts and the police. Photographers and reporters raced to cover the lurid and the macabre, from Mafia hits to crimes of passion.

**We are losing a peculiar culture and an ethic.** This loss is impoverishing our civil discourse and leaving us less and less connected to the city, the nation and the world around us. The death of newsprint represents the end of an era. **And news gathering will not be replaced by the Internet.** Journalism, at least on the large scale of old newsrooms, is no longer commercially viable. **Reporting is time-consuming and labor-intensive. It requires going out and talking to people. It means doing this every day. It means looking constantly for sources, tips, leads, documents, informants, whistle-blowers, new facts and information, untold stories and news. Reporters often spend days finding little or nothing of significance. The work can be tedious and is expensive. And as the budgets of large metropolitan dailies shrink, the very trade of reporting declines. Most city papers at their zenith employed several hundred reporters and editors and had operating budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The steady decline of the news business means we are plunging larger and larger parts of our society into dark holes and opening up greater opportunities for unchecked corruption, disinformation and the abuse of power.**

*A democracy survives when its citizens have access to trustworthy and impartial sources of information, when it can discern lies from truth, when civic discourse is grounded in verifiable fact. And with the decimation of reporting these sources of information are disappearing. The increasing fusion of news and entertainment, the rise of a class of celebrity journalists on television who define reporting by their access to the famous and the powerful, the retreat by many readers into the ideological ghettos of the Internet and the ruthless drive by corporations to destroy the traditional news business are leaving us deaf, dumb and blind. The relentless assault on the "liberal press" by right-wing propaganda outlets such as Fox News or by the Christian right is in fact an assault on a system of information grounded in verifiable fact. And once this bedrock of civil discourse is eradicated, people will be free, as many already are, to believe whatever they want to believe, to pick and choose what facts or opinions suit their world and what do not. In this new world lies will become true.*
I, like many who cared more about truth than news, was pushed out of The New York Times, specifically over my vocal and public opposition to the war in Iraq. This is not a new story. Those reporters who persistently challenge the orthodoxy of belief, who question and examine the reigning political passions, always tacitly embraced by the commercial media, are often banished. There is a constant battle in newsrooms between the managers, those who serve the interests of the institution and the needs of the advertisers, and reporters whose loyalty is to readers. I have a great affection for reporters, who hide their idealism behind a thin veneer of cynicism and worldliness. I also harbor a deep distrust and even loathing for the careerists who rise up the food chain to become managers and editors.

Sidney Schanberg was nearly killed in Cambodia in 1975 after staying there for The New York Times to cover the conquest of Phnom Penh by the Khmer Rouge, reporting for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. Later he went back to New York from Cambodia and ran the city desk. He pushed reporters to report about the homeless, the poor and the victims of developers who were forcing families out of their rent-controlled apartments. But it was not a good time to give a voice to the weak and the poor. The social movements built around the opposition to the Vietnam War had dissolved. Alternative publications, including the magazine Ramparts, which through a series of exposés had embarrassed the established media organizations into doing real reporting, had gone out of business.

The commercial press had, once again, become lethargic. It had less and less incentive to challenge the power elite. Many editors viewed Schanberg’s concerns as relics of a dead era. He was removed as city editor and assigned to write a column about New York. He used the column, however, to again decry the abuse of the powerful, especially developers. The then-editor of the paper, Abe Rosenthal, began to acidly refer to Schanberg as the resident “Commie” and address him as “St. Francis.” Rosenthal, who met William F. Buckley almost weekly for lunch along with the paper’s publisher, Arthur “Punch” Sulzberger, grew increasingly impatient with Schanberg, who was challenging the activities of their powerful friends. Schanberg became a pariah. He was not invited to the paper’s table at two consecutive Inner Circledinners held for New York reporters. The senior editors and the publisher did not attend the previews for the film “The Killing Fields,” based on Schanberg’s experience in Cambodia. His days at the newspaper were numbered.

The city Schanberg profiled in his column did not look like the glossy ads in Rosenthal’s new lifestyle sections or the Sunday New York Times magazine. Schanberg’s city was one in which thousands of
citizens were sleeping on the streets. It was one where there were lines at soup kitchens. It was a city where the mentally ill were thrown onto heating grates or into jails like human refuse. He wrote of people who were unable to afford housing. *He lost his column and left the paper to work for New York Newsday and later The Village Voice.*

Schanberg’s story was one of many. The best reporters almost always run afoul of the mandarins above them, a clash that sees them defanged and demoted or driven out. They are banished by a class of careerists whom the war correspondent Homer Bigart dismissed as “the pygmies.” One evening Bigart was assigned to write about a riot, drawing from the information provided by reporters on the scene. As one reporter, John Kifner, called in from a phone booth rioters began to shake it. Kifner relayed the distressing bit of news to Bigart, who, sick of the needling of his editors, reassumed Kifner with the words: “At least you’re dealing with sane people.”

Those who insist on reporting uncomfortable truths always try the patience of the careerists who manage these institutions. If they are too persistent, as most good reporters are, they become “a problem.” This battle, which exists in all newsrooms, was summed up for me by the Los Angeles Times reporter Dial Torgerson, whom I worked with in Central America until he was killed by a land mine on the border between Honduras and Nicaragua. “Always remember,” he once told me of newspaper editors, “they are the enemy.”

When I met with Schanberg in his apartment on Manhattan’s Upper West Side he told me, “I heard all kinds of reports over the years that the wealthy patrons of the Metropolitan Museum of Art would often get to use the customs clearance provided to the museum to import personal items, including jewelry, which was not going to the museum. I can’t prove this, but I believe it to be true. Would the Times investigate this? Not in a million years. The publisher at the time was the chairman of the board of the museum. These were his friends.”

But Schanberg also argues, as do I, that newspapers prove a vital bulwark for a democratic state. It is possible to decry their numerous failings and compromises with the power elite and yet finally honor them as important to the maintenance of democracy. Traditionally, if a reporter goes out and reports on an event, the information is usually trustworthy and accurate. The report can be slanted or biased. It can leave out vital facts. But it is not fiction. The day The New York Times and other great city newspapers die, if such a day comes, will be a black day for the nation.
Newspapers “do more than anyone else, although they left out a lot of things,” Schanberg said. “There are stories on their blackout list. But it is important the paper is there because they spend money on what they chose to cover. Most of the problem of mainstream journalism is what they leave out. But what they do, aside from the daily boiler plate, press releases and so forth, is very, very important to the democratic process.”

“Papers function as a guide to newcomers, to immigrants, as to what the ethos is, what the rules are, how we are supposed to behave,” Schanberg added. “That is not always good, obviously, because this is the consensus of the Establishment. But papers, probably more in the earlier years than now, print texts of things people will never see elsewhere. It tells them what you have to do to cast a vote. It covers things like the swearing in of immigrants. They are a positive force. I don’t think The New York Times was ever a fully committed accountability paper. I am not sure there is one. I don’t know who coined the phrase Afghanistanism, but it fits for newspapers. Afghanistanism means you can cover all the corruption you find in Afghanistan, but don’t try to do it in your own backyard. The Washington Post does not cover Washington. It covers official Washington. The Times ignores lots of omissions and worse by members of the Establishment.”

“Newspapers do not erase bad things,” Schanberg went on. “Newspapers keep the swamp from getting any deeper, from rising higher. We do it in spurts. We discover the civil rights movement. We discover the women’s rights movement. We go at it hellbent because now it is kosher to write about those who have been neglected and treated like half citizens. And then when things calm down it becomes easy not to do that anymore.”

The death of newspapers means, as Schanberg points out, that we will lose one more bulwark holding back the swamp of corporate malfeasance, abuse and lies. It will make it harder for us as a society to separate illusion from reality, fact from opinion, reality from fantasy. There is nothing, of course, intrinsically good about newspapers. We have long been cursed with sleazy tabloids and the fictional stories of the supermarket press, which have now become the staple of television journalism. The commercial press, in the name of balance and objectivity, had always skillfully muted the truth in the name of news or blotted it out. But the loss of great newspapers, newspapers that engage with the community, means the loss of one of the cornerstones of our open, democratic state. We face the prospect, in the very near future, of major metropolitan cities without city newspapers. This loss will diminish our capacity for
self-reflection and take away the critical tools we need to monitor what is happening around us.

The leaders of the civil rights movement grasped from the start that without a press willing to attend their marches and report fairly from their communities on the injustices they decried and the repression they suffered, the movement would “have been a bird without wings,” as civil rights leader and U.S. Rep. John Lewis said.

“Without the media’s willingness to stand in harm’s way and starkly portray events of the Movement as they saw them unfold, Americans may never have understood or even believed the horrors that African Americans faced in the Deep South,” Lewis, a Georgia Democrat, said in 2005 when the House celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act. “That commitment to publish the truth took courage. It was incredibly dangerous to be seen with a pad, a pen, or a camera in Mississippi, Alabama or Georgia where the heart of the struggle took place. There was a violent desperation among local and State officials and the citizens to maintain the traditional order. People wanted to keep their injustice a secret. They wanted to hide from the critical eye of a disapproving world. They wanted to flee from the convictions of their own conscience. And they wanted to destroy the ugly reflection that nonviolent protestors and camera images so graphically displayed. So when the Freedom Riders climbed off the bus in Alabama in 1961, for example, there were reporters who were beaten and bloodied before any of us were.”

Our political apparatus and systems of information have been diminished and taken hostage by corporations. Our government no longer responds to the needs or rights of citizens. We have been left disempowered without the traditional mechanisms to be heard. Those who battle the corporate destruction of the ecosystem and seek to protect the remnants of our civil society must again take to the streets. They have to engage in acts of civil disobedience. But this time around the media and the systems of communication have dramatically changed.

The death of journalism, the loss of reporters on the airwaves and in print who believed the plight of the ordinary citizen should be reported, means that it will be harder for ordinary voices and dissenters to reach the wider public. The preoccupation with news as entertainment and the loss of sustained
reporting will effectively marginalize and silence those who seek to be heard or to defy established power.

Protests, unlike in the 1960s, will have a difficult time garnering the daily national coverage that characterized the reporting on the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement and in the end threatened the power elite. Acts of protest, no longer covered or barely covered, will leap up like disconnected wildfires, more easily snuffed out or ignored. It will be hard if not impossible for resistance leaders to have their voices amplified across the nation, to build a national movement for change. The failings of newspapers were huge, but in the years ahead, as the last battle for democracy means dissent, civil disobedience and protest, we will miss them.

Chris Hedges, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, is a senior fellow at the Nation Institute. He writes a regular column for TruthDig every Monday. His latest book is Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle.