

The Washington Post

Frayed Thread in a Free Society

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By Kathleen Parker
Sunday, March 15, 2009; A17

BOSTON -- The biggest challenge facing America's struggling newspaper industry may not be the high cost of newsprint or lost ad revenue, but ignorance stoked by drive-by punditry.

Yes, Dittoheads, you heard it right.

Drive-by pundits, to spin off of Rush Limbaugh's "drive-by media," are non-journalists who have been demonizing the media for the past 20 years or so and who blame the current news crisis on bias.

There is surely room for media criticism, and a few bad actors in recent years have badly frayed public trust. And, yes, some newspapers are more liberal than their readership and do a lousy job of concealing it.

But the greater truth is that newspaper reporters, editors and institutions are responsible for the boots-on-the-ground grub work that produces the news stories and performs the government watchdog role so crucial to a democratic republic.

Unfortunately, the chorus of media bashing from certain quarters has succeeded in convincing many Americans that they don't need newspapers. The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press recently found that fewer than half of Americans -- 43 percent -- say that losing their local newspaper would hurt civic life in their community "a lot." Only 33 percent say they would miss the local paper if it were no longer available.

A younger generation, meanwhile, has little understanding or appreciation of the relationship between a free press and a free society. Pew found that just 27 percent of Americans born since 1977 read a newspaper the previous day.

Such grim tidings are familiar to the 80 or so editors and publishers gathered the other day for the annual New England Newspaper Association meeting, where I was a speaker. But what to do about it? How does the newspaper industry survive in a climate in which the public doesn't know what it doesn't know? Or what it needs?

Constant criticism of the "elite media" is comical to most reporters, whose paychecks wouldn't cover Limbaugh's annual dry cleaning bill. The truly elite media are the people most Americans have never heard of -- the daily-grind reporters who turn out for city council and school board meetings. Or the investigative teams who chase leads for months to expose abuse or corruption.

These are the champions of the industry, not the food-fighters on TV or the grenade throwers on radio. Or the bloggers (with a few exceptions), who may be excellent critics and fact-checkers, but who rely on newspapers to provide their material.

As others have noted, the Internet can't quickly enough fill the void created by lost newspapers. In time, some markets simply won't have a town crier -- and then who will go to all those meetings where news is made? What will people not know? In such a vacuum, gossip rules the mob.

That newspapers have to adapt to a changed world is a given. But just how much the world has changed is sometimes hard for old-schoolers (like me) to wrap their minds around.

Alex S. Jones, director of Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, tried to break the news gently to the crowd of mostly older men and a few women at the meeting.

In the not-distant future, says Jones, the news may be delivered via a video game. Forget the Internet. Forget blogs, tweets and tags. Forget Jim Cramer-style infotainment. Millions of people are already living in computerized parallel universes through games such as "The Sims" and "World of Warcraft" (WoW). We may have to toss the newspaper on *those* stoops -- in the virtual world of fake life.

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For those who have been busy with real life, "The Sims" is apparently popular with women who can create a virtual doppelganger and live happily in the suburbs. For millions of guys, WoW is a role-playing game that combines fantasy with mythology. One can't help noting that males and females acting out fantasies are drawn to roles frowned upon in real life: suburban homemaking and warrior-hero play. Hmmmm.

While executives ponder the possibly strange future of news delivery, the more immediate challenge is how to keep institutions in place and profitable so that the news can be covered.

Whatever business models emerge, Jones says newspapers have to focus on their traditional core of fact-based, serious reporting. We might add to that formula the need for a serious populace informed about the fragile thread that connects a free press to a free future.

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