

Lamenting the fate of newspapers: Opinion

star_ledger_building.jpg

The Star-Ledger, New Jersey's largest daily newspaper, said Thursday it is cutting 170 jobs, including 25 percent of the newsroom staff. (Frances Micklow/The Star-Ledger)

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By Carl Golden

First jobs — like first loves — are the ones most often and fondly remembered.

Showing up in an office or a factory floor or behind a sales counter — nervous, a little scared — is recalled years later with affection and more than a little sentimentality.

It was a seminal moment of life, the passage from adolescence into the adult world. It was the start of accepting responsibility, answering for your own actions, and a fuller understanding that you controlled your future.

Mine was the newspaper business. When I walked into the newsroom of the Easton (Pa.) Express — a 17-year-old kid who'd graduated high school five days before — I knew this was where I belonged.

It was a cacophony of ringing telephones, shouted questions and orders, the clacking keys of dozens of typewriters, the hammering of teletype machines. Clouds of cigarette smoke clung to a ceiling permanently stained a sickly yellow by absorbing years of fumes. Empty coffee cartons and newspapers littered the floor. Beat-up wooden desks were shoved into a more or less orderly setup.

It was an electric atmosphere, so viscerally compelling that the tingling I felt then returns today, more than 50 years later, when I recall it.

It is, then, sad to witness the steady decline of newspapers, shoved closer to oblivion by the satanic machine I'm sitting in front of at this moment.

Another hammer blow fell last week when The Star-Ledger announced a 25 percent reduction in its newsroom staff — 40 reporters, editors, photographers and other staffers — and a consolidation of its operations to serve its print outlets and online sites.

The Ledger was on track to lose \$19 million this year and is by no means the only paper clinging to existence. Shutdowns, layoffs, scaled-back publication schedules and labor concessions have become common occurrences industry-wide.

Paid circulation continues a downward spiral as consumer outlets, blogs, commentaries and opinion pieces available at the touch of a button. Advertising dollars have followed readers to the computer screen.

I spent 11 years in the newspaper business, first at the Easton Express and later at the Newark News, a proud and influential paper driven out of business in 1972 by mismanagement, a labor dispute and subsequent sale to a media company that had no intention of rescuing it.

Print journalism has been victimized like so many other seemingly invincible businesses by a competitive force it failed to foresee and fully appreciate and which fell upon it so rapidly and with such impact that recovery is problematic.

Those critics who claim insight but lack it tie the downfall of newspapers to an ideological bias, one that favors liberalism and a partisan left-wing agenda.

It is an absurd argument, ignoring the long history of newspapers thriving, their financial success growing steadily, while their editorial pages reflected a decided political tilt, left or right. They've been driven to the financial brink by turbulent market forces, dramatically changing reader habits and advertising dollars fleeing to other outlets.

Purchasers of space in newspapers to sell cars, houses or women's foundation garments cared not whether the paper endorsed one candidate or another or support

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