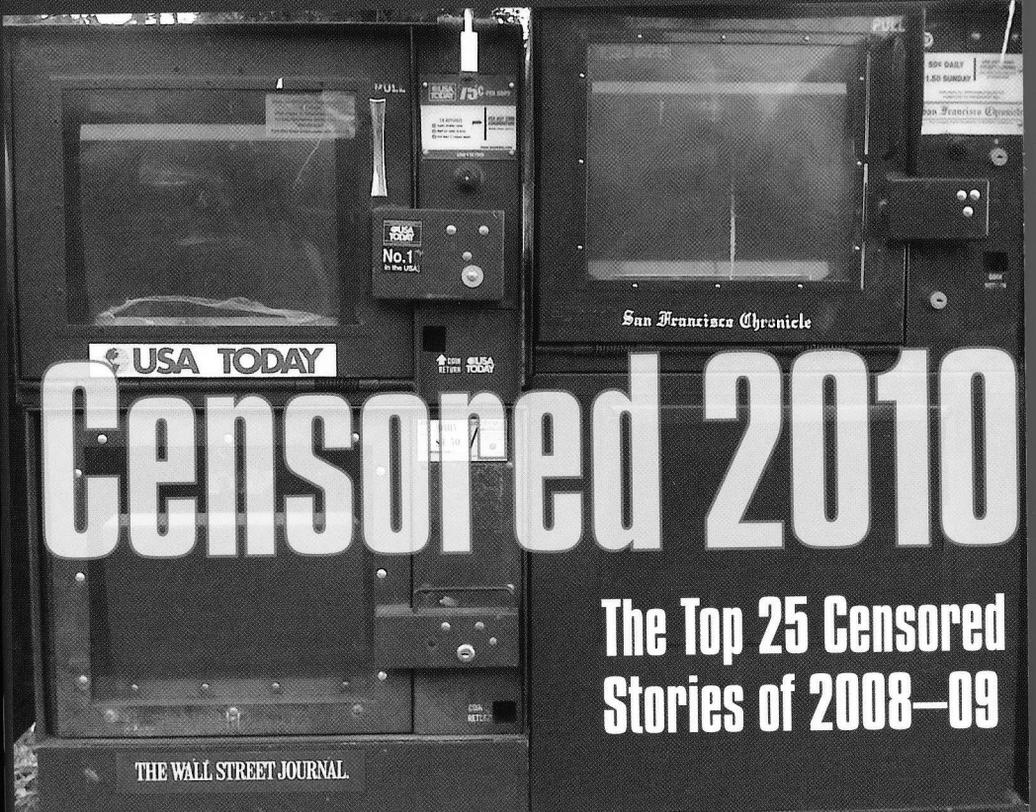


MEDIA DEMOCRACY IN ACTION



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INTRODUCTION

Die Zombie Newspapers, Die: The dailies really died a generation ago, and now their corpses are following suit.

by Michael I. Niman

Headlines and TV news leads are abuzz with obituaries for the newspaper business, as if the industry had suddenly up and died. Sure, the nation's top newspapers are in financial turmoil. A few major dailies recently shuttered their doors. Most papers are downsizing staff. Some, like the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Los Angeles Times*, are physically shrinking, trimming their waistlines by about three inches. The *Detroit News/Free Press* and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* are moving away from printed paper and going virtual. Denver's 150-year-old *Rocky Mountain News*, the 128-year-old *Cincinnati Post*, and the 87-year-old *Albuquerque Tribune* have recently closed down entirely and gone to the compost pile. Like much of what we've been reading in our daily newspapers, however, the story about the collapse of journalism is old news. Newspapers have been dead for quite a while. The only twist is that their zombie bodies have finally followed suit. I know this sounds cruel, and I'm no doubt raising the ire of legions of coupon-clippers, crossword enthusiasts, and dog-smackers, but let's look at the history here.

The collapse of the newspaper industry was predicated by its loss of biodiversity. The monopoly model grew to dominate the industry by the middle of the twentieth century. In almost every American city, the dominant paper, buoyed by a growing economy of scale, drove its competition out of business. By the end of the century, approximately 98 percent of American cities were one-newspaper towns.

The monopolies threatened democracy, with the dailies often acting as regional news gatekeepers whose spin dominated local politics. Their power put them above reproach; few politicians ever took on the local daily and lived, at least career-wise, to tell about it. And they jacked up advertising prices, sometimes to the point of threatening the very existence of struggling businesses.

With their regional monopolies, newspapers regularly generated double-digit returns for their Wall Street investors, becoming one of the nation's most profitable industries. The romance of the cub reporter out chasing hot leads, ferreting out corruption, scooping the competition,

and saving democracy, however, was dead. Newspapers, as profit generators, more and more were taken over by conglomerates in business not to inform, educate, and agitate, but simply to make money. The monopoly model gave newspapers a good run financially, but it was short-lived because publishers grew fat and arrogant as they sat on their thumbs, viewing their growing profits more as an entitlement than as something they would have to work to earn. Without competition, they cut staff, even in good financial times, greedily bleeding their papers for ever-increasing profit margins. Generic wire service stories replaced hard-hitting local reporting, and papers lost their significance as sources of local news.

The profit-greed model meant that newspapers avoided biting the hands that fed them. This meant avoiding stories that pissed off advertisers, friends of advertisers, and the folks that sold out to advertisers. It also meant avoiding any controversy that could in any way upset any party that might one day think of advertising. Between these two censored categories lie most of the stories that make newspapers both necessary and vibrant.

In its more extreme form, the profit-greed model meant not only trying not to offend, but actually pandering to advertisers. Hence, newspapers replaced hard news with soft, advertising-driven fluff stories and entire advertiser-driven sections of the paper.

Think about it. When was the last time you read a story in the auto section critical of a car, or a story in the real estate section critical of irresponsible development patterns?

On the macro level, the "suck up to power and don't ask questions" mandate to which newspapers adhered left us, for example, with nearly every major newspaper in the United States shamelessly parroting subsequently discredited Bush administration propaganda in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In fact, many media critics now argue that the pro-war bias of American newspapers was a key factor in allowing the Bush administration to lead the nation into war. Alternative news sources, residing mostly in cyberspace, countered this false information with what has proven to be prescient analysis and more accurate information—but they couldn't counter the misinformation disseminated by newspapers.

Look over Project Censored's tally of the most important but least reported stories of the past twenty years. They choose twenty-five mind-boggling stories each year—stuff like Halliburton selling nuclear

technology to Iran, Halliburton getting contracts to build detention centers in the US, and Dick Cheney's Halliburton stock rising 3,000 percent during the Iraq war. These stories cover the gamut from government allowances for carcinogens in our food and water, to the destruction of habeas corpus and basic human rights protections, to the wholesale corporate plunder of natural resources.

Yet, in any given year, you can count the number of these stories broken by daily newspapers on your thumbs—and usually have a thumb or two left over. Newspapers have let us down. That's why we've turned to other sources for our news.

Sure, the newsprint model of squishing forests into paper pulp is dated in the digital age, but that's not why these massive news organizations are dying. Today's major newspapers have, on average, a century or so of brand-building under their belts. They should be the principal recognized players in the news industry, in every medium. These should be strong brands well placed to dominate a convergent media landscape. But after a generation of suck-up-manship, their brands, and hence, their value on Wall Street, are trash. After leading us into war with Judith Miller's mindless cheerleading for the Bush administration, why should we trust the *New York Times* for information about Iraq? And, really, why the hell should we pay for their misinformation?

Many of the stories we're reading and watching about the collapse of newspapers are authored by papers whining about their own self-induced demise, or by similarly run and equally greedy TV news organizations, prematurely gloating about the death of newspapers as they follow closely down the same path to irrelevance. Missing from this analysis is coverage about the consequent growth of democratic media organizations that actually challenge the status quo and report on dangerous and troubling news stories. In this context, the story isn't one of a generation racing toward illiteracy and apathy, but a much more hopeful story about a media revolution. Let's look at this as a market adjustment, with the value of the propaganda model plummeting. This is not a bad development.

But Big Media won't die gracefully. No. They're wheeling out a host of wonks—so-called experts—to tell us that newspapers have been killed off by, get this, Craigslist.

Think about that. It seems the mysterious loss of classified revenue turned out to be the silver bullet laying the undead to rest. But (and seldom does anyone ask) why did the dailies lose their classified ads?

Coincidentally, this loss came on the heels of their readership dwindling. And many of those ads migrated not to Craigslist, but to the weekly alternative papers that have been picking up the reporting slack as the big guys shied away from dangerous stories. This is the market at work—Milton Friedman, not Karl Marx. Where do you look when you want to rent an apartment? And the weeklies didn't inherit these ads from dead relatives—they worked for them around the same time the dailies stopped working.

For journalism to thrive, journalists need to be paid. Critics of democratic media are quick to point out that the market cannot support a million online information venues, and small media organizations can only afford small salaries for all but a handful of workers. So, the argument goes, we need a new model to finance quality media.

True indeed. But this same argument often operates on the premise that the old model—big monopoly newspapers—were doing that, and that the death of the big boys now means the end of journalism as a profession. The remuneration system by which professional journalists are paid has been way out of wack for a long time, rewarding some of the worst, most spineless, boot-licking writers, while punishing hard-working, risk-taking journalists. Let's look at the *New York Post*, for example—clearly one of the nation's most sensationalist, fear-mongering, xenophobic rags. They employ some of the highest-paid "journalists" in the industry. Meanwhile, in the same city, the hard-hitting, award-winning *Independent* (yes, it's spelled with a "y") relies on volunteer writers for some of the best local investigative reporting in the country. If we stop rewarding lackeys for selling out their supposed profession, that's not a bad thing. Finding revenue streams to pay good journalists is a whole other issue.

The bottom line here is that while there might not be a future for soulless, zombie monopoly newspapers, there is a future for journalism. I'm reminded of a meeting I had a few years back with a delegation of Ukrainian journalists. They were all middle-aged, which means they trained as journalists in a totalitarian Soviet society where there was no journalism. Still, generation after generation, aspiring journalists learned skills they were barred from using. Then the empire collapsed, and when it collapsed, there were journalists waiting to come out of hibernation.

Maybe that's the story here. Perhaps the collapse of self-censored monopoly papers will finally break the stronghold that mediocrity has held over journalism for a generation. Maybe this means that good journalists won't have to hold day jobs in other professions to support

themselves. Perhaps it means weasels will no longer edit newspapers. Or maybe not much will change other than the venue in which misinformation and trivia is delivered. In any event, I'm not shedding any tears for corporate media.

DR. MICHAEL I. NIMAN is a professor of journalism and media studies at Buffalo State College. A version of this introduction was published in *ArtVoice* on April 28, 2009. His previous *Artvoice* columns are available at artvoice.com, archived at mediastudy.com, and available globally through syndication.