

Commentary

Kiss My Ink if You Think We're Dead

The following column was published today in a blog written by John Archibald on the Web site of The Birmingham News. It is reprinted in the SNPA eBulletin with permission. SNPA invites its members to share their thoughts about the newspaper industry for the eBulletin and in SNPA's eBlog.



John Archibald

By John Archibald
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The grand opening of Century Plaza was something to behold back in 1975.

It was a carnival and a lottery all rolled into one. Helium balloons filled the air, and some of them, The Birmingham News told us ahead of time, held cold hard cash.

I was 12 or 13 then, and never had I seen anything like it. Girls ran in packs, wide-eyed at the mall and its splendor. Boys ran behind them, wide-eyed at all those girls.

It was, for a shining moment, a grand place. I hated to learn this week that it is closed. But while it was sad news, it was not unexpected.

Times are hard in Birmingham. Forbes Piano. Bruno's as we knew it. So many institutions are gone.

Those of us at the 122-year-old News got tough news Wednesday, too. Employees must take pay cuts to make up for lost ad revenue. The cuts come on a sliding scale, from 5 to 8 percent. Most reporters will take 6 percent cuts that, on top of the 3.8 percent cuts that came with furloughs earlier this year, total almost 10 percent. Publisher Victor Hanson III took a 15 percent cut.

I can hear folks out there now, talking of our demise.

Well, they can kiss my ink. For we are far from dead.

It's appropriate, I think, that Mark Twain wrote his famous bit in the New York Journal 112 years ago this week:

The report of my death is an exaggeration.

I feel you, Mark. I feel you.

It is common knowledge that newspapers and traditional media struggle in this changing world, especially in an economy that has mauled traditional advertisers in real estate, retail and automotive.

It is a complex problem, and experts can't say for sure how much of it is the economy and how much is the media landscape. I believe things will improve, but the business must change.

Most newspapers, including this one, now give away too much for free on the Web. Smart people are trying to find ways to "monetize" that content, but don't hold your breath. Buy a paper instead.

That's our biggest hope and pride, anyway. Readership of The Birmingham News is in some ways better than ever. While audiences in media across the country have splintered like dime store baseball bats in recent years, News readers remained committed. Scarborough Research's survey numbers say average readership has been steady at The News since 2004, both on Sunday and during the week.

We actually have more readers now than in 2004, and that doesn't even include our Internet readers.

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According to Editor & Publisher, The News and its Internet partner, al.com, reach 76.5 percent of all adults in this market. That's 6th best in the country.

I see it anecdotally every day. People have a thirst for local news and depth that only newspapers provide, whether online or in print.

That is the light that drives us through these dark times. We'll get through. With work.

I heard a comment from one bozo who said he didn't care about the fate of the papers because he got his news free on the Web, anyway.

That's a lot like saying you don't care about farmers because you get your food from the supermarket.

As for the pay cut, we'll get by. After all, good reporters don't get into the business for money. *Good* reporters are not that stupid.

A good story – and the pride that goes with it – is as good as cash to a real reporter, anyway.

We'll still look under rocks to tell you what's there. We'll even comfort the afflicted and poke the comfortable at times.

If we don't, who will?

John Archibald's column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays in The Birmingham News. Write him at jarchibald@bhamnews.com.

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