

Commentary

Newspaper Print Edition Still Special



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The images will live forever.

The heartbreaking moment caught in time when firefighter Chris Fields carried the body of baby Baylee Almon from the rubble of the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995.

The fiery Twin Towers just seconds after two airplanes crashed into them and minutes before the buildings collapsed into an enormous cloud of dust on Sept. 11, 2001.

The smiling face of then President-elect Barack Obama holding hands with wife Michelle and daughters Malia and Sasha as thousands cheered on election night 2008.

Quite simply: three historic photographs displayed on front pages everywhere that exemplify the staying power of newspapers.

There are few, if any, of you reading these words who cannot recall those photographs or other front page images that made an impression yesterday or yesteryear. Whether the photo had national or international impact or was as local as a hometown high school celebrating a state championship, memorable newspaper front page photos are part of our culture, and will be for many more tomorrows.

There is something special about a newspaper front page that pundits who want to say goodbye to this enduring industry just don't understand – as is often said today, "they just don't get it."

For many of us who entered this industry because we really do live the cliché that "ink is in our blood," it's too early to type "30" at the end of the Fourth Estate's story – there are still a lot of presses that have not yet been shuttered.

In today's constantly-changing newspaper industry, it's community newspapers – both print and online – from San Marcos, Texas, to Albemarle, N.C., to Gloucester, Mass., to Ottumwa, Iowa, and towns from coast-to-coast, that continue to capture events and deliver this information better than any other medium. It's these same community newspapers that serve as a mirror of where we live.

Overall, the newspaper industry that was one dimensional for years is now a multimedia platform with a larger audience reading and using its portfolio of products and services than ever before. And in the communities they serve, there is likely no stronger brand than the local newspaper.

Additionally, what other medium continues to deliver information without an agenda – with the exception of newspaper journalists, who are consistently asking the real questions and not those with a predetermined answer? Not television. Not radio. Not blogs.

In most communities, it's those other media outlets that typically play catch-up to local newspapers when it comes to delivering news, including the watchdog-type journalism that our founding fathers considered when drafting the First Amendment.

Research shows that millions of newspaper readers are not ready for a world that consists of mostly videos, sound bites and blogs with little substance. Here are a few facts: almost 50 percent of all adults read a newspaper on an average weekday; more than 50 percent of adults read a newspaper on an average Sunday; just more than 65 percent of adults read a daily newspaper in the past five days; and almost 70 percent of adults read a Sunday newspaper in the past month – all pretty significant statistics.

Newspaper loyalty was also confirmed in a recent Wall Street Journal article focusing on the buying power of community newspaper readers that continues to be recognized by advertisers. In response to the article, Suburban Newspapers of America President Nancy Lane said smaller newspapers are still attractive because of "their hyperlocal coverage and 'news you can't get anywhere else' advantage."

Need a few more unscientific observations from a journalist who has been observing people and taking notes for almost 30 years?

Walk into any coffee shop and see if anything goes better with a good cup of java than today's newspaper.

Stroll through an airport and count the hundreds of people entrenched in today's headlines while they await their flight.

Or better yet, be at a newspaper office when the press runs late and witness the endless number of calls from subscribers asking why is "my newspaper" late – emphasizing the words "my newspaper" because people take ownership when part of their daily lives – their community newspaper – is not on time.

Sure, the newspaper industry continues to change, but what business doesn't? Despite the constant demise being spewed by naysayers, especially those recently-ordained experts who have little knowledge of the business, newspapers are no different than any other industry working through a difficult economic period.

There's no doubt that tomorrow's newspaper will be different from today's, including content, format and delivery options, but change is good and will only make the industry better.

Yes, there's room for the Internet, Facebook, Twitter and other unknown delivery forms that are just a click away on the horizon. Similar to the Internet, newspapers will continue to embrace the successful delivery options to compliment print editions.

However, there will always be something special about holding a print edition in your hands – the one that sometimes leaves black ink smudges on your fingertips.

And, it doesn't matter if that print edition displays a Pulitzer Prize-winning photo or a local photo that will be clipped and displayed on a proud parent's refrigerator. Those of us who continue to make newspapering our profession anxiously await the next time the presses begin rolling to print another front page.

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