

Commentary

Behind the Newspaper Negativists

SNPA members are invited to publish this hard-hitting op-ed piece on their editorial pages. It was written by Randy Siegel, co-founder of [The Newspaper Project](#) and president and publisher of [Parade Publications](#).



Randy Siegel

As many newspaper companies try to turn themselves around in a brutal economy, under huge debt loads and against a backdrop of increasingly funereal media coverage, it's worth looking at the behavior and motives of some of the industry's harshest critics.

Earlier this month, Time magazine, struggling for its own survival in the hemorrhaging newsweekly marketplace, published a column on its Web site entitled "The 10 Most Endangered Newspapers in America," which hundreds of news outlets around the world ran under the headline "What Newspapers Will Die in 2009?" complete with a list of soon-to-be-dead newspapers. The trouble is that Time's "report" appears to have been created from pure speculation, with minimal reporting or research, by a Time.com affiliate called 24/7 Wall St.

Needless to say, the Time piece roiled the newspaper industry, sparking denials and rebuttals while driving already beaten-down newspaper-company stocks even lower. Though 99 percent of the people who read this premature obituary probably assumed it was written by the professional journalists at Time magazine, it actually was written by Douglas McIntyre, an editor at 24/7 Wall St., which, according to its Web site, also runs a site called Volume Spike Investor, whose self-described goal is to bring stock-market speculators "5 to 10 stock ideas per day in unusual trading activity that we see in stock volume and in options activities. Many of these stocks are among very active and very liquid stocks, yet we will always aim to bring you key ideas in stocks that might not otherwise get noticed."

It's a sad day when Time magazine, once one of the most trusted publications in America, runs an unsubstantiated article on its Web site, without a single disclaimer, from Wall Street speculators who make their living peddling tips to help day-traders jump in and out of distressed stocks.

Another prominent newspaper pundit with questionable motives is the ubiquitous Jeff Jarvis, a former magazine editor and newspaper executive who has built a lucrative cottage industry for himself as a quote-machine, author, blogger, speaker and new-media consultant specializing in one primary area of pontification: the imminent death of newspapers and the rise of a new world order dominated by his favorite company, Google, the fawning subject of his most recent book, "What Would Google Do?" In fact, if you Google "Jeff Jarvis and the death of newspapers," 74,000 articles and references pop right up.

If any journalist on deadline needs a quote about the imminent death of newspapers, Jarvis will serve one up in a hurry. His BuzzMachine blog features columns such as "Newspapers are f***ed" and "Hitting the coffin nail on the head for newspapers."

I've met Jarvis and found him engaging, but it's disappointing how often he is quoted by other journalists as a "newspaper-industry analyst" or "media critic" without any mention of his bias or his consulting work for new-media companies, including Daylife, a popular aggregator of other people's proprietary journalism for Web sites that can't afford to pay for their own content. While Jarvis' business success is clearly a result of his hard work and entrepreneurial zeal, his crusade against newspapers needs to be looked at in the proper context: The more newspaper companies struggle, the better Jarvis does on a number of levels.

Other consistently biased players in the newspaper speculation game are the folks at CNN.com, who have done a wonderful job building up their news site but probably would like nothing better than to see newspapers and newspaper Web sites fail, so their biggest competitors for audience and ad revenue would go by the wayside. Two recent examples prove the point: When Denver recently lost its second newspaper, The Rocky Mountain News, leaving the city with one relatively strong newspaper, The Denver Post, CNN ran a huge story on its home page:

"The Rocky Mountain News was the latest victim in an era of shutdowns, layoffs and cutbacks plaguing the newspaper industry. 'It's in a free fall and nobody knows where the bottom is. It's kind of like water in the toilet swirling around and nobody knows what's left when you're done flushing,' media critic Eric Alterman said.

Newspapers across the country are under pressure as readership declines, along with advertising revenue, while more and more Americans get their information online.” At least give CNN credit for using toilet humor to trash the competition and advance their own agenda, which includes promoting their new wire service for newspapers, CNN Wire.

When The Washington Post announced that it was moving its Business section into its front section without any layoffs or staffing changes, CNN.com jumped right in with another big piece on its home page, trumpeting yet another sign of the impending implosion of the newspaper industry. Not only did the piece receive an excessively prominent position on CNN.com’s home page – which was odd given other more important news of the day – but it was riddled with factual errors, including this: “The Post, one of the oldest newspapers in Washington, has a daily readership of 289,300, according to its Web site.” Hmm...While the Post is the oldest newspaper in our nation’s capital and one of the oldest and most prestigious in our country, its daily readership is actually 1.6 million, not 289,300. But why should facts get in the way of opinion?

As newspaper companies fight for survival and attempt to rectify many of the mistakes they have made in the last decade, they don’t deserve a break from anyone – their readers, their advertisers or their competitors. What they do deserve, however, is a little more objective coverage of their problems and more detailed disclosure about the possible motives of those “critics” and “analysts” who are hardly unbiased observers.

SNPA eBulletin 3-26-09