



Jay Smith

**Commentary**  
**Time to Stand Up for Newspapers**

By Jay Smith  
Retired CEO of Cox Newspapers  
*This column is reprinted from the Philadelphia Inquirer*

Eight months ago, I retired from a 37-year newspaper career. Since then, I've watched silently at what has transpired in my old business, and my amazement has turned to horror.

On a dreary morning in January, I got together with three industry colleagues who are continuing the fight for their publications. Their passion and enthusiasm contrasted with the cold, damp weather, as well as with the bleak forecasts for newspapers. Their voices have not been heard much, but they should be.

If nobody reads newspapers anymore, I wonder, why did the governor of Illinois try to silence the Chicago Tribune's editorial writers? And the morning after our historic presidential election, what were people lining up to buy?

Without newspapers, where would radio and television stations get the stories they read from each morning's front page? How will people begin conversations if they can't ask, "Did you see that story in the paper?" And what will people pin to the kitchen bulletin board or mail to relatives when their son scores a game-winning touchdown?

What will fill up Yahoo's local-news category? It's built on the backs of hundreds of partner newspapers. In any given month, those same papers attract 70 million visitors to their own sites.

Where will news come from – *real* news, not the if-it-bleeds-it-leads stuff of the 11 o'clock news – if the doomsayers are right?

Like other national treasures, newspapers age, change, and sometimes need a new coat of paint. But they endure. That's why they're treasures. Lose them, and we lose a part of ourselves. We lose a part of what makes America – well, America. If you believe in our way of life, you believe in newspapers.

Recessions come and go, although this one is a doozy, maybe the worst since the Great Depression. Speaking of which, 98 newspapers died or merged out of existence from 1937 to 1939, according to the Encyclopedia of American Journalism. However bad today may feel, we're a long way from losing, on average, a newspaper a week.

Newspapers also rise and fall with the communities they serve. That's as it should be.

And what about my three friends with whom I spent that rainy morning? Brian Tierney, publisher and CEO of Philadelphia Media Holdings (which owns The Inquirer and Philly.com), relishes the challenge. Donna Barrett, who runs the 140 newspapers of Birmingham, Ala.-based CNHI Inc., says nothing in the financials of her company resemble the gloom and doom she reads about. And Randy Siegel, publisher of the nation's largest-circulation publication, Parade, makes a compelling case for the return on investment advertisers get when they run in the magazine's 30 million copies each week.

Newspapers have faced challenges before, and they will face them again. The weak may disappear, but the strong will survive. My faith is in the leaders of our business. It's time all of us – even those who have retired to the sidelines – stand up on their behalf. We stand up not just for newspapers, but for democracy.

Once upon a time, newspapers found it unseemly to fight back when others spoke ill of them. That time has passed.

SNPA eBulletin 2-5-09