
The News Mausoleum

John Podhoretz

THE NEWSEUM, a dazzling edifice of glass, marble, and steel that recently opened in Washington after seven years of planning and construction at a cost of \$475 million, sits directly across Pennsylvania Avenue from the National Gallery of Art and cater-corner from the National Archives. Though the location was not chosen for this reason, it suggests that the subject matter of the Newseum (a blend of “news” and “museum”) is as crucial to America and the West as the masterpieces hanging in the National Gallery and the foundational documents of the United States preserved within the Archives.

Its president, Peter Prichard, told me as he showed me around the almost-finished Newseum a few months ago that the purpose of the institution is the celebration of free speech. A 50-ton, 74-ft.-high slab of yellow Tennessee marble hangs from the front of the building; on it are etched the 45 words of the First Amendment. There could indeed be no nobler cause, but the Newseum addresses it primarily by inference. The slogan adorning its press kit gives the real game away: “Newseum. Where the News Comes to Life.”

This half-billion-dollar enterprise is not really a tribute to an important idea or a celebration of a

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basic human freedom. It is, rather, the news industry’s tribute to itself. And it is a tribute on a scale that would have gladdened the heart of Ramses II. The original Newseum, which opened in 1997, was a modest facility housed in the USA Today building across the Potomac from Washington in Rosslyn, Virginia. The current iteration, conceived by the Freedom Forum, a non-profit organization with a \$700-million endowment courtesy of a huge block of Gannett Company stock, has been graced with eye-opening donations from almost every major-media corporation in America.*

The ebullient Prichard, who edited *USA Today* from 1988 to 1994, has reason to be proud. The Newseum is an overwhelming space. It was designed by James Polshek, who also mapped out the extraordinary Rose Center for Earth and Space on the site of the old Hayden Planetarium in New York. The two institutions are similar in scope and analogous in presentation. Like the Rose Center, the Newseum is a gigantic diorama, with a clear exterior wall of glass exposing the inside to full view. While the Rose Center pivots on a giant sphere, the Newseum is dominated by the world’s largest LCD display, 90 feet square, with photographs and headlines and video in constant motion.

Visitors to the Rose Center ride an elevator to

* Collectively, the New York Times Co., News Corporation, Hearst Corporation, ABC, NBC, Time Warner, and Cox Enterprises have given \$45 million; another \$52 million has come from foundations and individual philanthropists.

the top, where their tour of the universe begins with the Big Bang, after which they walk downward in a spiral around the mammoth globe, approaching ground level as the universe ages. Prichard took me by elevator to the top floor of the Newseum and then walked me down five levels through 28 different galleries and fifteen theaters. An endless row of display cases features newspapers from every era in American history, which can be examined in the climate-controlled drawers in which they are being perfectly preserved. Another endless row of screens allows visitors to pull up almost every front page of every newspaper in the world at any time.

“WORLD’S MOST Interactive Museum,” says the Newseum’s literature, trumpeting 130 “interactive stations featuring more than two dozen interactive programs.” For once, the rules of contemporary museum design—which favor showing the visitor a good time rather than insisting on his aesthetic or spiritual elevation—are entirely congruent with institutional purpose. There is, for example, something faintly ridiculous in the notion that pressing buttons in a natural-history museum will teach visitors something about the rain forest that they could not get from reading a wall display. But news is an interactive medium by definition—the original interactive medium. The newspaper, the wellspring of the industry, was created to cover the actions of some and relay the report to others, who are then encouraged to respond to what they have read.

What is more, while neither the rain forest nor great art is a consumer product, news is a business. A museum dedicated to promoting an industry *should* pull out all the stops to make its visitors think they are having the time of their lives. Do vast numbers of people today find news arid, boring, or dull? Well, they won’t after they visit this Space Mountain of a museum. And perhaps, just perhaps, upon leaving, they will awaken on the morrow with an unfamiliar yearning—an itch to hold an actual newspaper in their hands or to tune in later in the day to the evening news on television.

The Newseum is chock-a-block with television studios, both actual (ABC’s *This Week with George Stephanopoulos* is now broadcast from it) and pretend (facilities allow visitors to anchor their own “newscasts”). Nonetheless, its true subject is the glorious history of the newspaper and its vital role in American life since the early 1700’s. But herein lies a stark and bitter irony. For the simple fact is that, slogan or no slogan, the news is *not* coming to life, at least as far as newspapers are concerned.

For newspapers, these are the end times, or something very much like them. Every week provides a new marker on the road to apocalypse: hundreds of layoffs in Los Angeles, circulation scandals in Dallas and Long Island, buyout packages in New York and Washington. Newspaper-circulation numbers are released twice a year, and for the past decade those numbers have charted an uninterrupted downward curve, accelerating at speeds now approaching an avalanche.

Designed as a monument to the daily, the Newseum may in fact be its mausoleum, with the marble First Amendment slab serving as its tombstone.

NEWSPAPERS HAVE been dying for a half-century, of course. For each big city in the United States there is a name—the *Chicago Daily News*, the *Washington Star*, the *Baltimore News American*, the *Dallas Times Herald*, the *Houston Post*, the *Nashville Banner*, the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*—that serves as a Proustian madeleine, instantly conjuring up the memory of a beloved comic strip or an elegiac sports columnist or a hard-bitten crime reporter. And this is to say nothing of the vanished papers of New York, each of which summons a little universe: the *World Telegram*, the *Herald Tribune*, the *Mirror*, the *Graphic*, and the original *Sun* (whose name has been revived by the only big-city broadsheet to have been launched in the United States in the past twenty years).

Evening papers, timed to report on news events occurring after the late-night printing of morning papers, not to mention the afternoon baseball scores and closing stock prices, were killed off by the advent of the dinner-hour TV anchorman. At the same time, the mass migration of Americans from the city to the suburbs buried all but a handful of papers that depended for their circulation not on home delivery but on people tossing a coin to a newsie.

These simultaneous shakeouts were basically completed twenty years ago or more. What is happening to newspapers now is something very different. In the wake of the industry’s consolidation, the survivors prospered mightily. But they are now being drained of their value, and at a quickened rate.

Newsday, the high-end Long Island tabloid that was once one of the most profitable enterprises in all of American industry, is on the block at a rumored price of \$350 million. Five years ago, it would have sold for at least \$1 billion. The seller is the Tribune Co., which in 2007 was bought outright by the Chicago billionaire Sam Zell. Tribune

made \$240 million in profit in 2006; in the fourth quarter of 2007, it lost \$78 million. Zell sought to explain his decision to sell *Newsday* by saying he had “started with the assumption that print would be down 2 or 3 percent this year, not 18 percent.”

The most ominous aspect of the industry’s collapse is that monopoly newspapers—whose competitors folded long ago and left them in sole possession of an entire local market—are the worst afflicted. Such institutions, being the only game in town, should have been immune from decline. And yet falling they are. Over the past few years, for example, the *Dallas Morning News* had to “restate” its paid circulation twice when it was discovered that the figures had been fraudulently inflated.* There have been layoffs and buyouts by the hundreds, and the news-gathering staff has been cut by a third.

When a monopoly begins to lose market share by as much as ten percent per year, withering and fading on its own and not on account of specific competitive pressure, it is a sure sign that the structural integrity of an entire industry has been compromised. Implosion is sure to follow—and is indeed taking place in every city in every region of the country. For anyone who depends on newspapering for his livelihood, there is simply no mistaking the death rattle.

THE NEWSPAPER is a classic product of the Industrial Revolution. Its manufacture, which has barely changed in 150 years, requires a huge physical plant dominated by complex machines that cost hundreds of millions of dollars to purchase and maintain. Crews of manual laborers must load and unload many tons of paper, take care of the machinery as the newspaper is inked and colored and cut and folded, and oversee the interweaving of its sections. After all that, a brigade of truckers shows up to take the papers on an hours-long delivery tour. This must happen seven days a week, under any conceivable weather condition, every day of the year, forever.

And that is merely the blue-collar side of the business. The white-collar side employs hundreds of workers as well: writers and editors and photographers and graphic designers to fill the pages with copy and images, advertising salesmen to fill them with ads, a circulation department to make sure the paper gets to paying customers, and dozens of executives supervising it all.

This labor-intensive process is precisely the model that has been upended in industry after industry, driven to painful change by technological innovation and competitive threats. When the first

such major threat hit the newspaper industry, it came in the form of television news, another labor-intensive and expensive medium. But in helping to shutter newspapers, TV proved to be a boon for the ones that weathered the storm.

However dangerous the challenge from television, the number of stations was, fortunately for the print business, fixed by federal fiat. Meanwhile, there was usually one money-making newspaper in the same local market—the only venue for print advertising by supermarkets and department stores and other businesses needing to let their customers know about weekly sales and bargains. For two decades, those newspapers cornered their markets, generated an enormous amount of cash, produced unheard-of profit margins of 20 to 30 percent, and were as valuable as their TV rivals, if not more so.

THIS PERIOD came to an end with the end of the 20th century. If one new medium, television, had wounded the institution of the daily newspaper with happy results for those who survived, a second new medium, the Internet, has been slowly garroting the survivors.

The substantive reason almost goes without saying. The Internet has turned the daily newspaper into an atavism. By providing readers with news and features every second of the day, cleanly and quickly, it has basically destroyed the rationale behind a once-a-day compendium printed on paper.

I began in the news business 25 years ago, and one of the first things I learned was that the profession was on the cusp of a profound and epochal change. The culprit was the rise of the personal computer. At conferences of newspaper editors in the 1980’s and 90’s, the drumbeat was constant: what we are we will not be in ten, fifteen, or twenty years.

At one conference, a futurist sketched a scenario in which we would all be carrying screens that would roll up in our briefcases like a tabloid—an early and only slightly fanciful imagining of what has actually taken place with handheld devices like the BlackBerry and the iPhone. Another visionary suggested that in some Brave New World, newspaper companies would install a special printer in every subscriber’s home, into which the electronic content of the newspaper would be delivered over phone lines. The cost of manufacturing and maintaining these home devices would be far less than the mammoth expense of printing and delivering an actual daily newspaper. And here was the best part—the subscriber would be paying for the paper

* *Newsday*, sued by hundreds of its advertisers for overcharging on the basis of falsified circulation claims, settled out of court.

he was printing on. Something not too dissimilar from this vision has come to pass as well. Tens of millions of people now get their news from a special “box” in their homes that is the radically faster, vastly more powerful, and better-designed personal computer. Whether they print what they read or not is up to them.

So clearly did news organizations see the threat posed by the computer that they mobilized to address it, to get ahead of it, and to manage it. In the 1980’s, they spent hundreds of millions and perhaps billions of dollars in the effort. To take one example, the Washington Post Co., a well-run and far-thinking industry leader, sank nearly \$50 million into an electronic news service called Datatext. But the system was hard to understand, and made demands on the memory of the personal computer and the bandwidth of telephone lines that neither could meet at the time. The experiment was folded after three years, but it or something like it was repeated again and again by other major news companies, with similarly dire results.

These efforts were motivated by more than the desire to master a new technology for its own sake. It was universally understood that the mass audience for news was shrinking—the same audience on which the business relied in order to sell subscriptions and advertising. Readership had already declined by 50 percent since the advent of television. Young adults who had never developed the habit of reading a paper as children were showing no inclination to pick it up later in life.

The personal computer was going to be the way to reach these and other new people, if only someone could figure out how. Ironically, the breakthrough in this regard—the development in 1993 of the graphic interface called Mosaic, which gave birth to the creature known as the “website”—turned out to be far cheaper than any of the visionaries could have imagined.

Still, they were more forward-thinking than their counterparts in most other industries when faced with similar challenges. Not only did the news business know what was coming, it even knew where it was going to be hurt most severely. Katharine Graham, who ran the *Washington Post*, once told me that the primary reason she was worried about the future of her paper lay with the threat posed by the computer to, of all things, classified advertising.

That conversation took place in 1987—seven years before a man in San Francisco started a local bulletin board to let his friends know about cultural events in town. His name was Craig Newmark,

and he, more than any other person, is the Shiva of the newspaper business, the destroyer of worlds.

NEWMARK BEGAN publishing his “list” as a website in 1995, only two years after the invention of the web browser and in the only region in the United States where people had grown truly comfortable using the new medium then known as the World Wide Web.

In short order, his friends told other friends, and Craigslist.org became popular. His readers began posting both job listings and items for sale. These were arranged in a simple and comprehensible manner, were easily searched, and were free. The site soon expanded to other cities. Craigslist became the first place any urban dweller under the age of thirty would go to find a used couch, a part-time job, or a roommate. In short order, realtors, too, began listing apartments and houses for rent. There arose an entire web-based industry following the Craigslist model: help-wanted sites like Monster.com, journalismjobs.com, and media-bistro.com.

Classifieds have always been the most profitable element in any newspaper. They divide a broadsheet page into as many as 200 ads, each one sold separately and at full price (unlike larger display advertising, which is often sold at a discount). The rule of thumb is that the more spaces can be sold on any given page, the more money can be made per ad. Thus, two half-page ads can be sold for more than a full page, four quarter-page pages can be sold for more than two half-pages, and so on.

The rise of the Craigslist model has devastated classified advertising in newspapers, once the only place in a city to sell a used car or list a job opening. True, today’s newspapers have duplicated all their classified ads on their websites, and they have attempted to best Craigslist and its emulators by offering different features, new ways to search, and so forth. But the result is harder to use, and in any case why should you spend \$100 putting something up for sale in the paper when you can post it on Craigslist for free? Why list a job for \$200 when you can list it for \$10?

There is no answer to these questions. The only solution is for newspapers to lower their prices to Craigslist levels, but at that point someone else will come along and restore the entirely free model, and the end result will be the same. Last year, classified advertising dropped nationally by more than 16 percent; overall, it is down 34 percent since 2000. Over the next ten years, the cash cow of any newspaper will dry up entirely.

Feverishly anticipating the demise of their 19th-century industrial product, newspapers are once again renewing their efforts to take advantage, somehow, of the growth of the Internet. But they are uniquely ill-positioned to do so. When it comes to reporting the news, their greatest competitive asset is the size of their news-gathering and news-writing staffs. But they can afford those staffs only because of advertising revenue. And, on the web, they will generate only a fraction of the advertising revenue they have been able to generate in print as an effective monopoly. Moreover, and unlike the case with every other rival they have faced in the past, the technical cost of competing with them is astonishingly low.

All they will have left is a very powerful brand—the term we now use for what used to be called a name. That brand will be worth a very great deal, but it will not be worth enough on its own to produce the kind of comprehensive news portrait that has been the defining purpose of urban and regional newspapers for a century and a half. That is why, to many observers, it seems a certainty that these brands will eventually be bought out by Internet monoliths, like Google and Yahoo, which are hungry for “content.”

THE PROSPECT is a very stark one for people who work in, write, and edit newspapers. For these people do not think of themselves as “content providers.” They think much more highly of themselves than that. They believe they play a vital role, perhaps the most vital role, in the defense of the freedoms of every citizen. After all, who else is there to keep a vigilant watch over the official custodians of society? Who else is there to protect the people from the depredations of business and government? Is not freedom of speech—the very freedom that enables journalists to ply their trade—the first of our freedoms, *primus inter pares*, and who will guard it if not they?

Historically speaking, this attitude is of relatively recent vintage. It may, in fact, be an artifact of the rise of the same highly profitable monopoly newspapers and shared-monopoly television networks that were so profitable and consequently grew so powerful that they gave the members of their news force reason to believe they were not just working stiffs—the general attitude of newspa-

permen throughout most of the preceding era—but akin to a democratic nobility.

The immodesty of this idea led many newspaper professionals of the late 20th century into a category error. They came to confuse the significance of the subjects they were covering with the act of covering them. Proximity to the news made *them* a species of news. They wrote about government; therefore, they were equivalent to the government in importance. They reported a war, and their act of reporting a war came to loom as large as the war itself. Today, the death of a journalist in a war zone is assigned vastly more weight than the death of a soldier.

This error is very much in evidence in the Newseum. Its grandest displays are giant artifacts. On the third floor, there is an East German guard tower attached to a slab of the Berlin Wall; on the first floor, there is a huge twisted piece of metal that was the World Trade Center’s broadcast antenna. These are remarkable to behold and to contemplate, and they encourage one to reflect deeply on totalitarianism, Islamofascism, and terrorism. But what is important about them, what is thought-provoking about them, has absolutely nothing to do with journalism or with journalists; it has to do with actuality. If anything, the unearned grandiosity at work in the news business is one of the key elements behind the deep and abiding disdain that the American people have come to harbor for it.

AFTER MUCH study, the Newseum’s researchers have determined that Katharine Graham’s husband, Philip, the editor of the *Washington Post*, was the first person to utter the phrase, “News is the rough first draft of history.” The phrase appears on the wall of the News History Gallery on the fifth level. It was a pithy and clever way to describe the role of the industry, and it has been cited ever since by professionals who believe it places journalism in the highest possible context.

But read the sentence again: “news is the rough first draft of history.” There is a very becoming modesty at work here. For as every writer knows in his marrow, and every editor knows to his annoyance and grief, the central quality of a rough first draft is that it is full of mistakes.

Nor is this very rough first draft expected to improve on a second reading. It is supposed to be superseded by something else. Something better.