

Dave Moyer

The Death of Newspapers

Perhaps you have your stereotype of a hard drinking newspaper man with a notepad in his hand and a fedora on his head. My stereotype might be a little different than yours. You see, my dad was a newspaperman. Sure, he drank a few martinis back in the day when that was en vogue, but whether or not he fits your stereotype as a newspaper man, he fits mine, and either way, I believe that's how he'd classify himself—a newspaper man.

He started out as a sportswriter at a small newspaper in Kaukauna, Wisconsin, for a year, and then accepted a job at his hometown paper, *The Sheboygan Press*, also in Wisconsin. That was back when many newspapers were still family owned, and it was back when there was a little more old school journalism going on. Simply put, it was back when people still read the newspaper (or anything for that matter). There were even copy editors that caught at least some of the mistakes before the paper went to print.

What exactly do I mean by old school journalism? The following examples are by no means exhaustive, but to me, simply put, there was a distinction between reporting the news and creating it. One could pick up the paper and know whether they were reading a game story or a sidebar column. A lead paragraph in a game story actually contained pertinent information such as the final score, and was not confused with what might be the first paragraph of a novel. High school sports were covered due to local interest, but high school athletes were not considered pseudo-professionals. Prep athletes were not quoted unless they did something extraordinary such as make a game winning basket, throw a no-hitter, throw a big touchdown pass, or unless the game was part of the state championship series or was otherwise very important, featuring a local rivalry, having conference championship implications, or something similar. Newspapers did not do feature stories with half page color photographs on 16-year old boys and girls who've never accomplished anything even as relevant as being named to an all-conference team for the sole purpose of selling a few extra newspapers in one of the outlying communities of the circulation area.

Huge multimedia conglomerates that existed as entertainment entities solely to pad each other's bottom line, while perhaps existent to some degree, had not yet totally corrupted what was once journalism. For the most blatant example of this, one need only to turn on the television juggernaut ESPN and listen to "reporters" refer to players by their nicknames, such as A-Rod and T.O. rather than Rodriguez and Owens. Ah, but that was then.

Then, my dad covered these high school sports in Sheboygan and eventually became the Sports Editor of the paper. People enjoyed his weekly column, game stories, and occasional feature stories. Everyone knew him, and I was fortunate enough to nip at his heels to many memorable Friday night basketball games. This was also when high school gyms were full on Friday nights. Fans had to arrive by halftime of the preliminary contest or they would not get a seat. They had to get to the

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local bar for their fish fry early or plan to wait until 9:00 p.m. to eat supper. It was before every high school student worked 25-plus hours per week to subsidize their personal vehicle. It was back when the local newspaper was the centerpiece of the community and kids still had to ask their parents to borrow the car. And none of us thought we had it that bad.

The Sheboygan Press was sold. It was inevitable. It didn't take long for the changes to start. The Saturday paper was moved to a morning edition, pushing up the deadline for all the Friday night athletic events. Getting those stories in the paper was essential, as Saturday morning papers were evolving into rags that featured empty fill and or canned feature sections, produced several days in advance with very little other actual news to read. On top of that, overtime was significantly reduced or eliminated altogether. Next, a Sunday morning paper was added. So now, my dad, who already worked almost 60-hour weeks, worked almost 80-hour weeks for less pay.

As was common for my dad, he endured. Increasingly, he regretted turning down a job with the *Green Bay Press Gazette* where he would write a couple columns a week, including some on the Packers during football season and training camps. There were some other opportunities along the way, but my mom wasn't too interested in leaving Sheboygan where her mom and much of her family still lived, and my dad was too attached to the summer baseball team he ran to give that up.

So, he endured until one day when the proverbial straw broke the newspaperman's back. What it was exactly, I don't recall anymore, and I don't know if he does. He could take a lot and did. He was a tireless worker. On top of that, he was endlessly kind. A person was afforded many chances with him before he angered, but once he did, look out. You see, above all, he was a man of principle. There were lines that could not be crossed, and eventually one was, and he basically said, "Take this job and shove it." Soon thereafter appeared his final column, which most would describe as a sad day in Sheboygan.

My dad went on to a job producing marketing brochures and writing other advertising copy for a large company in the area, but that job was not for him. He moved on to a job at the Sheboygan Chamber of Commerce, promoting Sheboygan. This job, while tedious at times, was a much better fit. There was no one better suited to sell the community than Mr. Sheboygan. However, a power play in the mayor's office redefined that job, and as he retires, if he ever can (thank you Wall Street), his memories of that position will not be what they might have been either. If a stranger walked up to him and asked him what he did, he would probably say one of two things. He would probably tell you that he runs a ball team, or he might answer that he is a sportswriter who hasn't written a column for a while.

It is common knowledge that many newspapers are struggling and some have gone under. Two of the highest profile papers to shut down include *The Rocky Mountain News*, which published its final print edition on Friday, February 27, 2009, and *The Seattle Post Intelligencer*, which produced its last print edition on Tuesday, March 17, 2009. Both are now available on line only. As of March 30, 2009, a third, *The Detroit Free Press*, cancelled home delivery except for Thursdays, Fridays, and Sundays,

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though it would continue to sell thinner editions at newsstands. I expect many more will go down very soon.

This, of course, coincides with the worst economy most living Americans have ever endured. Certainly, one can't fault the business executives who make these decisions. You can't have a newspaper if you can't make payroll. I suppose I can't fault "the younger generation" and its addiction to all things electronic in nature. And, admittedly, I find having information available instantaneously on the Internet a terrific convenience at times.

Climate change is responsible for virtually every mass extinction in history, and it appears that our current electronic and financial climate will lead to the demise of the newspaper species as well. But is it merely stubborn romanticism to question if this is a good thing? Is it too old fashioned to like having the printed page in your hand rather than a Kindle, too corny to look forward to picking up the local newspaper out in front of a hotel when you're traveling to get a flavor of what the area is like, too quaint to be excited about running to the driveway to get the Sunday paper, and all of its exciting features? I guess it is, or so those of us that love our newspaper are being told.

Soon, no comics, no crosswords, no Sunday editorials, no Wednesday food sections, no scrapbooks for the kids, no box scores, no best seller lists, no stacks of papers laying around when you get back from vacation, nothing. Oh, I forgot, we can just go on line and print this stuff off. If it's any consolation, many newspapers have been so gutted, that what we used to enjoy is gone anyway. These papers have adapted—for now.

At least my dad left the newspaper business on his own terms. Someday, and likely soon, it appears that they will be taking the newspaper away from me, and I will have no say in the matter.

Dave Moyer is the author of the novel *Life and Life Only*. His short stories have appeared in *Puffin Circus*, *Monkey Puzzle*, and *PANK*. Moyer received his doctorate from Northern Illinois University. He earned a BS degree from the University of Wisconsin, where he majored in English. Moyer currently resides in Crystal Lake, IL, and can be reached at lifean-dlifeonly22@gmail.com or at his artist's Facebook page.