

Where Have All the Journalists Gone?

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Photo by Amanda Leung

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It is perhaps odd to think about the future of American journalism while here in Russia; but then again, perhaps it is not so odd. The cutbacks at newspapers around the United States are dramatic and are hitting hard in California. Driven in part by the Internet revolution and its impact on advertising and readership, falling circulation has caused hundreds of newsroom staffers are losing their jobs or take buyouts at papers, including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *San Jose Mercury News* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

The decimation in the print news business comes close to home, as longtime colleagues face the necessity to rethink their careers in their 40s, 50s or 60s. Those leaving the newspaper business are among the most experienced, distinguished journalists in the business – Pulitzer Prize-winning editor Rob Rosenthal and veteran Narda Zacchino at the *Chronicle*, for example.

The hard reality for these journalists is that the newspaper jobs evaporating from under them may not ever come back at other newspapers or even in the media more generally. And the disarray in the media has caused further dislocation in education, as journalism schools wonder what they should be teaching to prepare journalists of the future.

Even newspaper writers whose jobs are safe for now have a wry view of the future. One friend at the *The Washington Post* told me that the *Post's* circulation is declining at a rate of 3 percent per year, and she figures that at this pace, her job will last just about until she expects to retire.

Newspapers are not alone in decline among the media. In general, the more serious media – whether radio, television or print – that have traditionally devoted money, time and space to following important stories in depth, are precisely the part of the U.S. media that is diminishing.

Now, why does the U.S. phenomenon of media decline come to mind while visiting Russia? It is because the effect of newspapers' decline on the journalism profession is dwarfed by the potential social impact of losing smart journalists. It is they who provide us with needed information about important issues, and who serve as watchdogs over the many aspects of our society that benefit from being held accountable through serious examination by an inquisitive media.

Before, during and after the Soviet period, Russia has never had much of a tradition of independent media. Corruption and violations

of human and civil rights have been the norm here. From Soviet officials sending their fellow citizens off to the gulag, to bureaucrats stealing from the public treasury, to oligarchs appropriating industries and influencing elections to serve their interests, Russia is perhaps the extreme example of what happens to a society that lacks democracy and its essential ingredient, a robust free press.

There is plenty of blame to go around for the rapid deflation of U.S. newspapers. Investors have demanded too-high profits from newspaper companies and, without considering the public service newspapers provide, punished outlets that have not produced these returns. News company executives continued with business as usual for too long, paying insufficient attention to the decline of their advertising revenue as employment ads, in particular, fled to online sites like *craigslist.org*. And newspaper owners and editors continue to misread their audience by dumbing down their coverage and expanding sensationalistic coverage of meaningless stories, which further alienates their intelligent readers.

But placing blame doesn't change the reality that our ability to gather information about issues that need attention and to hold our leaders – and ourselves – accountable will be impaired as the strength of the independent press declines. Strong, capable, free media, of which newspapers have been the leading edge, are a crucial tool for citizens to be informed and to ensure that our leaders serve the public interest.

Where will these smart journalists go? Most of them are dedicated to the public education and accountability missions of their profession, so hopefully they will find ways to continue to do their work from new perches. Several journalists I know have moved to the nonprofit sector – former *San Jose Mercury News* editorial editor David Yarnold to New York's Environmental Defense; former *Washington Post* and *New Yorker* editor Steven Coll to the New America Foundation; former *Chronicle* editorial writer Louis Freedberg to a new project on the future of California media, hosted by The Commonwealth Club. Some will move to public broadcasting. Others will turn to writing books.

Hopefully, since especially younger Americans are moving away from relying on traditional print, radio and television sources of information, some of them will find ways to enrich the ability of the Internet and other digital media to provide the in-depth coverage of important issues that is essential to a healthy democratic society. Ω