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Writers at the End of Print



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Newspapers are folding around the country like luxury car dealerships. There are unpaid 'furloughs' at USA Today and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer is reinventing itself as an Internet research firm. Denver's Rocky Mountain News has already gone belly up and it's even money that the San Francisco Chronicle -- a good paper that once reviewed my book favorably -- will soon follow.

Part of this is the recession, of course. In hard times, people are less inclined to buy hard-copy newspapers especially when they can receive most of the content online for free. But much of the blame for these closures can be laid at the feet of newspaper executives since there was plenty of warning that the business was changing, and it was time to adapt the advertising base that supports daily printed news.

But identifying a cause and a culprit can sometimes be useless, and few people will shed a tear for the hardships of the conglomerates that own our newspapers.

The real tragedy involves the masses of newspaper employees who will join the swelling ranks of the unemployed. Some also say a deeper threat will strike down democracy as surely as the Ug99 rust fungus destroyed Asia's wheat harvest: without the watchdog of the professional free press, governments will no longer be accountable to the people.

Hmmm. Let's think.

It's true that if we were forced to rely on electronic journalism, democracy might well be doomed. By themselves, the literate likes of NPR, Public TV and John King would probably be insufficient to preserve the checks and balances guaranteed by the first amendment from the assaults of reality TV and Nancy Grace. Fortunately, these bastions of responsible electronic journalism are not alone. The New York Times continues to adapt its brand to the new media environment with the same acuity that enabled it to fight its way up from the five boroughs to become an international beacon of journalism.

And then there is the growing mass of non-professionals, myself included, who are brought to you by the same media revolution that is slowly bringing print to its timely end. Bloggers, vloggers, citizen journalists, text-messagers, and tweets have de-professionalized journalism, taking it out of stuffy institutional hands, and putting it back into the streets where it began. However long the transition from print to digitized texts takes, our free press will remain free on the Internet even though it looks grimier and takes considerably better judgment to determine what's sensible and what's B.S.

The real upshot of the decline of print journalism is after the shaking out process there will be many fewer electronic newspapers. As e-zines and e-books proliferate, most dailies will not make the transition to e-papers. Their content is too localized. Their attitudes, audience, skills and personnel are too old.

This is going to leave a lot of print people out-of-work, and what is it that journalists do when they find themselves with a lot of time on their hands? They write books. Fortunately, during the economic downturn, people are rediscovering the cheap portable medium of books. America is reading again.

For these reasons, I predict a flowering of American letters over the next year or so. I can see forcibly retired journalist writing masses of popular histories, how-tos, self-helps, and contemporary analyses. These books will be able to take advantage of the benefits of the decline of print that few have noticed. It is now much easier and cheaper to publish a book than ever before. In the recession, ebooks (and the 'Indie Authors'* who write and publish them) are real comers. There are good reasons for this as April L. Hamilton points out in her truly useful book *The IndieAuthor Guide*.

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