

COMMENTARY

Staying in the fat



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You probably spend a lot of time worrying about the state of American journalism — I know I do. Most of our other problems pale by comparison.

Fuel costs? No biggie, especially with George W. Bush still muttering about all the petroleum we can reach with a drill in Florida and Alaska. With a forward thinker like that at the helm, no need to worry.

Iraq War? Yawn. Just another little Republican misadventure, but the Bush-Cheney crowd does misadventure the way other people do Disney World, as a kind of eight-year fantasy vacation from reality. Why worry about it? There's oil in them thar hills, too, don't forget, so you have to figure there's a big rose on that Iraq thorn bush, even if we do lose 5,000 or 6,000 or 7,000 or 8,000 young Americans getting it, while simultaneously earning the enmity of millions of Muslims for decades to come. But hey, frig'em if they can't take a joke.

Then there's the question of whether to elect an Almost Dead Anglo Male for president (ADAM), or a Black Inexperienced Stud Politician (BISP) in November. Really, who cares anymore besides the press corps? Well, we all care, of course, but not quite the way the press corps does.

Every four years the many members of the press get to fly around the country, stay in nice hotels, eat in nice restaurants, enjoy the prestige of being out front, never get shot at, have their clothes (their expensive clothes) dry cleaned

at the drop of a hat no matter how much that contributes to carbon emissions, have affairs with each other, make their mothers proud, and make large amounts of money, compared to most other people.

Of course they care. Oh, don't get me wrong, they do honorable work. And it's tough, it's grueling, it's a real marathon; they might lose a little sleep sometimes.

But a politician is a politician by any other name, to paraphrase Shakespeare, whether he's a black rose, a white rose, or a pink rose, no matter what the press corps says. Well, maybe a pink rose is a little different; it'll be a long time before we see one of them run for president. But what would America be without a vestige of bigotry, the kind that lets you squander your talent pool the way we've squandered women and blacks for 232 years of rompin', stompin', name-takin', ass-kickin'...well, never mind all that now.

So that's nothing to worry about.

But journalism, now that's a problem. Journalism is the way we traditionally keep watch on those in power, and those who spend our money. It's the way Americans learn about things we don't have to worry about and that some politicians don't want us to worry about, like wars and national elections and possible reasons for interstellar gas prices and more violent hurricanes and more intense heat and cold. Journalism done well is the way we wear the sinewy and muscular stories that knit our character to the unum e pluribus — by state, by city, by town, by neighborhood. Good journalists tell American stories whose beauty and strength is unimpeachable, whether dark or light.

And journalism is in trouble. Let me bring you up to date at category 5 wind speed.

One: Corporations now own most daily newspapers.

Two: Corporate newspapers rely on ad sales and to a lesser extent on paper sales to stay fat.

Three: Corporate owners like being fat very

much. So do corporate managers, who obey the marching orders of corporate owners as long as they have a hope of getting fat, too.

Four: Advertisers buy expensive space in print because readers will look at their ads.

Five: But now readers can get news elsewhere, especially on line, or on television, for the cost of electricity to run the TV or computer, and on-line ads are a lot cheaper than print ads.

Six: By reducing the amount of editorial content, the quality of content and the nature of content — by defining editorial content as “what readers want” the way an overburdened parent might define supper as what the kids want (fast food, soda pop and ice cream, anyone?) — corporate owners can reduce costs while maintaining their own high salaries and benefits.

Okay, that's where we are. And here's how The New York Times quoted a real son-of-a-bitch opining on this very subject, this week (that's his description of himself, not mine, since he wrote a best-selling book called “Confessions of an S.O.B.” I, of course, would never use language like that myself, except about him).

“Allen H. Neuharth, former chairman and chief executive of the Gannett Company (owner of The News Press and many other newspapers), thinks offering a thinner newspaper, produced by fewer people, can make a lot of sense.

“Most readers of newspapers really only consume a small fraction of what the newspaper produces,” he said. “Can you give them the stuff they want, even though there's less of it over all? I think you can.”

“Such changes ought to move gradually, if possible, he said, to be less of a shock to readers. ‘But I think at some point in time when any business is in trouble, you have to substitute smart management for money, and I think that's what we're going through,’ he said.

“Mr. Neuharth, of course, is the founder of USA Today, which pioneered a newspaper style — now much copied — that Mr. Zell seems to have in mind. Mr. Zell said that in addition to more focus on local news, all of Tribune's papers would have more graphics, charts and other easily digested elements that surveys show readers like.”

Who is Mr. Zell? Well, for readers who don't want to be patronized with a cake-and-ice cream content, for readers who aren't concerned with quantity but who actually care about the thinking, the writing (which is part of the thinking) and the quality of the content (to use a dog-tired but still serviceable word) Mr. Zell is the man from hell. Or something like that.

He's chairman and CEO of the Tribune Company, which owns not only The Chicago Tribune and The Los Angeles Times, but about 10 other major players in American journalism, such as The Baltimore Sun and The Hartford Courant.

He aims to trim 500 pages of news each week from the company's 12 papers, The New York Times reported, and come up with a newspaper that is significantly more of an advertising sheet than a news sheet. He will cut many reporters out of the life, although I doubt his income will do much more than climb like a rocket.

Zell calls the product goal a 50-50 split between editorial or news content and ads, but that doesn't include his many pages of classifieds, and special ad sections.

So the likelihood is that readers of those papers, millions of them, will soon get thick wads of ads — maybe 60 percent — which blanket and in some cases smother news.

But what news exactly?

Maybe whatever news advertisers will pay for.

Because one thing is certain: In the world of Al Neuharth and Sam Zell, journalism is not about righting wrongs or telling great stories, but about staying in the fat. ■

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