

## NEWSPAPERS DOWN BUT NEWS REMAINS LONG LIVE THE PRINTED WORD

By Lee Harding

The old home for the Coventry *Evening Telegraph* is a building frozen in time. The publishers boarded the place up in 2012 when it moved to more modern facilities. Its home of more than 50 years is now an arts space where people come to take pictures. The scene has a museum-like quality, and on some desks family photos, a ball cap, and computers still sit. It has fallen silent, and many fear the same can be said for the newspaper industry itself.

Video killed the radio star, but not the newspaper. If it has had a fatal wound, that has come from the internet. Although radio and television helped a slow decline for the papers, it was apparent even last decade that the internet was the paper's biggest threat yet. By 2006, *The Economist* had already noticed.

Circulation has been falling in America, western Europe, Latin America, Australia and New Zealand for decades (elsewhere, sales are rising). But in the past few years the web has hastened the decline. In order to cut costs, newspaper publishers are already spending less on real journalism. Many are also trying to attract younger readers by shifting the mix of their stories towards entertainment, lifestyle and subjects that may seem more relevant to people's daily lives than international affairs and politics are.<sup>1</sup>

And that is precisely what concerns many observers. Since 2005, more than 200 newspapers have closed in the U.K., leaving 58 percent of communities with no local or regional daily paper. A [2016 study](#) by King's College, London showed a "democratic deficit" in those places, as people were less likely to be politically engaged but were also more distrustful of public bodies. The National Union of Journalists has said the industry is in "free-fall," prompting Prime Minister Theresa May to launch a [government review](#) on the sustainability of the regional press.

Across the ocean, things don't look much better. Warren Buffett, whose companies own 31 of the remaining 1,400 papers in the USA is [only confident of three papers remaining](#): the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*, simply because they have found sustainable internet revenue streams. Craigslist and Kijiji stole plenty of revenue from the classifieds, which traditionally was one-third of newspaper revenue—a loss not easily compensated.

Recent precedents in radio and print suggest that fewer choices are less likely to mean better ones. In the past quarter-century, deregulation and market forces have led to media conglomeration like never before. In 1983, it took 50 companies to comprise most of the United States' media, but by 2012 just six companies comprised 90 percent of it across multiple platforms. In 1995, U.S. companies could only own 40 radio stations, but by 2002, Clear Channel owned more than 1,000, including all six radio stations in Minot, North Dakota. Early that year, a tragedy in that city illustrated how the equivalent of McDonald's owning every restaurant in town can be a problem.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Who Killed the Newspaper?," *The Economist*, August 24, 2006, <https://www.economist.com/node/7830218>.

<sup>2</sup> Ashley Lutz, "These 6 Corporations Control 90% Of The Media In America," *Business Insider*, June 14, 2012, <http://www.businessinsider.com/these-6-corporations-control-90-of-the-media-in-america-2012-6>.

When Clear Channel purchased all six Minot commercial radio stations in 2000, they "replaced locally produced news, music, and talk programs with prepackaged content engineered in remote studios and transmitted to North Dakota through digital voice-tracking systems." With the power out during a dangerous toxic spill crisis, people took to their battery-powered radios, hoping for updates from the designated emergency radio station KCJM AM 910. But the pre-packaged programming played on, and the police could never reach anyone there or at the other five radio stations. Even so, Clear Channel insists they had an employee working there that night and has called Klinenberg's damning account "the Minot Myth" ever since.<sup>3</sup> Or, one might say, "fake news."

Is there any hope? Yes. Winston Churchill once quipped that the rumour of his death had been greatly exaggerated. Or, to channel Miracle Max from the *Princess Bride*, the newspaper is only "mostly dead. That means, partly alive." In the U.K., it was ironically the BBC that found a way to keep it going. In 2016, the News Media Association (NMA) complained that the BBC's online presence could wipe out local newspapers before they had a chance to find sustainability in this digital era. So, the BBC [collaborated with the papers](#) to form the Local News Partnership scheme. Here, local papers can use BBC video and audio and utilize 150 license-free reporters to cover public meetings.

Some believe that America's newspaper industry is simply going where the U.K. already did a century ago. In his article, "[The Death of the American Newspaper](#)," Tim Worstall of the Adam Smith Institute says it is not the newspapers that will die, but the model they were based on. That model is a series of regional monopolies that existed because transportation networks couldn't take newsprint far enough fast enough. This means the internet is not killing the newspaper, but allowing instant and nearly cost-free distribution of their product. He says the media is 90 percent liberal and the veneer of objectivity can vanish. The potential for both conservative and liberal publications will mean a greater diversity of opinion and a greater net result for available perspectives.

No news is *not* good news. Even so, one needn't worry that its words will pass away. Like the Coventry *Evening Telegraph*, it's just abandoning its old home for a better place. The newspaper will remain as long as people want to read it at the price people want to print or distribute it. If the internet does assassinate the newspaper to take the throne, content providers and readers will just have to make the new leadership work. The king is dead, long live the king!

### **About the Author**

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Lasar, "Clear Channel Still Haunted by Minot Toxic Spill Disaster," *Ars Technica*, May 24, 2010, <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2010/05/will-clear-channel-ever-live-down-the-minot-toxic-spill-disaster/>.

