

My community is where I live – and real, physical communities need newspapers

By Randall Rothenberg

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Newspapers, say the talking head, are dying – chewed up for four decades by television, and finally digested during the last tenner by the Internet. Information wants to be free, the chatterers opine, and that means “the news” will evade the papers’ attempts to confine it inside a paywall. It will escape, and proliferate, becoming a slippery commodity unsupported by either subscription fee or advertising. *Requiescat in pacem, cuculli piscibus.*

I beg to differ. It’s not that newspapers aren’t troubled; like all consumer media, they’ve been decimated by the recession that began in 2008, which smacked advertising more severely than it did the broader economy. And even the most ink-stained among us must concede that the combination of iPhones, notebook computers, digital video, Google, blogs, Twitter, Yahoo, Gawker, and Digg has challenged the hardiest of wood-based journalism enterprises.

No, my objection to the conventional wisdom is based on a more intimate economic observation: Newspapers will thrive because Walt Whitman dines at Goat Hill.

I’ll explain, but not before providing some perspective. As the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Interactive Advertising Bureau, I guide an unruly, adolescent industry that’s taking a fair share of blame for undoing newspapers’ two-century long, largely unchallenged dominance of the advertising industry. As recently as 10 years ago, newspapers claimed nearly a quarter of all ad spending in the United States, ahead of broadcast television, cable TV, radio, and the infant Internet. Today, newspapers’ share of domestic advertising spend hovers around between 14 percent and 18 percent, according to the Group M and Magna media-buying agencies, with the Web due imminently to catch up. The root cause for the falloff derives from Econ 101: Because economic demand for advertising has been, through boom and bust, relatively stable for decades (at about 2 percent of GDP), ad growth in one medium tends to mean ad loss in others. Moreover, new media are creating vast new supplies of advertising inventory, pushing down prices for excising media that historically lived within reasonable secure oligopolies.

But when you peer under the hood, the math isn’t as simple as all that. Newspapers remain a vital force and maintain a strong business position – in a place where the Web-centric technorati of the Left Coast rarely look because they spend too much time in their cars and their cubicles: the community.

“Community” is one of those words that has taken on a near mystical and certainly metaphysical definition in our Internet-enveloped world. In the minds of the venture-capital-financed and ambitious young technology entrepreneurs who are driving the development of new media, it seems to mean ... well, anything they want it to mean. Tack the adjective “social” onto “media” and presto!, you’ve created an engine for community development, whether your community is World War II buffs or World of Warcraft aficionados.

Not that this isn’t a great thing. Social media allow every child – every adult, for that matter – entrée to worlds beyond their doorsteps, to fellowships and sisterhoods whose interests, if not physical proximity, they share. It’s to serve the desires and needs of such distanced interest groups that the magazine industry was born, and the reason it survives. And it’s to realize these opportunities and fulfill these needs in even more refined and ever more distant fashions that online media currently are flourishing.

But , excuse me, these are not communities. My community is where I live – not metaphorically, but physically. My community is where I shop – not virtually, but really. My community is where I work, not at a distance, but behind a desk, in a low-rise office building above a restaurant and across from a bar, where 28 oh-so-physically-present men and women depend on (and worry about) my decisions. My community is where I exchange pleasantries and the occasional icy glare with my neighbors; where I pay Mr. Speeches to store my car for the winter; where I plop down on a couch at night and tell my wife about these and the other brief interludes that make up each and every day of my existence. My community is where, to quote Whitman, I encounter” the beggar’s tramp, the drunkard’s stagger, the laughing party of mechanics, the escaped youth, the rich person’s carriage, the fop, the eloping couple, the early market man, the hearse.”

Whitman reveled in the sheer physicality of his surrounding environment. And shy would eh not? He was, after all, a newspaperman, and his grounding in places “latent with unseen existences” is the essence of the newspaperman’s creed and the core of his soul.

And thankfully so! Because, for more than 200 years in the United States, a newspaper’s attention to its very real, very physical community is what alerted citizens to the threats, opportunities, troubles, and joys at their doorsteps. A proposed real estate tax increase ... The school girls’ volleyball team making the state finals...A builder’s destruction of old growth trees...Recent house sales (and sales prices!) in my neighborhood...The existence of new leaf renewal service – all this an unaccountably more, of deeply tangible and of softer but still serious meaning to my household, I learned recently and learned only from my local newspaper.

Needful to say, such news – much of it contained in advertising – also is necessary to the economic well-being of my community. For my neighbors aren’t only consumers; They are

produces, too. They are the plumber and the video store owner and the grocer and the propane gas distributor – and they need the local newspaper as much as they need each other. Economics requires information at least to the same degree it requires infrastructure, and newspaper advertising remains the central source of local business information – the reason why, to this day, some 95 percent of newspaper ad revenue is local in origin, a far higher percentage than in any other medium.

Which brings me to Goat Hill. That's what we locals call our public, 9-hole golf course, at the highest point of which sits a 100-year –old wood-framed clubhouse, inside which resides a bar and restaurant – a bar and restaurant whose proprietor and chef changed just about every other year. And so every other year, come March, we look forward to learning who will take the Goat Hill dining franchise. It's not important enough news for us to seek out; my friends and neighbors, - “none but are accepted, none but are dear to me” will go anyway, because there aren't a hell of a lot of alternatives. But it's news we anticipate, and news we learn one way only: from our local paper.

That's why I'm sure America will always be home to a healthy newspaper industry. It's not to say that paper will forever remain the dominant means of distribution. Nor do I want to imply that today's top newspapers proprietors will be tomorrow's industry leaders. I have little doubt that their travails can be traced in no small part to their abandonment of local news in favor of canned filler; their unwillingness to serve younger readers who flocked to the new medium of television long before the fled to the Web; and their abuse of customers who felt under-served by expensive classified and display ads, and so began departing for the AutoTraders and real-estate weeklies years before Craig even had a List. Yes, newspaper economics and services can, must, and will change.

Happily, they are. Recent research by the Newspaper Association of America shows that local newspaper Web sites rank first among all sources for trustworthiness, credibility, and access to local content online, and that consumers also consider local newspaper sites to be their most trusted source for online advertising.

Yes, as long as physical communities exist, there will be a need for newspapers in some form to bind them. In my community, and yours, they are as vital as “you flagg'd walks”, “you curbs, and “you ferries” that Walt Whitman extolled. Newspapers are our daily and weekly song of the open road.