

Seminar discussion question: Tim Porter says he has met the enemy and he is us, to quote a long-gone comic strip character. He finds the doom and gloom of many newsrooms depressing, defeatist and ultimately a wrong-headed dead end because journalists have the power to change it. Prime Minister Tony Blair once said of change that he loved Britain's history, but he didn't want to live in it. What's the mood in your newsroom? Chronically (if not clinically) depressed people who miss the good old days cannot champion journalistic change that can attract and hold an audience. How well does your newspaper handle change? Is it on the offensive and taking advantage of it, or on the ramparts defending the old from the new? (His blog can be found at <http://www.timporter.com/firstdraft/>)

First Draft by Tim Porter

Ink-Stained Kvetches About Newspapering, Readership & Relevance

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THE MOOD OF THE NEWSROOM

In the last 18 months I've interviewed several hundred journalists - reporters, photographers, copy editors, executive editors, designers, graphic artists. I've been in newspaper newsrooms of more than 500 people and in newsrooms of less than 50. It has been **an immersion course in the mood of the press** - and much of it hasn't been pretty.

The amount of anger and hostility, of distrust and suspicion, of inertia and ennui that **pollutes the journalistic environment** in these newsrooms at first surprised me. Now, when I first step into another newspaper I only wonder how long it will take to surface.

Initially, before the realization grew within me that the negativism was not sporadic but pervasive, I tempered my perception of it with the desires I heard from so many journalists to do good work, **to chase on still after the dreams** that drew them into reporting or photography - speaking truth to power, afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted, and, of course, the byline.

After a time, though, I came to see that many of these journalists, and not just those swimming in my end of the generational pool, **used these nostalgic desires as substitutes** for the actual passion and energy necessary to achieve their journalistic dreams in today's new world of news media. In other words, their notion of "doing good work" meant doing journalism the way it was done "before," a temporal concept loosely bound in the wrappings of time before cable, before Internet, before loss of authority, a time in which "the paper" was "the news."

As much as I want to sympathize with those yearnings - I am, after all, of that time - and as much as I want still to preserve the best of journalism - speaking, afflicting and comforting remain principle elements of the craft - I view this inability to let go of a past that is, if not dead, on life support as poisonous to journalism. **It is a venom whose toxicity**, fed by the same sort of outwardly-directed anger and suspicion that floods the waning days of all

diminishing industries, weakens all hope these reporters and editors and photographers have of imagining a future in which journalism survives but its form is vastly different.

More simply, professional life isn't turning out quite the way these journalists thought it would - and it makes them mad.

Unfortunately, the working stiffs, these angry ink-stained wretches who **once provided the passion and the personality to newspapers**, have strapped on the same blinders as their penurious publishers, who persist in milking the highest possible margins from their businesses rather than investing in the technology, ideas, partnerships and people who can reinvent their business and editorial models.

I didn't think, given the scrappy newsrooms from which I sprang, the day would come when I'd say the responsibility for the decline of newspapers as the principal platform for journalism is **shared equally by the journalists and the publishers**. But that day has come. Shame on you both.

Here is **the litany of shame** that echoes in newsroom after newsroom:

We don't have the money.
We don't have the time.
We don't have the people.
We have lousy editors.
We have lousy reporters.
We can't communicate.
We don't talk.
We don't listen.

Things were better when ...

We had more people.
We zoned.
We didn't zone.
We had more money.
So-and-so was editor.
We did more (name your beat) reporting.
We did less (ditto).

Yes, my friends in the newsroom, there's less money and there are fewer people. That's not really your fault - although it wasn't TV news and the web and shifting demographics alone that drove the readers away. Boring stories, formulaic content and refusal to change with the times are all also culprits.

But, I am sorry, my friends in the newsroom, **much of the rest is your fault**. The journalism, the leadership, the mandate to reflect and engage your community, the necessity to make tough, but creative decisions in the face of conflict, as all industries must do from time to time - those are all your responsibilities and you have abdicated them.

The **obdurance and avoidance** endemic in newsrooms rests on a bedrock belief that the "problems" at their newspapers are best solved with more bodies or a return to a more "traditional" form of journalism.

This belief exists in every newsroom I've been in during the last 18 months and while it is certainly understandable - most people prefer a known past, however glorified it may be, to an uncertain future, regardless of the promise it may hold - I believe **it is dangerously destructive**. It focuses on what was rather than on what could be. It is a virtual "benchmark" against which all is measured, usually unfavorably.

Even younger journalists too young to recall the halcyon days of the press invoke phrases like "staffing situation" and "lack of resources" when explaining certain newsroom condition. They have **drunk the newsroom Kool-Aid** and ingested the **defensive culture**.

To quiet the chorus of criticism I hearing warming up backstage, allow me to offer this salving footnote to the above: In these same newsrooms where **the nattering nabobs of nostalgia** pine for days of yore, there are also forward-thinking reporters and editors and photographers who envision and are working to create a journalistic future built on new story forms, deeper community connections and more truth-telling and watch-dogging. A dilemma facing the industry is whether it can retain these folks long enough to make change happen. It is sad that in so many of my conversations with these younger journalists they tell me of plans to leave newspapers for grad school, magazines or simply travel. As one smart young photographer told me recently: "There is nowhere for me to go here."

Does this sound **too harsh or simplistic**? I'm not sure any longer. I love journalism (and, I confess, newspapers, too). But if we're going to survive in any meaningful way we need to find creative solutions to our dilemma, ways to ensure the continuance of quality journalism at a time when what has been its principal platform -- the newspaper business -- is gravely threatened. Do I have the answer? No. But I know the solution can only be found by using the windshield and not the rear-view mirror.

The search for answers begins with **a question: What if?**

* **What if ...** we **exploded** our newsrooms rebuilt them from scratch? (If someone gave you XXX number of journalists and \$XX millions - add you own newsroom numbers - and said, here, make any type of news organization you want, would you build the same newspaper you have today?)

* **What if ...** we could cover anything we wanted? Would we go to the same meetings, call the cops as much, fill the paper with so many stories about institutions?

* **What if ...** we stopped writing about things even journalists don't read? Let's be honest: Many journalists don't read their own newspapers because they find them boring. Why continue feeding that stuff to the public?

* **What if ...** every journalist believed in the Power of One? As Washington Post reporter Robert O'Harrow **says**: "You have one life, one career, you might as well shoot for the stars." Be dogged, follow truth, think big. [Read: **The Power of One.**]

* **What if ...** we stopped worrying about the Web and instead embraced it by writing for it first and the paper second, but digitizing our interviews, by displaying our source material, by inviting readers to contribute, comment and confront?

There are **plenty of ideas for change** out there and some very smart people pushing them.

* Here is **Ken Sands** of the Spokane newspaper **offering good advice** about how to **use the Web** and **how to meld** mainstream journalism and blogging.

* Here is the **Readership Institute** working with the **Minneapolis newspaper** on **editing for readers** and not for other journalists.

* Here is the **Atlanta** paper **using strategic training** to focus its staff on watchdog reporting and new ways of telling stories.

* Here is the **Bakersfield** (California) newspaper using the Web to **enable readers** to report on their own community.

* Here is the editor of the **Greensboro** (North Carolina) newspaper **talking to readers** daily through his blog.

* Here **is me**, offering some starting ideas about how to **explode the newsroom**, or **invest in change**, or create a **new set of values** for a new age of journalism.

We are in **a time of great transition in journalism**. The tectonics of technology, demographics, economics and lifestyle are disrupting the ground on which newspaper journalism stood for half a century. Survival requires nimbleness, openness and a sense of the possible. The intransigent and the angry and the incurably nostalgic will fall into the cracks.

Newspaper journalists may not be able to control the changing economics of their industry, but they are responsible **for the manner and the mood** in which they respond to those changes.

Tags: **Journalism, Newspapers, Media**

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