



May they rest in peace

Friday, April 3, 2009

Even when I was a member of the fourth estate, I existed in that realm as a feature writer and photographer, unofficially charged with creating page content that would sell ads and boost subscriptions. Graft, corruption and greed were not my beat, nor were they of any real interest to me. The public watchdogs were the investigative reporters. I was a public lapdog, writing happy news and holding my camera at angles calculated to flatter.

In 1998, as the tech bubble was reaching its zenith, Knight-Ridder-Tribune (may it rest in peace) decided the time was ripe to begin publishing its products online. Four members of The State's newsroom staff, were chosen to execute that directive in Columbia, SC and I was among them. As the weekend editor of thestate.com, it was my responsibility to choose, hand-code and post at the stroke of midnight a representative sample of articles, some locally generated, some pulled from the wire. I doubt it occurred to any of us that we were the advance guard of a democratic revolution that would cause so many printing presses to fall silent and so many trees to breathe sighs of relief.

Speaking as someone who for years has gleaned all of his news from often questionable online sources, someone whose exposure to newsprint has for just as long been confined to verifying ad placement and skimming editorial headlines, the fact that the newspaper industry as we know it may disappear during my lifetime is a matter of only passing nostalgic interest ... not unlike the demise of hand-written letters and rotary-dial telephones. It's been over a decade since I last saw my byline printed beneath an advance section masthead and almost as long since I let my last newspaper subscription expire. Now the whole medium seems to be expiring, and a digital poltergeist rising from its remains to haunt the hard drives of former subscribers.

We're now being told that, when the holocaust has run its course, only two or three newspapers will remain in print, The New York Times foremost among them. One of my friends, J. Michael Craig, a 50-something theater animal who has almost no intercourse with the Internet, is a devotee of The Times. This "late adopter," as his kind is called by those of us whose email addresses are older than our cell phone numbers, will have to make a choice someday soon between capitulation and isolation. The industry is pupating and no reasonable person believes that the end product of this metamorphosis will look or feel or smell the way it did at the turn of the century.

A former editor of mine, a career newspaper man who jumped ship shortly after I did, wrote to me recently that The State is "no longer a newspaper that merits respect -- or attention." I'm not a student of newspapers, but from my own extremely limited perspective, that assessment sounds about right. Newspapers are courting irrelevancy. The literate carnival barkers, feature writers such as I was, have replaced journalism with infotainment. And cyberjockies, such as I was also, have placed seasoned journalists on an even footing with well-spoken bloggers and Facebook whales.

Alas, poor Gutenberg. I hardly knew him at all, Horatio.

Length: 4:17

Music: *High Hopes* sung by Frank Sinatra, *Guys and Dolls* from *Guys and Dolls*

Writer, voice: Tim Brosnan



Actor and "late adopter" J. Michael Craig, who has no email address, is a voracious reader. And he keeps up with The Times.

