

When the presses go silent



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By Jim Poling Sr.

Silence is not always golden.

Sometimes it is sorrowful, even hurtful.

It was all that when the thunder of newspaper presses at The Hamilton Spectator faded to a whisper, then silence, last Friday.

It was like watching a heart stop beating. Presses that had printed billions of words of news for millions readers over many decades suddenly still and silent.

Those presses will not roar again. A hole will be smashed through a side wall of The Spectator building and a scrap dealer will disassemble and remove the colossal machines.

A small group of employees and former employees witnessed the final press run. I was among them because I have family connections to the paper, plus those presses printed many of my stories, written as a wire service reporter, later as a freelance writer. The Spectator will continue to serve its readers in print and online, but printing and distribution will be done elsewhere by other people.

Watching the presses go silent was heartbreaking. But beyond the heartache and the nostalgia is the realization that a final press run is a reflection of what is happening in the newspaper business across North America and around the world.

Presses are going silent and are being sold for scrap metal to save money as newspapers fight plunging circulation and reduced revenues. It is a fight for life that started two decades or more ago. Many papers have not survived.

In Canada, more than 200 newspapers have closed in the last 10 years ? 13 of them paid circulation dailies in fair-sized cities and 189 community newspapers in smaller centres.

In the United States there have been roughly 1,800 newspaper closures since 2004, more than 60 of them dailies. Newspaper circulation declined 40 per cent in the U.S. during the same period, and newsroom employment fell 45 per cent.

One result of all this is expanding news deserts ? widening areas without newspapers. The number of communities whose citizens have diminished access to news critical to their lives, and to democracy, is growing rapidly.

This is a shame because we live in a time of misinformation, manipulated information and information massaged and shaped to benefit political and business interests and the powerful people behind them.

Newspapers and their professionally-trained editors and reporters are needed to correct and balance one-sided information by gathering and reporting facts. Despite the industry's problems, the quality of newspaper reporting and writing has increased significantly in recent times.

Newspaper owners and publishers must accept some blame for the decline of newspapers and the resulting weakening of our democracy.

They lacked the foresight and innovation needed to maintain their newspapers' important role in a changing society. They continued to do things the way they always had done, while new and innovative players like Microsoft, Amazon, Apple, Google, Facebook and Twitter exploded on the scene and changed the world.

The game is not done yet for the newspaper industry. Its future lies in delivering its important work to readers online. It must, however, regain newspaper readership and that will require much innovative thinking. Much thinking in the past was about how to attract and please advertisers and not enough on readers, who are the industry's most important customers.

Advertisers are important because they pay the bills and add value to the newspaper products. But without the most important customers ? the readers ? there is no need for advertising.

The newspaper industry needs to engage readers directly to help them understand how news is collected, how decisions about news are made and how it affects their lives. To show them that the only true news is news based on provable facts, balanced by context, and free of bias and opinion.

Newspaper owners and publishers need to get out of their offices and talk with readers because there is no future for newspapers without an engaged and committed readership.

There are a lot of intelligent people in the newspaper industry and my guess is that they will figure out how best to revive and revitalize this crucial aspect of our lives.

We have to hope so because as The Washington Post masthead states: Democracy Dies in Darkness.

It also dies when presses, or the digital production equipment that replaces them, go silent.