

Book Review

THE QUALITY CONUNDRUM

**“The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age,”
by Philip Meyer**

Reviewed by Kay Mills

The conversation often goes something like this:

*“I feel like a (choose one) hamster turning a wheel, canary in a coal mine,
convict on a rock pile.”*

“That bad?”

*“I’m doing the work three people used to do. And I feel as though I am simply
shoveling copy about celebrities instead of editing serious journalism.”*

“And you think it will only get worse. Are they planning buyouts?”

*“Yes. They think by getting leaner they can still make money and attract younger
readers and hold their own against the Internet. Which in the long run is utter nonsense.
But if I don’t take a buyout, I could be fired and end up with nothing.”*

“So you’ll leave. How do you feel about that?”

“Sad. This is not the journalism we went into the business to do.”

Philip Meyer, author of *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2004), sends mixed messages to those of us who have had this conversation more than once in recent years. On the one hand, he says in effect, “get over it—news is being packaged in different ways and aimed at niche markets and he who understands that and adapts has a better shot at surviving.” But on the other hand, Meyer also tells us that quality and credibility still count in the newspaper world and papers that don’t harvest their good will by doing journalism on the cheap will also have more chance to persevere.

I’m oversimplifying his arguments, but these were the bottom lines I saw in his book. In my heart, I want to believe the latter argument, for the sake of my friends who are still in the business and all of us who believe that a robust press is essential to democracy. But my head says the former argument offers more likely prospects. Too many corporations and their investors think only short term and want to continue the fat profits newspapers earned when they held a monopoly on the readers’ interest and the advertisers’ dollars. Information about everything from world news to CD buying obtained via the Internet, where no one has to buy a printing press and newsprint, is easy to get and cheaper to produce. And the ink doesn’t rub off on your hands. So let the innovations roll.

Don’t get me wrong: I am a newspaper person to the core. But even I occasionally have stacks of papers that build up, unread, because life intervenes. So I read Meyer’s

book with the hope that he would throw a life raft to the business that has been my calling for so long.

Many of the early chapters are not an easy read, filled as they are with charts and graphs and studies seeking to measure newspapers' influence, credibility, accuracy, readability, profitability, and attractiveness to advertisers. But I am clearly not the target of Meyer's proselytizing for quality—he's aiming, I think, at the people who run the business side of newspapers and invest in them. He seeks to show them that putting money into improving the accuracy and credibility of a newspaper will be profitable in the long run. The catch, as he acknowledges, is that it is sometimes difficult to prove causality, that is, is a paper profitable because it has influence and credibility or does it have influence and credibility because it is profitable? Some papers like the Washington Post, blessedly have both.

Many family-owned newspapers have gone public to generate more money to improve their plant or buy more newspapers. Once they did, many felt they had to answer to the stockholders' desire for short-term profits. For awhile, newspapers, which had been the main conduit for local advertisers, could trim staff or news hole and drive up the profit margin. Inflation also helped them look better. But soon they had trimmed all they could; but the pressure was still there for obscenely high profits.

Gary Pruitt, who became the CEO of the McClatchy newspapers in 1996, commented about that tactic: "We always say to our papers, your challenge is no matter

what, the paper must improve. It always drove me crazy. . .where in a downturn, news hole cuts were made and the paper got worse. . . And I always thought restaurants don't make food worse in a downturn. Car companies don't make cars less safe in a recession. Clothing companies aren't making lower-quality clothes. If they did, we wouldn't be their customer. We would resent them for it, and we should resent them for it. And I wouldn't give them business even in good times after that. Why is it OK to make a newspaper worse in a recession? That's your excuse for making your product worse? It makes no sense. We thought what we need to do, even in a downturn, is plan how we will improve each paper."

Faced with competition from the Internet and niche publications on everything from men's health to interior design, newspapers need to compete in those fields, Meyers argues. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a leading management consultant, has said that old businesses should "dream your worst nightmare and then invest in it. Figure out what could hurt you and then figure out how to bring it inside." Some newspapers have lively websites, and Meyer reports that those with the most separation from the traditional newsroom often are the most innovative.

Meyer is unwilling to put R.I.P. on newspapers' tombstones. But he does issue this warning:

"The chief threat to newspapers in the twenty-first century will come from entrepreneurs who figure out how to use the more favorable cost structure of Internet-

based media to provide better services to the same kinds of communities that newspapers have served so well. Some of these entrepreneurs might be newspaper companies, but don't bet your career on that. If newspapers harvest their goodwill to maintain their historic profitability, they will create opportunities for entrepreneurs who are willing to try new things and be satisfied with smaller returns."

I'd take that buyout.

Kay Mills, a former Los Angeles Times editorial writer, is the author of "Changing Channels: The Civil Rights Case That Transformed Television."