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Nieman Journalism Lab

After newsroom layoff: It's a mystery

By Tim Windsor / May 20, 2009 / 8:31 a.m.

I recently ran across a compelling tale of a reporter in the midst of wrenching change at a once-great American newspaper:

Every eye in the newsroom followed me as I left Kramer's office and walked back to my pod. The long looks made it a long walk. The pink slips always came out on Fridays and they all knew I had just gotten the word. Except they weren't called pink slips anymore. Now it was an RIF form — as in Reduction in Force.

They all felt the slightest tingle of relief that it hadn't been them and the slightest tingle of anxiety because they still knew that no one was safe. Any one of them could be called in next.

I met no one's stare as I passed beneath the Metro sign and headed back into podland. I moved into my cubicle and slipped into my seat, dropping from sight like a soldier diving into a foxhole.

It goes on from there to tell what happened in the two weeks after he was given his walking papers.

The only thing is — it's all a *complete and utter fabrication*.

And that's okay. It's just the beginning of the latest novel from summer-stalwart Michael Connelly, this time channeling his once-a-newspaperman self through the character of Jack McEvoy, the L.A. Times scribe who, at the beginning of *The Scarecrow*, has just joined the ranks of independent contractors and consultants formerly known as reporters.



Like the paper and ink newspaper itself, my time was over. It was about the Internet now. It was about hourly uploads to online edition and blogs. It was about television tie-ins and Twitter updates. It was about filing stories *on* your phone instead of using it to call rewrite. The morning paper might as well be called the *Daily Afterthought*. Everything in it was posted on the web the night before.

The novel's chief focus is the pursuit of a particularly clever and twisted serial killer, but along the way, Connelly *nails* the details of what it's like to work inside a modern newspaper today — even down to the in-book mention of such recent earthshakers as the closure of the Rocky Mountain News and the Tribune bankruptcy. Not bad for a guy who hasn't filed on news deadline — for print or online — for more than a decade.

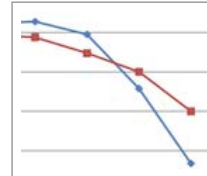
To get a sense of how Connelly came to write *The Scarecrow* and of his take on the current state of newspapering, I asked him a number of questions via email. His answers follow.

The Nieman Journalism Lab is a collaborative attempt to figure out how quality journalism can survive and thrive in the Internet age. ([More.](#))

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David Simon, creator of *The Wire* and former Baltimore Sun Reporter, recently [told a Senate committee](#): “The parasite is slowly killing the host.” Do you think that the Internet is what's killing newspapers? Or, beyond that, do you even agree that newspapers are dying?

I think I will take these questions in reverse order. Two years ago I would have said the newspaper business is in a shakeout period, that it is in a downward spiral that will eventually plateau and that the best papers will survive. Now I am not so sure. It could very well be a death spiral and we find ourselves with front seats at the end of an era. Now, is it the Internet's fault? In part, yes. People's habits and preferences when it comes to news consumption are changing. More rely on the Internet and less on newspapers. And the advertisers are following. Does this make the Internet a villain? I hardly think so. It is just the way the world is changing. It is evolution and social choice and economics. How many tens of millions of people have AOL accounts? Every time you go onto AOL you have your choice of several pages of news and links to thousands more. And it changes and is updated all the time. People with those choices start skipping the newspaper and wondering why they are paying for it.

You bump into Tribune CEO Sam Zell at a party. You're surprised—he's an affable guy. And yet, there's something you feel like you need to tell him. What is it?

I say, Sam, it doesn't matter what you told the people, you didn't really love newspapers or have any affinity for the business. It was just about money. Why didn't you go pick on somebody else? And by the way, whether deserved or not, your face will ultimately be on the book that tells the story of the end of the newspaper business. Now, can you have your waiter get me a beer? I don't like champagne.

You [mentioned](#) to the *Wall Street Journal* that some of your best work came when you were working fast. In *The Scarecrow*, there's a major character that represents a similar, fast approach to news gathering and reporting, filing live to the web, posting video and photos on the fly, rewriting for the next day's paper. Do you know reporters who work like this now? Is this expansion of a beat reporter's job description a move forward, or a distraction?

I've been out of the news business for a long time so I was never of this technological era. In researching the book I consulted contemporary journalists and learned this is the way it is now. In terms of news gathering and delivery to the client, I think it's a move forward because it means news comes to the client quicker and in a variety of formats. If you happen to have a secret motive for becoming a journalist—like say you want to learn to write as a journalist in preparation to be a novelist—this new way is probably a distraction. It appears to me that these new methods, while certainly valid, probably take away from focus on the craft of writing to at least a small extent.

Google is the enemy of newspapers. Agree or disagree?

Google doesn't kill newspapers. People kill newspapers.

Assuming the business model works out either way, and you had to choose, would you rather live in a world with MoJos and no newspapers, or thriving newspapers but no web?

At this point I couldn't live without the web.

If the L.A. Times started charging for their web site tomorrow, would you pay up or move on?

I would pay up in a heartbeat (and then write it off as a business expense.) I no longer live in L.A. but I write about it. So I need to know what is happening there. I read the L.A. Times everyday but haven't paid for it in five years. The L.A. Times website is my homepage, the first thing I see when I go online. So I guess that makes me part of the problem. But it's not my choice. The Times made the choice. I would gladly pay but I've never been asked.

What other novels about reporters and reporting do you like?

I can't recall very many at the moment. The thing is, reporters observe the action but rarely force the action. Novels are about characters who force the action. I think this is why my two “newspaper novels” were half accurate procedure and half fantasy. Nevertheless, a few novels come to mind. Pete Dexter's *Paperboy* is probably the high watermark. Carl Hiaasen has had several strings through his novels that deal with the newspaper. *Tourist Season* and *Double Whammy* come to mind. Former journalist Jonathon King wrote a novel about the biz called *Eye of Vengeance* that was a great take on it, too. John Katzenbach wrote a book called *In*

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the Heat of the Summer that kept me riveted when I read it. It's funny; I think every book I just mentioned is set in Florida. That was not intentional.

The Scarecrow *goes on sale May 26th, unless you're reading this in the U.K., where it's already available.*

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This entry was written by [Tim Windsor](#), posted on May 20, 2009 at 8:31 am, and tagged [fiction](#), [Michael Connelly](#), [mojos](#), [newsrooms](#), [online news](#), [reboot](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Follow any comments here with the [RSS feed for this post](#), [Post a comment](#) or leave a [trackback](#).

18 comments:

1. Rob Levine at [11:54 pm, May 20, 2009](#)

>>>Google doesn't kill newspapers. People kill newspapers.

People WITH GOOGLE kill Newspapers.

2. George Cowie at [3:46 am, May 23, 2009](#)

Michael Connelly's writing has always entertained me, and this is no exception. I find myself being painlessly educated and entertained at the same time, about writers and writing, and about subjects that (or who) move the action. This is a welcome blog. Thanks to LA Observed for the lead.

3. Suzanne Grund at [11:14 pm, May 23, 2009](#)

I hope that newspapers will NOT become extinct. I look forward to the weekend to get my copy of the Saturday paper and then on Sunday where I can relax and sit back with a cup of tea and read the paper. Its so relaxing. And WORST of all; imagine reading a book on an iPhone instead of as they come now. HEAVEN FORBID!!!!

PLEASE NO. KEEP THOSE PAPERS COMING

4. JMulvaney at [11:35 am, May 26, 2009](#)

Newspapers will die if they insist on current path of USA Today, dumb down, quick read. Radio and the web will always do that better. Newspapers will live if we have cop reporters like Connelly taking us behind the scenes, to get the tactile, olfactory, sonic senses going. Newspapers thrived with stars like Breslin and Kempton but also unheralded hacks like Connelly, Willie Rashbaum of NYTimes and pre-column Cullen of the Globe (I am a former hack). Publishers have got to give readers a reason to subscribe beyond news you can use and top 10 lists.

5. [mystery advertising agency webmaster](#) at [8:46 pm, June 15, 2009](#)

It is not a mystery why newspaper companies are in trouble financially. Each newspaper company must be innovative and evolve into what customers want to read both on and offline. For example, a mystery advertising agency takes the mystery out of search engine viral advertising.

mystery advertising agency webmaster

6. kate at [1:15 pm, June 28, 2009](#)

One more good read from Florida -

The Corpse Had a Familiar Face by Edna Buchanan.

Although I have never covered the cops beat I laughed out loud in recognition numerous times.

Trackbacks:

1. [The API's Plan To Save Newspapers: Let's Put Humpty Dumpty Back Together Again](#) at 5:40 pm, June 3, 2009

[...] at Amazon, Google and others seems to be a bit off. As author Michael Connelly wisely says in an interview, "Google doesn't kill newspapers. People kill [...]"

2. [The API's Plan To Save Newspapers: Let's Put Humpty Dumpty Back Together Again | Viningmedia Nieuws](#) at 6:44 pm, June 3, 2009

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3. [The API's Plan To Save Newspapers: Let's Put Humpty Dumpty Back Together Again | The Good NET Guide](#) at 7:48 pm, June 3, 2009

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4. [Technical blogs with pictures and videos » The API's Plan To Save Newspapers: Let's Put Humpty Dumpty Back Together Again](#) at 9:09 pm, June 3, 2009

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5. [The API's Plan To Save Newspapers: Let's Put Humpty Dumpty Back Together Again](#) at 9:50 pm, June 3, 2009

[...] at Amazon, Google and others seems to be a bit off. As author Michael Connelly wisely says in an interview, "Google doesn't kill newspapers. People kill [...]"

6. [A Plan To Save Newspapers | Blog YODspica Ltd](#) at 10:43 pm, June 3, 2009

[...] author Michael Connelly wisely says in an interview, "Google doesn't kill newspapers. People kill [...]"

7. [アメリカの新聞：読者の心を揺るがすものはあるか？](#) at 2:09 am, June 4, 2009

[...] Connellyがインタビューでにもこうっている: [...]

8. [アメリカの新聞：読者の心を揺るがすものはあるか？ | KGRAND ONLINE NEWS](#) at 3:02 am, June 4, 2009

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9. [The API's Plan To Save Newspapers: Let's Put Humpty Dumpty Back Together Again | The Scripts Zone](#) at 5:02 am, June 4, 2009

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10. [Mash123 » The API's Plan To Save Newspapers: Let's Put Humpty Dumpty Back Together Again](#) at 5:57 pm, June 4, 2009

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11. [After the layoff < malaysian media matters](#) at 9:27 am, June 8, 2009

[...] the interview at: After newsroom layoff: It's a mystery » Nieman Journalism Lab. [...]"

12. ["Google n'a pas tué les journaux" « HemispheriqueS](#) at 12:37 pm, June 12, 2009

[...] un maître du crime qui parle, Michael Connelly en personne. Dans un entretien accordé au Nieman Journalism Lab, un blog fort instructif sur les médias réalisé à Harvard, l'auteur de polars, [...]"

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