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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Slouching Towards Oblivion

By MAUREEN DOWD
Published: April 25, 2009

LOS ANGELES



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
Maureen Dowd

Maybe it's because I'm staying at the Sunset Tower on Sunset Boulevard, but I keep thinking of newspapers as Norma Desmond.

Papers are still big. It's the screens that got small.

Now that everybody can check their iPhones and laptops for news that personally interests them, now that they can Google, blog and tweet, as well as shop — and stalk — on Craigslist, old-school newspapers seem like aging silent film stars, stricken to find themselves outmoded by technology.

As a disgusted Desmond asks from behind dark glasses: "And who have they got now? Some nobodies — a lot of pale little frogs croaking pish-posh."

Eric Schmidt, the Google C.E.O., reassured me that newspapers would last 500 years, but only for a boutique market: commuters taking trains, cabs and subways on the East Coast and in cities like London and Paris.

"For somebody who lives in the suburbs," he said, "especially if they're driving and they have kids screaming in the back seat, why would they prefer a physical newspaper over something that is more personal."

Journalists are still hot in Hollywood. Russell Crowe, playing a messy and morally ambiguous Washington investigative journalist, teaches the self-regarding blogger, Rachel McAdams, a thing or three, including why a pen is necessary. "The Soloist," based on an inspiring story about a schizophrenic musician by the Los Angeles Times columnist Steve Lopez, was shot in the Times newsroom.

But in real life, journalists are feeling the chill. Calling his purchase of The L.A. Times and The Chicago Tribune "a mistake," Sam "The Sham" Zell said, "It's very obvious that the newspaper model in its current form does not work and the sooner we all acknowledge that, the better." He said he probably would not try for a merger because "that's like asking someone in another business if they want to get vaccinated with a live

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Many L.A. Times journalists were outraged over a recent front-page NBC ad for the cop show “Southland” that was torted up to look like a real news feature story (a tactic the paper repeated with an ad supplement for “The Soloist”).



“It’s one thing being marched to the gallows by an uncaring and unappreciative public, **INSIDE NYTIMES.COM**

sentenced by shifting technological and cultural habits and a few bonehead moves of your own,” Phil Bronstein, San Francisco Chronicle editor at large, said in a blog, summing up the attitude of the 100-plus journalists at The L.A. Times who signed a petition protesting the “Southland” ad. “But it’s quite another having to go to your death stripped naked as a jaybird.”

When I met up with Bronstein in San Francisco — where The Chronicle was bleeding nearly a million a week last year — he said he thought the L.A. Times reporters had overreacted, and that newspapers should not be so prudish.

“The principle is a sound one — you don’t want to deceive your readers,” he said. “But I’m not all that convinced your readers are so deceivable. A lot of readers think we’re biased, and because we think we’re unbiased, we think they must be stupid. But they’re not. They’re just opinionated.”

Bronstein prefers action to self-pity: “The death spiral stuff is all so self-referential, a lot of fake righteousness.”

I asked him to take me on a justify-your-existence tour.

He started by driving me past an old journalism hangout. “That’s kind of a dead thing, a newspaper bar,” he said. Continuing with the obsolescence theme, he showed me the Linotype machine in the lobby of The Chronicle and his old conference room upstairs.

“This is called the Komodo Dragon Room, for obvious reasons,” he said dryly, referring to the time his ex-wife, Sharon Stone, gave him a meet-and-greet session with a Komodo dragon, who mistook his foot for a snack.

We pass another conference room where the San Francisco political consultant Clint Reilly tangled with Bronstein and left on a stretcher with a broken leg.

We drove around the city for hours, looking at places where journalism had had an impact. At police headquarters, he told of The Chronicle’s coverage of police brutality that forced the department to create a database tracking misbehaving officers. He talked about the paper’s AIDS coverage as we drove through the Castro and past San Francisco General Hospital, where the AIDS wards once overflowed. Parked outside the Giants’ ballpark, he praised the paper’s reporting on Barry Bonds and the steroids scandal, noting that “there are far fewer fly balls going out in the bay.”

His tour ended with cold comfort, as he observed that longer life expectancies may keep us on life support. “For people who still love print, who like to hold it, feel it, rustle it, tear stuff out, do their I. F. Stone thing, it’s important to remember that people are living longer,” he said. “That’s the most hopeful thing you can say about print journalism, that old people are living longer.”

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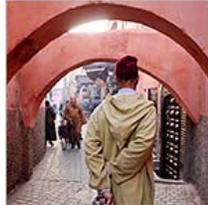
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