

The Decline of the Newspapers

by Thomas C. Reeves

Circulation for the nation's daily newspapers has been declining steadily since 1990. In 2004 and 2005, daily circulation dropped 3.5% and the Sunday circulation declined by 4.6%. In the six months period ending in March, 2006, daily circulation fell 2.5% and the Sunday editions fell 3.1%. Readership declined in almost every demographic group and among people with all levels of education, even those with postgraduate degrees. One study found that baby boomers read newspapers a third less than their parents, and generation Xers read them a third less than the boomers.

The most common explanation is that many people today prefer to obtain their news from television broadcasts and the Internet. (Some observers think that newspaper websites have prompted people to drop their subscriptions to the paper product, and believe therefore that newspaper readership is still high.) According to the Pew Research Center, about 50 million Americans view news on the Web every day. Indeed, the Internet provides one with not only the news but perspective from all political and cultural points of view. Tens of thousands of bloggers attract large audiences, and chat rooms flourish on virtually any topic.

There are undoubtedly other reasons for the decline in newspaper circulation. For one thing, the intellectual quality of the newspapers has clearly declined, especially since 1990, as editors have been actively pandering for younger readers. The book review sections, for example, have seriously disintegrated. Cultural news often involves the prattle and juvenile antics of Rock and Rap stars. Women's news almost always means feminist news. Minority columns are very often written by people on the Far Left, committed to the expansion of the welfare state and strongly into "victimization."

Newspapers have become wearisomely predictable. They were always partisan, of course, but these days, led by the *New York Times*, most editorial pages and much of the political writing is solidly encased within the confines of a monolithic left wing ideology. (The *Times*, of course, is now guilty of treason, having publicly exposed a major weapon against the financing of Islamic terrorism.) The appearance of an occasional column by a conservative does not prove fairness or weaken the indictment. Such newspapers often own an entire market, so that people who want other points of view cannot buy the opposition newspaper; it doesn't exist. And they go elsewhere.

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* fits this description fully, being flagrantly partisan and predictable, watering down its cultural pages, and having a large market all to itself. One sees too an anti-Roman Catholic emphasis that is by no means foreign to American journalists, especially near Christmas and Easter.

Still, over the years, the newspaper had done some useful investigative reporting, and its sport page is consistently well written.

Perhaps too the anti-intellectualism of most young people is such these days that news, especially world affairs, mean little to them. I retired when I discovered that my college students read almost nothing and cared little about most things beyond their immediate needs. Then too, many young people simply can't read newspapers. Christina Hoff Sommers has pointed out that the reading scores of 17-year-old boys have declined in the past decade, hitting an all-time low in 2004. And we aren't discussing minorities exclusively. Department of Education data note that 23% of *white* sons of *college educated* parents scored "below basic" in reading, meaning that they cannot read a newspaper with understanding. Internet chat rooms illustrate the semi-literacy that plagues our youth.

It may be indeed too late for the major newspapers. Having helped to dumb down the culture, they have paved the way for their own demise. They can't become serious again, returning to standards of literacy and objectivity of earlier periods, as there's little demand, and they can't dive much lower for readers or they'll be competing, on an even greater scale, with the supermarket tabloids. I wish I could feel sorry for them.