

## NRJ Book Reviews

Rebecca Theim, *Hell and High Water: The Battle to Save the Daily New Orleans Times-Picayune* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican, 2013). Hardcover, 320 pages, \$26.95.

*Review by Marc Edge*

Advance Publications has ventured into the forefront of the “digital first” movement in newspapering that sees the future as online, with a diminished presence in print. Advance has cut back on the publication frequency of its once major dailies in New Orleans, Cleveland and Portland, Oregon, along with smaller newspapers in Michigan and Alabama, to three or four times a week. Industry watchers are following the reaction in those markets with interest, as it could well determine whether the bold moves by Advance will start a trend away from daily publication. Judging by the experience in New Orleans, as chronicled in Rebecca Theim’s remarkable *Hell and High Water*, much pain will be experienced by all involved. The transition there, according to Theim, was nothing less than bungled. The way Advance executives and Newhouse officials treated employees, readers and advertisers in New Orleans is almost a textbook example of ineptitude and insensitivity. The problems began when David Carr of *The New York Times* scooped the company announcement of the change in May 2012. Executives were caught off guard and were thus constantly on their heels in dealing with the ensuing community outrage, much of which centered on the company’s longstanding pledge not to lay off employees. The 200 or so *Times-Picayune* workers who lost their jobs were required to remain at work for months and, in some cases, to train their more tech-savvy replacements. Morale at the newspaper was poisoned as a result. After more workers quit than Advance wanted to lose, the company attempted to re-hire many of those it had laid off, but most of them balked at returning. The moves prompted the *Advocate* newspaper in neighboring Baton Rouge to begin a daily New Orleans edition, which hired many of the *Times-Picayune*’s castoffs and quickly gained a circulation of 23,500. That caused the *Times-Picayune* to counter by printing a tabloid called *T-P Street* on the days it had ceased publication. All of a sudden, New Orleans had more newspapers than ever.

While Theim focuses on the situation at the *Times-Picayune*, she also monitors the transition to non-daily publication at Advance’s three newspapers in Alabama, which also took place in 2012, and subsequent transitions at Cleveland’s *Plain Dealer* and Portland’s *Oregonian*. Advance pioneered the move to non-daily publication in economically distressed Michigan, where it reduced publication at three of its eight dailies to three times a week in 2009 and cut

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back its *Ann Arbor News* to twice weekly. Its moves in Ann Arbor were most controversial of all. It renamed the *News*, which had been publishing since 1835, after its newly emphasized website, Annarbor.com. The change did not go over well in even such a high-tech hub as the University of Michigan's hometown, and the name *Ann Arbor News* was returned to the newspaper in late 2013. By then, Advance had a full-scale public relations disaster on its hands in New Orleans, and uprisings were also brewing in Cleveland and Portland. Readers in New Orleans, upset over losing their daily newspaper, delightfully dubbed the versions that appeared less frequently the *Sometimes-Picayune*,

Theim is hardly a disinterested observer, and her account comes from a definite point of view. A former *Times-Picayune* reporter who now practices public relations in Las Vegas, Theim started a fruitless petition imploring Advance to stop the changes, helped to organize a "Save the Picayune" page on Facebook and started a blog at dashTHIRTYdash.org. She began work on her book in late 2012, and it was published to coincide with the first anniversary of the switch to non-daily publication. She reserves her harshest criticism for *Times-Picayune* editor Jim Amoss, who led the setting up of the changes, accusing him of gullibility for having "seemingly swallowed a corporate line with little critical consideration of the true underlying dynamics." She is also harshly critical of the third generation of the Newhouse family, which controls the privately held Advance. One source that is not found in *Hell and High Water* is any executive or owner of Advance, as Theim reports that all of her requests for interviews with them were refused.

As remarkable as the story Theim tells is the alacrity with which her publisher got the tale to press. Pelican Publishing is a small house that specializes in local New Orleans subjects, but it got a manuscript with citations as late as August 2013 to press in mid-October. The book is clean, well-written and -edited and comes complete with an index, bibliography and endnotes. Theim makes great use of a variety of sources, ranging from interviews and documentary research to Facebook and blog posts (and even reader comments), talk show transcripts, leaked memos and acerbic analysis from alternative weeklies. Her tale of the changes at the *Times-Picayune* and in the broader newspaper industry would be of interest to anyone enamored of journalism and concerned for its future.

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