

Marc Edge, *Greatly Exaggerated: The Myth of the Death of Newspapers* (Vancouver, Canada: New Star Books, 2014). Paperback. 320 pages, \$21.

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On its final day of publishing in 2007, *The Cincinnati Post* anchored its front page with a -30-. The longtime copyediting symbol for the end of a story marked the end of Ohio's Queen City's afternoon daily and, in part, the end of the competing afternoon daily as a whole.

At the time, many observers and critics of the newspaper industry thought the -30- for *The Post* would become a -30- for the entire industry. In *Greatly Exaggerated: The Myth of the Death of Newspapers*, Marc Edge uses the weapon of perspective to skewer the fault in their logic. He examines the ways newspaper industry insiders and critics positioned the declines and changes at the end of the 2000s as the harbinger of death for the printed news. Their claims overstated the problems, he argues. Instead, corporate greed drove the cuts to the industry.

Soundly researched, the book details the economics of the industry and offers those economics as the reason afternoon, second-place daily newspapers went the way of the dodo, or perhaps, the linotype machine. He decodes the complexities of newspaper finances, including advertising revenue, circulation, expenses and the write down of value loss associated with the downturn of advertising during the Great Recession. This process cleanly argues the Wall Street ownership of newspaper chains has de-emphasized quality to keep profit margins inflated—double that of other industries.

Edge's no-holds-barred book names names of the naysayers and doomsday mongers, as well as the owners and executives at newspaper companies who cowed to investors instead of fighting to preserve the newsroom. He cites the industry's vast profit margins, in excess of 20 percent for some chains, and their declines into the single digits during the recession, as the chief cause for much of the industry's transformation. His argument here delivers the analytics lacking in many reports about the "death" of printed news.

As I read Edge's book, I anticipated an account of my former newspaper, the *Charleston (W.Va.) Daily Mail*; however, it was not found. In 2004, MediaNews Group sold the *Daily Mail*, then an afternoon newspaper, to the larger morning *Charleston Gazette*, effectively dissolving the newspapers' joint operating agreement.

The *Gazette* leadership began systematically diluting the *Mail's* operations, cutting staff from more than 50 to about 20. After much public and advertiser outcry, intervention by the Department of Justice restored much of the *Mail's* staff, and rulings put major restrictions on the *Gazette's* ownership and operation of the *Mail*, which switched to the morning cycle in 2009 and continues to compete.¹ The *Gazette-Mail* saga illustrates many of Edge's arguments: the death of a second-place afternoon daily, the complications of joint operating agreements, the engagement brought by competing newspapers (The *Gazette* and *Mail* offer countering viewpoints about political issues in West Virginia's capital city) and the impact of advertiser and community support for a printed newspaper.

Edge unabashedly advocates for printed newspapers; unfortunately, he's one of the few left to do this. He claims newspapers have righted the ship in terms of revenue and have returned to the print edition as a vehicle for profit, albeit with less of a wall between news and advertising. Further, pay walls and metered content online are still forcing people to pay, tapping that revenue stream.

I am hesitant to buy into Edge's argument about the future of the printed newspaper. As a former Web editor, I know the value of embracing digital content; as a designer, I want to believe in the print edition most of all. I believe design and content *can* make the printed newspaper a valid and useful means of journalism, and newspapers are taking steps to create the design and content that *would* make this possible. But, I am not sold on the idea that a great product of any kind will draw millennial readers to the printed newspaper. Millennials are a different market, a different consumer. They are not buying houses and settling down financially: two life benchmarks Edge argues will lead the generation to become print newspaper readers. I think the depth of investigative journalism Edge champions has a role in the print newspaper. However, his derision of content driven by market desire, and not editorial oversight, reeks of paternalism. Eat your broccoli, or no dessert for you. Millennials like broccoli. And they like dessert, too. But don't think you'll be able to force them to eat on your terms, not theirs.

That's the rub with this book: Edge positions convergence and the Internet as one of the factors that contributed to the downfall. He does not clearly delineate convergence via merger of ownership or embracing digital media; instead, he positions both as flawed, with ownership the more flawed. Demo, Dailey and Spillman's convergence continuum includes cross promotion, cloning, cooperative competition, content sharing, and convergence.² Edge argues that these are detrimental to the printed newspaper. I counter that these, at some level, can be its savior. In my time at the *Daily Mail* during its tour on the Newspaper Death Watch, we treated our print edition and Web edition as converged partners, where we shared and cloned content, cross promoted one entity to the other, and had the notion of cooperative competition with the print scooping the Web, and the Web scooping the print. Ultimately, we used the print for great design, info-graphics, photography and compelling local stories. And we used the Web for content that could not fit in the diminishing column space, additional Web-only national content, updating breaking news and as a vehicle to extend our superior

reporting of state government and the state's two Division I college sports teams beyond our 50-mile home delivery radius.

Edge's book delivers a dose of tonic for those who lived through the Great Recession in a newsroom, waiting to see if the next -30- was the bell tolling for them. He systematically shows what went wrong in an age where it seemed every action was a rearrangement of the *Titanic's* deck chairs. But its notion that millennials will someday realize the incredible printed newspaper is at best misguided and, at worst, dangerous to newspaper companies seeking resonance for 20th century ideas. Instead, they should follow his other advice to embrace local, watchdog, investigative, data-driven reporting and work toward creating a print product with a superior, engaging user experience.

Notes

1. "Justice Department Reaches Settlement with *Daily Gazette* Company and MediaNews Group Inc.," *justice.gov*, January 20, 2010, <http://www.justice.gov/atr/public/press_releases/2010/254282.htm> (April 6, 2015).
2. Larry Dailey, Lori Demo and Mary Spillman, "Most TV/Newspaper Partners at Cross Promotion Stage," *Newspaper Research Journal* 26, no. 4 (fall 2005): 36-49.