

NRJ Books

Time, Change, and the American Newspaper, by George Sylvie and Patricia D. Witherspoon (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002, \$55 hard cover, \$24.50 soft cover) 224 pages.

Reviewed by Marc Edge

Times are changing, Sylvie and Witherspoon remind us, and newspapers must keep up with or even anticipate them lest they lose even more readers due to changes in lifestyles, demographics and technology. The good news, they argue, is that in many ways newspapers resemble adaptive, post-modern "knowledge organizations" capable of reacting quickly to changes in their environment.

Time, Change, and the American Newspaper provides an interesting perspective on newspaper management by combining the expertise of its authors. Sylvie is head of print journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, studies newspapers and has co-written a leading textbook on media management. Witherspoon is chair of the communication department and founding director of the Center for Communication Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso, studies the leadership of change and has written a book on organizational communication. The synergy of their approaches allows for a useful, if uncritical, look at some of the challenges facing newspapers today.

Unfortunately, they rarely question the wisdom of or need for some of the changes they chronicle. One example is their look at the recent high-profile breaching of the mythic "Church-State" Wall between newsroom and advertising sales at the *Los Angeles Times*. Most treatises on the tumult wrought by publisher Mark Willes, an economist with no previous experience in the newspaper business, agreed the move was a journalistic disaster. But Sylvie and Witherspoon present the scenario in an accepting and even favorable manner, without comment on whether his idea was brilliant or bone-headed. "The time was right for Willes' arrival," they state blandly in ending their mini-case study on the *Times*, "just as it was for his departure." The book then reveals its perspective beyond doubt by framing the quantitative research of David Pearce Demers as having "shown" the overstated nature of complaints by professionals against corporate newspapers, ascribing them pejoratively to "journalistic fear."

The authors provide a model comprising four concentric circles to explain newspaper change. The outer ring contains environmental influences, followed inward by considerations of organizational framework and the needs of stakeholders. Sitting at the center of their model are the individuals involved in

newspaper change. The notion of time is presented as key to change in the medium because in this time-sensitive business timing is crucial. The resistance of tradition-bound, fearful journalists to changes mandated by management is attributed to their "semi-virtuous" sense of mission and characterized as "ludicrous" according to the arguable maxim presented by the authors: "Newspapers must change or die." The importance of framing change to employees in a positive manner is illustrated in their example of introducing team reporting – not as a radical change to work methods, but instead as "a way to make their jobs easier and more fun."

The book's strength is its second chapter, which offers insight into newspapers as knowledge organizations. Most media management texts, the authors note, focus on newspapers as modern, hierarchical organizations and they thus present traditional task-focused classical and human relations / resources methods of management.

The irony is that, being interaction and communication-intensive networks and systems, newspapers have more in common with post-modern knowledge organizations, Sylvie and Witherspoon argue. This type of organization, such as computer and software companies, maximize communication and operate more effectively by sharing leadership across more informal, flatter hierarchies. Managing newspapers as constantly-evolving knowledge organizations, the authors argue, will make them more adaptable to change, but it also will require revised values and assumptions about their very nature.

The perspective that emerges is decidedly one of management consultant, a role to which first author Sylvie, who conducted in-house seminars at some of the newspapers studied, readily admits. As is the habit of management consultants, however, even the simplest of intuitive insights is often presented as profound. For example, the bottom-up, consultative implementation of pagination technology at the *Dallas Morning News* is deemed "truly visionary" for the acknowledgment by management that "it is not just what you do – changing the technology – that is important; it is how you go about doing it that also counts."

Another example comes in the second of three case studies, this one of improving product quality at the African-American *Dallas Examiner*. Sylvie's 1999 workshop at the troubled weekly resulted in the revelation that improvements to editorial quality will go for naught unless accompanied by a resulting increase in advertising revenue. The last of the case studies, which jointly comprise the middle third of the book, examines the "unrivalled innovative spirit" of the people who remade *USA Today*, once derided as "McPaper," into a deeper, more "journalistically-acceptable product."

Time, Change, and the American Newspaper provides an interesting departure from other books on media management. As a course offering, it would perhaps be more useful at the graduate level as a supplement and counterpoise to more traditional thinking on the subject. But the book's most appropriate audience

might be practitioners, whose notions of the very business in which they work would doubtless undergo a serious adjustment from its reading.

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