

Community Newspaper R.I.P.

Since the financial “meltdown” of 2008, we have witnessed the disappearance and bankruptcy of many newspapers –some which had existed for decades– due to competition from digital news and social media platforms. They –as well as many local and community radio stations– have been the victims of digital journalism.

The newspaper industry is in serious decline throughout North-America and Europe. In these regions, the industry is facing slumping ad sales, the loss of much classified advertising, and precipitous drops in circulation. The U.S. saw the loss of an average of two newspapers per week between late 2019 and May 2022, leaving an estimated 70 million people without their newspapers in places that are already “news deserts.” If the trend continues, a third of newspapers will be lost by 2025, according to a 2022 study published by Northwestern University. The decline of newspapers has various adverse consequences, in particular at the local level. Some research has linked closures of newspapers to declines in civic engagement of citizens and increases in political polarization.*

Fewer barriers to entry, lowered distribution costs, and diverse computer technologies have led to the widespread practice of digital journalism. Some sociologists have argued that this phenomenon has democratized the flow of information that was previously controlled by traditional mass media; but others argue that digital journalism undermines the traditional business model of mass media distributors, based on single-copy sales, subscriptions and the selling of advertisement space. **

In many small Canadian towns and districts, the disappearance of their local newspaper has had a detrimental effect on these communities’ ability to reflect and tackle local issues affecting them, and on the means to organize themselves democratically to face their daily challenges. Especially with such an enormous territory as Canada’s, with great distances between these small towns and the few large metropolises where important decisions are made affecting them, their lack of effective input into mass media coverage tends to considerably reduce their power as citizens.

COVID dramatically impacted the Canadian newspaper industry landscape. Since the beginning of 2020, 82 community newspapers have ceased publication. Community newspapers are hyper-local. They effectively represent the neighbourhoods they serve. And they are able to target these communities like no other medium. However, though digital news media have steadily grown, 46% of Canadians continue to read printed editions. ***

One of most troubling effects of this transformation is the disappearance of ethnic community newspapers serving their Canadian diasporas. I have recently studied a directory of that class of publications dating back to March 2006, and calculated that 45 out of 95 newspapers on that list are no longer being published today. Furthermore, 19 out of the 95 have gone digital, becoming either a website or other digital platform, sometimes shared with other entities here or overseas. It is also important to point out that, although 450 ethnic origins were reported in Canada’s 2021 Census, **** very few of their respective communities appear listed on that directory, or on any other source, as having ever published a newspaper to serve their particular ethno-cultural group.

Having had the privilege of seeing many articles penned by me, published in four different Canadian Spanish-language newspapers from 1988 till 1995, I can vouch to the importance of this traditional industry as a valuable means to organize a diaspora community when seeking solutions to their socio-economic problems as well as trying to preserve its particular mother-tongue and native culture.

Both small local and ethnocultural newspapers offer many advantages when compared to digital journalism:

(1) The enterprise can ensure greater control of its printing and distribution –in some cases even printing the paper in-house on their own printing press– thereby reducing the dangers of hacking and ransomware.

(2) Local ownership and staffing can reduce the possibility of foreign interference –crucial firewall for some ethnic communities who originally migrated from countries which are today suspected of foreign interference in Canadian affairs.

(3) Proximity to their local businesses and NGOs ensures that the paper responds to the authentic local problematic –down to the individual citizen– and supports the local economy.

Unfortunately, I fear that the trend towards digital journalism and further social media chaos is irreversible and, with the addition of A.I., will eventually be wrenched out of the hands of real human beings altogether. Resistance is futile.

Written by © Pascual Delgado, May 10th 2024.

* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decline_of_newspapers

** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_journalism

***https://nmc-mic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Snapshot-2021-FACT-SHEET_Final-02.02.2022.pdf

**** <https://uscanadainfo.com/ethnicity-in-canada/#>: