

Death by Internet?

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

In two years, this newspaper will celebrate its 40th anniversary and carries the distinction of being the longest running, English language, anti-authoritarian publication in American history. Yet, the substantial upsurge in computer use in recent years as a major source for ideas and information may be putting our existence in jeopardy.

By most measures, the Fifth Estate is doing well. We began a regular schedule since the paper's offices and editorial center moved to Tennessee in 2002. And the issues are marked by high quality writing and graphics.

Except during the desolation of the mid- and late-1970s, this paper has always been connected to the contemporary movements of contestation, both through the direct involvement of its staff and by reporting the actions and ideas that motivate them. We reflect the vibrancy of the current resistance to the increased corruption and violence of the state.

However, what is missing during this period of insurgency is a simultaneous rise in our circulation. Almost every other period of popular revolt experienced a marked increase in the number of papers appearing and a dramatic rise in circulation for those already existing—consider the labor press of the 1880s through to the so-called underground press movement of the 1960s. Not so this time, unfortunately.

Millions of Americans, joined by even greater numbers around the world, confronted the reckless, outlaw regime of George Bush in its drive toward invasion and occupation of Iraq through every imaginable means, particularly demonstrations which were seen even in the smallest cities and most conservative geographical areas. One would have expected a major increase in our subscriptions and newsstand sales and in other publications.

Instead, the percentage of subscribers renewing is at an all time low, and our newsstand figures remain flat.

We have just completed arrangements with two new wholesale distributors, so now the Fifth Estate is available in hundreds of more stores around the country. Our overall circulation will undoubtedly increase, but this doesn't address the fundamental concern of those of us who work to bring this to you every three months.

We're fearful that we and other radical publications are in danger of suffering Death by Internet. It's common knowledge that much of the anti-war movement's ability to expose the official lies about Iraq and to mobilize people across the planet was due to the pervasive use of email and the World Wide Web. This worked wonders for organizing opposition in a country whose media is no less an adjunct of power than was the old Pravda in the former Soviet Union (U.S. media is more sophisticated, so everyone doesn't automatically assume it's lying as it was with the Soviet paper). But, the other edge of this sword may be a major diminution of the role the printed page plays in people's information and idea sources.

So, what, say the most modern among us? Newspapers are so 20th century? The Web brings you immediate information, and computers don't kill trees?

But something significant is being lost when life is perceived through cyberspace. The ability to read the printed page in a deliberate manner in a 'form that doesn't connote speed and isn't competing with the next easily available image or article gives time for reflection of the ideas being communicated. Long articles of analysis on-line are usually skimmed at best, and, if you groaned at the very concept of lengthy essays, this only makes our point.

Computers are part of the destructive process of speeding up of life where only quick, exciting images are welcome. It creates a cognitive setting which mainly benefits the rulers. Has the Information Age made people even a bit smarter? In fact, doesn't the opposite seem true?

We could easily switch forms and publish an online publication; it probably would be a lot less work. However, we are committed to not just the content of our publication, but its form as well. A world of computers, web sites, email, cell phones, and all the electronic junk that dominates this era seems to provide some convenience and benefits, but overall, it's something else we desire: the ability to sit down, read an article, lazily go back and consider a sentence or a thought, or re-read a whole article a day or a year later to reacquaint one's self with what is being said.

Besides, only newspapers remain viable during a blackout.

—Walker Lane

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