

Avengers blank S. Kingstown 49-0

By Mark Thompson

October 1, 2020

Fifty years ago today, I earned my first paid byline. Made \$10.

But it might as well have been a million.

I had been tapped—well, I was probably the only kid to ask—to cover the Avengers of East Greenwich High School for the too-grandly-named *Rhode Island Pendulum* (the paper actually only covered East Greenwich, a town of about 10,000 on the western shore of Narragansett Bay). I began my reporting career at that 4,000-subscriber weekly newspaper, and ended it at a 4 million-subscriber weekly newsmagazine. In between were more than 40 years of great stories, great people (some morons, too) and great memories. This stream-of-consciousness is simply one reporter's take on the fate of his crumbling business as seen atop a half-century's worth of notebooks.

I started out by sitting in front of a convoy of clackety-clack manual typewriters. A much quieter ECRM CRT word processor. Followed by a primitive TI 700

computer, complete with that unspooling roll of thermal paper. Then a TeleRam Portabubble, followed by a Radio Shack TRS (“Trash,” to its fans) 80, to some Toshiba and other Stone Age machines, before landing behind a Mac 25 years ago, upon which, several Apple generations later, this is being typed (I’m sure there’s a couple of technological flashes-in-the-platen I’ve missed, and thankfully forgotten). From Rhode Island to Pontiac, Michigan, to Washington, D.C., in 1979, for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. Then it was on to the glorious Knight-Ridder D.C. bureau in 1986 (writing for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Miami Herald*, the *Detroit Free Press*, the *San Jose Mercury-News* and two dozen others K-R papers, along with 200 more, including the *Washington Post*, which took the Knight-Ridder wire), to *Time* magazine in 1994. After 23 years at *Time*, I’ve been writing about U.S. national security—my bread and butter for four decades—for the Project on Government Oversight since 2017. We’re an intrepid band of nonpartisan, nonprofit do-gooders, dedicated to getting more bang for every taxpayer’s buck in all nooks and crannies of the federal government.

It has been quite a ride. From town council meetings in a small New England burg to war councils in Afghanistan and Iraq. Chasing down police brutality in a small town, overtime abuse in a big county, and death-penalty cases before the Supreme Court. Skydiving over Massachusetts and tractor-pulling

down Michigan's Silverdome gridiron. Spending time with green cops, and Green Berets.

Flights, so many flights, including memorable ones aboard an F-16 fighter and Air Force One. There was also an older Air Force One, Tail No. 26000, which ferried President Kennedy's body back from Dallas in an all-bronze casket that was later buried, empty, at sea. My colleagues and I sat in that same compartment 30 years later, when it was reserved for reporters flying with U.S. defense secretaries. Yeah, kinda creepy. Even more so than staying in Fort Worth's Hyatt (now Hilton), which was where JFK spent his final night when it was known as the Hotel Texas (yes, hotels change owners just about as often as newspapers). Electrifying nights, in and out of newsrooms, reporting on wars and elections.

Strapped into UH-60 Black Hawk and CH-47 Chinook choppers crisscrossing Afghanistan, the Balkans and Iraq. We hugged the ground as we flew up and down mountains, and screamed at palm-tree height across deserts, to reduce our chances of being shot down. Midair refueling aboard a windowless E-4B doomsday plane—a flying command post for waging nuclear war—far above the Pacific in the middle of a 21-hour non-stop flight. Time spent watching the America's Cup races off Newport, R.I., and then watching a supertanker run into an Iranian mine in the Persian Gulf from the nearby bridge of a U.S. Navy cruiser pledged to protect her. Sailing the Pacific with the

first woman to command a U.S. Navy warship. Rides with cops and firemen along local streets, followed by rides in combat vehicles in war zones around the world. An MC-130 Combat Talon special-ops warplane streaking, lights out, through the Afghan night. The dim red lights inside brought back memories of darkroom days. That was when Tri-X film ruled front pages of newspapers around the world, before digital photography alt-control-deleted darkrooms forever.

It's funny. When reporters get together to reminisce, and commiserate, they often tend to recall the stories behind the stories, more than the stories themselves. And such tales have grown increasingly poignant in recent years as what many of us think of the golden age of journalism rides off—has been driven off?—into the sunset.

I became a reporter because I liked being the first to know stuff, and sharing that stuff with others. I guess Watergate was a magnet that inexorably drew me to the nation's capital, although I didn't realize it when it was happening. One of my lucky breaks was that I rarely covered politics. The first half of my career was when printing news on paper was the same thing as printing U.S. currency. The second half was watching the same industry stumble, falter and fall into the crumpled, rusty heap it is today, and being sold for scrap.

This isn't a lament for what was. Rather it's an acknowledgment of what has happened since the collapse of the news business, with all of its pettifog bickering about rules and sources. There's a direct link between that and the resulting collateral damage inflicted on our country. Nowhere was that more evident than in Tuesday night's disheartening debut debate between President Trump and Joe Biden.

The World Wide Web has become the World Wide Wedge. It's no longer a Central Bank of knowledge, but a centrifuge tearing Americans apart, pulling them into one warring camp or the other. Yet all evidence shows that most of us Americans are centrists. We are immune to the screeds. So we tune them out. And that gives extremists all the leverage. Taking in a day's worth of news used to be an adventure. Now it's the Bataan death march.

All those above-mentioned publications where I once worked are mere shells of their former selves. And that may be unfair to mollusks. None inhabits the building it did when I worked there. Herds of metal vending boxes peddling fat papers for a dime or two bits on street corners across America have been replaced with tatty plastic knockoffs, with skimpy freebies on offer. When I first rode D.C.'s Metro subway in 1979 to work at the National Press Building downtown, more than half the passengers had their arms spread wide reading broadsheet newspapers (with a few aficionados practicing the

“Brooklyn fold” that sliced the paper’s pages into long, narrow strips by folding them in half the long way, making them easier to handle in tight quarters).

There were a dozen or more *Washington Post* vending boxes at my subway stop; today there is none. By the time I stopped my daily subway rides in 2017, I’d be lucky to find one or two passengers reading papers in my railcar. Trying to navigate the news on a smart phone is not the same. The serendipity factor—stumbling across a story that blows you away, or simply tickles the unknown—has evaporated.

The Internet changed everything. The established U.S. press failed to adapt. And, to date, so has the rest of the country. Almost overnight, column inches became column lightyears, with a bottomless news hole to fill. And as reporters struggled to fill this new news hell—“but let’s wait until after the paper’s hit the street tomorrow morning before we post it online”—all kinds of reporters, from charlatans to champions, rushed in to sate the beast.

After trying to keep pace by giving away its news for free, newspapers tried to buy back their business model by building paywalls. It was a last-ditch effort after selling eyeballs to digital advertisers came a cropper. But it was too late.

There can be no license or test to become a reporter in America. That is the blessing, and the curse, of the First Amendment. Amid a tidal wave of news,

responsibility for content's content has shifted from producers to consumers. And boy, have we consumers failed. We have reverted to childhood, devouring the ice-cream treats that cotton-candy to our political views, while pushing aside the bacon-less Brussels sprouts a well-informed citizenry requires.

Mine has been a grand ride, and for that I am grateful. But it has also been distressing, as technology has upended the business model that I was lucky enough to climb aboard during the print-news industry's golden years. Now that I am in my own golden years (67, thanks for asking), I look back at bittersweet memories wrought by that technology, as much as by publishing pooh-bahs who couldn't find a pica pole if it were shoved up their nostril.

Right out of college in 1975, I returned to East Greenwich, that small Rhode Island town where I'd grown up, to work on the *Pendulum*. I'd type my stories on a manual typewriter, where I'd routinely blacken my fingertips trying to change the ribbon. I'd hand them off to colleagues who would retype them into a huge computer, which would spit out glossy ribbons of typeset columns. Our publishing week would end on Tuesday nights. That's when, in a flurry of teamwork, we used hot wax to paste the columns and accompanying headlines, captions and black-paper blocks for photos (they'd be added later) onto sheets with light blue lines to keep everything straight. I'd take these tabloid-sized camera-ready

mockups, usually 24 to 32 pages, to the next town, whose bigger paper had its own presses.

It was while listening to the radio on one of those rides I learned that Elvis Presley had left the building. Funny what strange things serve as markers, glancing into a career's rearview mirror.

The weirdest thing about my new job in the town where I grew up was calling my high-school teachers by their first names. There was nothing as exciting as writing up a big story. Dogged reporting helped lead to the ouster of the local police chief and school superintendent. There are few things more satisfying in life than breaking a big story in a local paper and then being surrounded by pleased—and irate—readers when you walk into the town's busiest restaurant hours after the paper hit the street. It tended to toughen one's skin, while making clear how easily errors, in fact as well as tone, can be made.

Then there were the sad tales: an elderly tenant evicted because his landlord failed to maintain the apartment; a man committed involuntarily to the state mental hospital who shouldn't have been; a woman in her 30s slowly dying because of an inoperable spinal tumor. I remember being so proud as a young reporter, eagerly going out of my way to personally deliver the latest *Pendulum* to a reader who called to complain that she hadn't gotten hers.

She put things in perspective. “Can’t miss those hot-lunch menus,” she chirpily told me on her doorstep.

Funny, what sticks in a reporter’s mind, such as it is.

I have read the *Pendulum* for the past 55 years (the paper got its name because it originally was published in two nearby towns, alternating between them each week). I continue to pay \$62 a year for the privilege. After my 1970-71 high school stint, I returned to the paper full-time for nearly three years until 1978. It’s not the paper it was back then. But, then again, neither is any other newspaper. In a warped move to make its content seem more local, it changed its name from the *Rhode Island Pendulum* to the *East Greenwich Pendulum*. Then it moved its office—which had sat in the town of East Greenwich, hard by Narragansett Bay, since 1854—15 miles inland. It’s now little more than rewritten press releases of what town and school officials said the week before. There are no more local editorials. While the names of those on the business side are regularly printed, the editor, if there is one, is simply listed as a generic email address. The valiant online *East Greenwich News*, to which I have occasionally contributed, is trying to fill the gap; it is the third to try in recent years.

The *Pendulum*’s plagues have spread across the industry. The Big City Paper, as the *Pendulum* publisher used to call the *Providence Journal*, stopped writing its own editorials in May. Summon the

smelling salts: it actually argued that having the paper take a stance in an editorial “causes understandable confusion” among readers. That’s baloney, and it’s not a reason; it was an excuse. In reality, of course, the reason was to save the money spent on editorial writers. When a once-proud newspaper can’t write the truth about its soul, that soul has become a desiccated husk.

Money, of course, is in short supply in our line of work. But newspapers continue to garotte themselves with greed. Jeff Bezos’ *Washington Post*, for example, tosses me unsolicited “special expanded editions” (on September 8, for example, I got one, including three additional sections I had no interest in reading) for \$3.50, nearly double the regular \$2. And when you suspend delivery while you’re on vacation for up to two weeks, there’s no credit given for the days it’s not delivered, unlike the *New York Times*. It was during one of those recent vacations back in Rhode Island that I saw a large block of text on page 2 of the *Providence Journal*. It may well have been the longest “article” in the paper that day. I quote it here in toto:

“HOME DELIVERY SUBSCRIPTION RATES: 7-day Monday-Sunday, print and digital, \$22/week. Print delivery available within the newspaper distribution area only. By submitting your address and/or email, you understand that you may receive promotional offers from Gannett and its related companies. You may unsubscribe from receiving any such email offers

at any time by clicking on the unsubscribe link in any of the emails you may receive. Payment collected will be applied first to any previous outstanding balance. The advertised price does not include the charges for any premium editions. Premium editions are published to provide additional information and value to our readers. You agree that you will be charged up to an additional \$9.00 for each premium edition published and delivered to you during your subscription period, in addition to the cost of your subscription. The length of your subscription will be shortened by the publication of premium editions if those premium editions are delivered to you during your subscription. As an illustrative example, if you select a subscription of up to 12 weeks at a cost of \$48.00, and two premium editions at \$2.00 each are published and delivered to you during that subscription period, your subscription will be shortened by 1 week because the weekly cost of the subscription is \$4.00 per week and the premium edition charges total \$4.00. Depending upon the length of your subscription and the timing of the publication and delivery of premium editions, you will not be charged for any premium editions if none are published and delivered to you during your subscription. As such, in that case only, the length of your subscription will not be shortened. The timing of the publication and delivery of premium editions is variable. There will be no more than 2 premium editions published each month during the subscription term. Print subscribers may suspend

print delivery during vacation periods. For vacation periods less than 15 consecutive days billing continues and subscriber maintains access to the digital portion of subscription. Credit days will be issued for any days in excess of the first 15 days. Subscribers also have the option to have print copies held as Vacation Pack. If you sign up for our Ezpay program, your subscription will automatically be charged to your credit card 0 to 14 days prior to your current expiration date, for the duration of your subscription or until you notify us otherwise. For more information or to cancel your subscription please call 1-401-277-7600.”

“Write tight,” editors used to demand. Too bad the *ProJo*'s bean-counters didn't get the message. Back in 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote that “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” He plainly isn't a subscriber to the *Providence Journal* today.

And don't get me going on the *Journal*'s decision, like many other papers, to charge for obituaries. It used to be part of a local paper's DNA to report the deaths of those in its circulation area as legitimate new stories, often written by rookies on the staff. Nothing like misspelling the deceased's name to separate real reporters from pretenders. Laden with personal history, these obits served as invaluable tools for

genealogists, not to mention grandchildren and those to follow. Far too many Americans are now going to their final reward without evidence in the public prints that they ever lived. “Death notices” were (and are) a separate, paid-for thing—classifieds for the dead—run by the advertising department, and generally listed the time and place of funeral services.

Now the only deaths reported in many locales are those whose survivors are willing to pay hundreds of dollars to commemorate their loved ones’ demise. Income inequality now follows us, or at least our next of kin, into the grave. Plus, the family writes the obituary, often with a funeral home’s help. That has turned what had once been a rite of passage for young reporters into a press release for the deceased, with unpleasant details MIA. Heck of a way to (1) abdicate a paper’s responsibility, (2) spurn the respect of readers, and (3) upset bereaved families, pushing many to become former readers. All tolled, a trifecta of journalistic malpractice.

Yet even as most reporters continue to work cheap, top editors and publishers generally have done very well for themselves as their vessels took on water, listed, then sank. At least the captain of the *RMS Titanic* had the class to go down with his ship, as a quarter of his crew managed to survive.

The *Pendulum*’s owner/publisher began hiring “editors” like me right out of college after he suffered

a heart attack. We tended to stay for a year or two before the need for more money (\$125 a week didn't go far in the mid-1970s) forced us to find a new job. But he gave us rookies all the rope we needed to hang ourselves. We wrote pretty much the entire paper (except for the publisher, who wrote most of the editorials; neighborhood columnists, who'd report on local hospitalizations, loose cows and garden clubs; and those daft high-school kids doing sports). Truth be told, we'd crib weddings and obituaries from the Providence paper, adding a local touch here and there. And, of course, our pictures of the brides were much bigger than those in the *Providence Journal*. Scrapbook-sized, you might say.

I'd loved to have worked at the Big City Paper but, having not gone to Brown, I had to hightail it out west to the *Oakland Press* in Pontiac, Michigan. Once again, I covered local schools and government. Even FOIAed and published the overtime paid to county employees, in pages of agate type, which generated a fair amount of ire (particularly among the divorced employees who neglected to include their OT when it came time to calculate alimony).

Within a year of leaving Rhode Island, I was in Washington, where I have been ever since. I drifted into covering national security for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. As additional reporters were hired to cover different beats, it ended up being all that was left.

Contrary to the view held by many Americans, the U.S. military is not a monolith. Troops, civilians, contractors and all their families add up to a city the size of New York. And, like New York, the military has its good and bad guys, along with splendid and not-so-good neighborhoods. While I never served in uniform—and found plenty to criticize—covering the men and women in the U.S. military has been the high point of my career.

My 37 reporting years in Washington broke into thirds: the gray chill of the Cold War, followed by the golden possibility offered by the post-Cold War decade, and finally the horrors of 9/11, and the follies of the wars that followed.

While the Cold War was on, editors were always interested in weapons—how they might win the looming conflict that was always just BVR and OTH—Beyond Visual Range because it was just Over the Horizon. If something were wrong with a weapon, especially if it were built in Texas, they wanted to know all about it. Kind of a 20th Century “for want of a nail.” So I spent years writing about poorly-designed aircraft falling out of the skies and killing hundreds of U.S. troops.

In the decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, editors’ interests turned from hardware—weapons—to software: the young Americans in uniform,

increasingly female, with a reckoning looming on the rights of gays and lesbians to serve openly. I visited boot camps to see how much training had softened. I watched a Minuteman ICBM missile die as it was pulled from the cold South Dakota soil. I floated like a ghost through the eerie abandoned North Dakota base that had been home to the nation's first missile-defense system (a \$25 billion contrivance shut down in 1976 after 113 days in operation). I helicoptered into Kosovo with U.S. Marines, and skirted the skies over northern Iraq as the U.S. military kept Saddam Hussein in his box. With U.S. Special Forces battling religious zealots on sweltering Basilan Island, at the remote southern tip of the Philippines.

Everything on my beat was swept aside by the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. They led to more than a decade of non-stop reporting and, unfortunately, non-stop wars. The wars, frankly, were as good as the weapons we used to wage them: too costly and too complicated to get the job done. Especially when Congress failed to do its duty and lacked the guts to declare—or debate and vote not to declare—war on the Taliban or Saddam Hussein.

During my Fort Worth years, I witnessed the arrival in the bureau of a huge monstrosity known as a facsimile machine—a fax machine, to its friends. It allowed us to deliver Xeroxed copies of our stories to important sources in Washington the day they were published. Then there was the time a salesman

stopped by the bureau to try to sell us near-instantaneous printouts (this was before computers, kids) of transcripts of hearings held on Capitol Hill, and briefings from the White House, State Department and Pentagon. We laughed him out of the office. But within a couple of years every news outfit in the capital subscribed to such a service. Didn't do much for readers, though. Instead of summing up a source's point with three carefully-chosen words between quotation marks, they were treated to a full paragraph of blather. In quotes, of course.

Back then there were newspaper morgues, filled with long file drawers crammed with envelopes of yellowed news clippings on every conceivable topic. Dedicated news librarians were able to track down any story. Copies of *Congressional Quarterly* and *National Journal* were in every Washington bureau, enabling even the most hapless reporter to sound informed when speaking to editors back home. Bound almanacs, atlases and reference tomes were the 20th Century's Google. The National Press Club library had shelves crammed with telephone books from every state.

There were interviews with House Majority Leader Jim Wright, who hailed from Fort Worth, and with Texas Senators Lloyd Bentsen and John Tower. I'll never forget Wright screaming at me over the phone after he gave me a peek at a tax proposal hours after he presented to the Reagan administration. All

because I'd had the temerity to get a thumbs-down from the Treasury Department ("Ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive," he sang to me, reprising Johnny Mercer's 1944 lyrics). After the failed mission to rescue the 52 U.S. embassy hostages in Iran in 1980, I remember hunting down a drunken Tower in his hideaway office tucked high up in the Capitol rotunda. "Never again!" he raged. And, try as I might, I still can't forget my first big interview, with Energy Secretary Jim Schlesinger, when my tape recorder broke.

I'd visit Fort Worth every summer for a week, meeting with colleagues and defense-industry types, and joyously washing down real Tex-Mex and BBQ with Pearl beer. The Texas press corps in D.C. was a fun bunch and we'd put our competitive instincts on hold for weekend parties (of course, back then, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio all boasted competing rags). But an oil bust hit hard in the early 1980s. When the *Startlegram's* Christmas bonus went from the traditional two weeks' salary to a single turkey, I suspected it was time to move on.

Journalism has always been a greasy pole, and nowhere was that more true than in the nation's capital. Gossip and the classifieds in the back pages of *Editor & Publisher*, a weekly magazine for ink-stained wretches, let reporters know where their next job might be coming from. Calls to prospective employers couldn't be made from your desk, where colleagues might overhear, so phone booths squirreled away in

the rejuvenated Willard Hotel across the street from the press building became popular for such clandestine conversations.

In 1986, I ended up moving from the ninth to the seventh floor of the National Press Building (shorter commute!) to cover the military for Knight-Ridder Newspapers. That happened only after I passed muster at a lengthy series of interviews—and a written test!—at the company’s classic MiMo (Miami Modern) headquarters overlooking Biscayne Bay. Knight-Ridder shared the building with its flagship *Miami Herald*. It was torn down in 2014 after a Malaysian resort developer bought it, vainly seeking to swap classifieds for a casino.

Knight-Ridder was then widely regarded as the nation’s best newspaper group (the company despised the word “chain”). It appealed to me because of its roster of first-rate newspapers, and because a couple of respected reporters in the bureau had kids who ended up in journalism. “Can’t be a bad place,” I remember thinking, “if they want to follow in Dad’s footsteps.” Alas, neither of my two sons, Geoffrey and Jonathan, became journalists, and they and their Mom, Diane, endured the long hours journalism demanded. That included time overseas when the U.S. was waging war, as well as a family 1992 Christmas Eve wiped out when the first President Bush, with 27 days left in the White House, pardoned former defense

secretary Cap Weinberger for his role in the Iran-Contra affair.

Within weeks of joining Knight-Ridder, the space shuttle Challenger and the Soviets' Chernobyl nuclear-power plant both exploded, keeping me and my colleagues busy for months. Then, before the year was out, Iran-Contra detonated on front pages around the world. The following July I was part of the first Pentagon national-press pool deployed on a real-world mission. We secretly traveled to the Persian Gulf where U.S. warships were protecting oil tankers from Iran. That was, until a supertanker ran into a mine, compelling the fearful, and much smaller, warships to follow in its wake. In an instant, the protected became the protector, as the unseen, cheap (and most likely Iranian) mine became a paper-tiger shredder.

Seeing where my stories ended up could be difficult. The bureau eventually got copies of K-R papers, but some 200 other papers took the Knight-Ridder wire. I'd make frequent trips to newsstands (remember those?) or the press-club library looking to see how, or, more importantly, if, my stories got played. It's simply gob-smacking to be able to do that, instantly, from your desk or phone these days.

My former papers have been sliced, diced and puréed. Capital Cities, the *Star-Telegram's* parent company, finalized its purchase of ABC (David beats Goliath!) three days after I left the *Star-Telegram*. CapCities

also bought the *Pendulum*. In 1995, Disney bought what had become CapCities/ABC. Two years later, Disney sold the *Star-Telegram* to...Knight-Ridder. In 2006, Knight-Ridder disappeared after the McClatchy Company bought it. In February, McClatchy filed for bankruptcy, make us pensioners nervous. Amid the pandemic, McClatchy has shuttered its storied Washington-bureau office. In the months before the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, under the Knight-Ridder banner, it was the only major news outlet to challenge the evidence the Bush Administration used to justify the war. This sad chapter came to a close September 4 when McClatchy, 163 years old, was piranhaed by New Jersey hedge fund Chatham Asset Management, 17.

I first walked into the Time & Life Building in midtown Manhattan early in 1994. *Time* had always been around my house growing up. In fact, my parents gave me a subscription when I left home for Boston University. One of life's little cuts is that my father didn't live to see me become a staff correspondent at Hank Luce's red-bordered mag. The 48-story HQs was equal parts *Mad Men* and *Emerald City*. While I didn't spend much time there, I did have the chance to sample the catered meals and liquor carts on Friday nights when the magazine went to press. Rows of black Lincoln Town Cars idled curbside to take the closing crew home. First-class travel across oceans (when all other seats were taken, mind you, and we had to get there asap). I got paid to eyeball everything

from the Great Gate of Kiev to the Korean DMZ to the Great Wall of China, and dozens of other sites and cities around the globe. Most were not garden spots.

It's hard to remember now, but there was a war raging between *Time* and *Newsweek*, with *U.S. News & World Report* occasionally getting in a punch. We'd swap bales of magazines on Monday mornings, checking to see who had the scoops and the better coverage on the week's Big Story.

But even before 9/11 upended journalism, there were rumbles about its future. I remember computer-phone chats from home via some strange beast called America Online. Readers would send in typed questions to an AOL chat room, and a *Time* PR person would read them to me over the phone. I'd respond verbally, and he or she would type in my answers. In 1996, as Time Warner was busy buying CNN, *Slate* launched as an online magazine. Backed by Microsoft, it was so nervous that it wouldn't be read by the chattering class that it printed its content every week for hand delivery to reporters still stuck on paper.

Time inevitably launched its own website, which changed everything. Days early in the week that used to be spent mining sources and traveling out of town became a conveyer belt for daily (if not more frequent) stories online. It was the beginning of doing more with less, according to the high command. Those of us in the trenches, more intimately connected with

the truth, saw it for what it was: the beginning of a long decline of doing less, with less.

But in those days between the end of the Cold War and 9/11, there were diversions. Working breakfasts, lunches, and dinners with a never-ending flow of admirals, generals, assistant secretaries of this and that, and the occasional crank that made reporting fun. Drinks with Al Pacino in a hidden nook of D.C.'s Jefferson Hotel, along with three fellow reporters, trying to tell him what motivated us for his upcoming role in *The Insider*. Watching the team once known as the Washington Redskins beat the hated Dallas Cowboys from the press box in the 1982 NFL Championship inside a rocking RFK stadium as 40,000 fans stomped their feet. Sure, Fort Worth hated Dallas, but it placed its disdain aside during football season.

White House Correspondents Dinners, where we were entertained by the likes of Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin, were initially interesting, but I ultimately quit going. Hollywood loomed larger each year, and I soured on the coziness between reporters and their sources. Nonetheless, I had a string of high-profile guests, including Colin Powell in 1995, when he was weighing a run for the White House. It was an exhausting three hours; the man was constantly accosted by well-wishers seeking (pre-selfie) photos with him, and wanna-bes angling for a spot in a possible Powell administration. Eight years later, two

months after the U.S. invaded Iraq, one of my guests was deputy defense secretary Paul Wolfowitz. He famously championed the war that Powell had enabled with his bogus U.N. speech on Iraq's purported weapons of mass destruction. Another guest was Marine Corporal Chad Taylor. He had been seriously wounded in Iraq two weeks earlier.

I sat between them.

In 1998, *Time* celebrated its 75th anniversary with a dinner at Radio City Music Hall, conveniently just across 6th Avenue from the Time & Life Building. The huge space was turned into a banquet hall with six tiers of tables built atop the auditorium's 5,000 seats. The 1,200 guests ranged from President Clinton to former president Gorbachev, and included the likes of Muhammad Ali, Lauren Bacall, Joe DiMaggio, Jack Kevorkian, Henry Kissinger, Sophia Loren, Norman Mailer, Robert McNamara and James Watson. I recall chatting with Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler's infamous film maker, and saw a colleague lose the final appetizer on a passing silver tray to Sean Connery. Sharing my dinner table that night were William Westmoreland, Ted Sorensen, Barbara Walters, and a half-dozen lesser lights like me. "Legends table-hopped among other legends in a 30's nightclub atmosphere," the *New York Times* reported. Members of the Washington bureau spent the night a few blocks north at the Plaza. That year, *Time* boasted 31 million readers in 210 countries and raked in more than \$10

million—a week—in advertising revenue. It was *Adweek's* “Hottest Magazine of the Year.”

But then the Internet's bitter cold blew in.

Twenty-two months after that 75th bash, in January 2000, America Online announced it was buying *Time*, and the rest of the Time Warner empire, for \$165 billion.

Old-timers may remember those shiny AOL discs (“You’ve got mail!”) and the squawking dial-up modems that were already being eclipsed by much speedier broadband connections. Old-*Timers* got something I remember being called “founders’ grants”—stock options in the new AOL Time Warner. “Founder” was supposed to suggest being there at the beginning, and getting in on the ground floor. But the second meaning of the word, according to Merriam-Webster, is to “collapse...sink...fail,” which ended up being more accurate. It was one of the most disastrous mergers in history. Our founders’ grants proved worthless as the combined company’s stock price plunged amid the 2001 dot-com bust. The company frittered away nearly \$100 billion in 2002. All of a sudden, AOL Time Warner and the Pentagon seemed to have a lot in common.

After 9/11, news from the Defense Department grew increasingly bleak. Yes, there were plenty of stories about the seemingly-perpetual fits-and-starts of the

Afghan and Iraq wars, and the ensuing political machinations in Washington, D.C. But there were too many stories about brave young Americans being killed and wounded on the battlefield (even though the toll was low compared to prior wars, unless it was your family). There were cover stories on a week's dead in Iraq, the wars' strain on the Army, the rampant use of drugs (unlike Vietnam, these were legal and prescribed by military doctors), and the epidemic of suicide in the ranks. There were major stories on military murder, the lack of mental-health care, and medical negligence. About the Iraq war's first MIA a year after he had gone missing; his remains finally returned home to Ohio three years later. One piece was about the three soldiers, each of whom lost a leg to an insurgent's single rocket-propelled grenade as it ripped through their armored vehicle. One soldier I interviewed was killed by a car bomb, another killed himself once he got back home. Grim times.

In 2006, Google launched Google News, a customized news site for anyone with a screen, edited by algorithms and populated by pixels. All of a sudden I feel like a 15th Century robed monk inking some religious tract in Mainz, Germany. Having finished a page with my quill, I hand the parchment over to a fellow monk, the illuminator, who applied gold leaf and vibrant colors to the pages. We look up to see a fellow peddling manuscripts. I suddenly fear for the future of my craft. "That's Johnny Gutenberg," I say.

“He’s invented this thing called the printing press.” My illuminator is unimpressed. “It can only print in one color,” he says dismissively. “It’ll never catch on.” We return silently to our scribbling.

Things like moveable type and the Internet come along one every 500 years or so. They are creases in history. In short order, Internet creations like Twitter, Facebook and the *Drudge Report* became the crack cocaine of journalism. Like a school of fish darting, this way then that, their instantaneousness permitted us to become stupider, quicker. The sheer volume, and the demand to choose our outlets from a groaning all-you-can-read buffet, cleaved us into factions. That’s been hardened, by years of hearing only what we want to hear. News now varies, like a hologram, depending on where you stand.

So-called Internet interactivity was supposed to be an advantage. As dawn rose over the World Wide Web, it was seen as a two-way street between journalists and readers, enlightening both. A generation on, important reporting too often ends with “zero comments.” Yet anything touching on politics brings out the mobs, with their pitchforks and torches. All heat and no light. Many editors, faced with such mindless venom, killed their comment sections, ceding the terrain to social media. Basically, Americans today are increasingly talking to themselves, and people very much of their ilk, to the detriment of true community and country.

In 2009, Time Warner spun off AOL for \$3.5 billion, suggesting how much each partner's fortunes had changed since AOL bought Time Warner for \$165 billion nine years earlier. In 2014, Time Warner split *Time* and the company's other magazines into their own company. In 2017, Time Inc. was sold to the publisher of Better Homes and Gardens for \$2 billion. A year later, a San Francisco tech billionaire bought *Time* magazine for \$190 million.

I have a steamer-trunkful of old newspapers in the basement. Scattered among them are the employee newsletters that detailed the comings and goings-on of my colleagues who produced the news. There was Star-Telegram *Junior*, Knight-Ridder's *Ink*, and *FYI*, Time Inc.'s in-house publication. All are now dead and buried, except in memory and in those scraps of paper detailing adventures in what used to be the greatest job in the world.

Luckily, I have been able to keep up with my former *Time* colleagues through the Time Life Alumni Society, which for years regularly published a newsletter. But on September 14, I received a letter telling me that TLAS too was folding. "Without the generosity of our late corporate parents, we simply do not have the facilities or financial means to continue, even with the help of dedicated volunteers," it said. TLAS will hold its final meeting, virtually, on October

21, three weeks from today. Then it, too, will fade into history.

My reporting cohort and I followed technology's arc. When our careers began, news could only be delivered by eyedropper, one column inch at a time. Information used to be relatively scarce, but it was fortified with knowledge, and occasionally even wisdom. Then came all-news radio and cable. Now there is a Niagara Falls of news, literally every minute. But that ratio of information, to knowledge, to wisdom, has been stood on its head.

A handful of the biggest papers still do a pretty good job. But they're the aorta of American democracy. They're not where most Americans get their news. It's the smaller arteries and capillaries—the small-town dailies and weeklies that are dying left and right—that nourish the American experiment. Lacking such blood, extremities grow cold, wither, and die. Without them, much of the nation is ignorant of what is happening down at their own town hall.

I don't pretend to have the answers to what's ailing the news business. My concern is that it is now metastasizing and seeping deep into the bones of American democracy. All of us, journalists as well as normal people, need to acknowledge its spread, and the danger it poses to the body politic.

News used to be vetted by editors before it ever got to you. It wasn't perfect—and believe me, I know plenty about imperfect editors—but it was a lot better than the food fight that passes for most news today. With all due respect, reporters and editors were akin to a sewage-treatment plant. They filtered the slop that flowed through the pipes so readers wouldn't have to. While it rarely ended up pure, it was safe enough for readers to drink. These days, too many Americans swallow swill straight from the Internet tap.

Back then, Americans willingly paid for their local paper, and endured advertising on TV's evening news as the price to be paid for discount—but generally decent—reporting. News was a package deal, nourishment leavened with sports, Ann Landers and the comics. Today, nutty conspiracy theories—which wouldn't make it past the greenest reporter's B.S. detector—are transmitted from news desks and White Houses. It seems these days that bizarre video clips, interesting but hardly worthy of national coverage, constitute half the networks' evening news. Today, for most Americans, news is simply the air that we breathe, polluted and otherwise. It is free to all, and honed to your particular political views.

It is worth precisely what you pay for it.

The press is reviled today in many quarters. Some of that is justified; most of it is not. Americans are now stranded, at both poles, on icebergs of ignorance and

idiocy. Any Facebook or Twitter feed, and most cable TV news, makes that plain. Today, information is everywhere, yet knowledge has gone missing. Wisdom? Don't make me laugh. Wisdom is an alloy, hammered out on the anvil of truth. When we can't even agree on the facts—the ingots of truth—then all we are left with are mirages, masquerading as wisdom.

-30-

© 2020 Mark Thompson