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Chris Hedges' Columns
Gone With the Papers

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Posted on Jun 27, 2011

By **Chris Hedges**

I visited the Hartford Courant as a high school student. It was the first time I was in a newsroom. The Connecticut paper's newsroom, the size of a city block, was packed with rows of metal desks, most piled high with newspapers and notebooks. Reporters banged furiously on heavy typewriters set amid tangled phone cords, overflowing ashtrays, dirty coffee mugs and stacks of paper, many of which were in sloping piles on the floor. The din and clamor, the incessantly ringing phones, the haze of cigarette and cigar smoke that lay over the feverish hive, the hoarse shouts, the bustle and movement of reporters, most in disheveled coats and ties, made it seem an exotic, living organism. I was infatuated. I dreamed of entering this fraternity, which I eventually did, for more than two decades writing for The Dallas Morning News, The Washington Post, The Christian Science Monitor and, finally, The New York Times, where I spent most of my career as a foreign correspondent.



AP / Joseph Kaczmarek

The newsroom of The Philadelphia Inquirer in 2009, the year the paper filed for bankruptcy.

Newsrooms today are anemic and forlorn wastelands. I was recently in the newsroom at The Philadelphia Inquirer, and patches of the floor, also the size of a city block, were open space or given over to rows of empty desks. These institutions are going the way of the massive rotary presses that lurked like undersea monsters in the bowels of newspaper buildings, roaring to life at night. The heavily oiled behemoths, the ones that spat out sheets of newsprint at lightning speed, once empowered and enriched newspaper publishers who for a few lucrative decades held a monopoly on connecting sellers with buyers. Now that that monopoly is gone, now that the sellers no longer need newsprint to reach buyers, the fortunes of newspapers are declining as fast as the page counts of daily news sheets.

The great newspapers sustained legendary reporters such as I.F. Stone, Murray Kempton and Homer Bigart who wrote stories that brought down embezzlers, cheats, crooks and liars, who covered wars and conflicts, who told us about famines in Africa and the peculiarities of the French or what it was like to be poor and forgotten in our urban slums or Appalachia. These presses churned out raw lists of data, from sports scores to stock prices. Newspapers took us into parts of the city or the world we would never otherwise have seen or visited. Reporters and critics reviewed movies, books, dance, theater and music and covered sporting events. Newspapers printed the text of presidential addresses, sent reporters to chronicle the inner workings of City Hall and followed the courts and the police. Photographers and reporters raced to cover the lurid and the macabre, from Mafia hits to crimes of passion.

We are losing a peculiar culture and an ethic. This loss is impoverishing our civil

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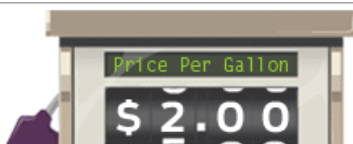


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Gone With the Papers

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Posted on Jun 27, 2011

By **Chris Hedges**

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I, like many who cared more about truth than news, was pushed out of The New York Times, specifically over my vocal and public opposition to the war in Iraq. This is not a new story. Those reporters who persistently challenge the orthodoxy of belief, who question and examine the reigning political passions, always tacitly embraced by the commercial media, are often banished. There is a constant battle in newsrooms between the managers, those who serve the interests of the institution and the needs of the advertisers, and reporters whose loyalty is to readers. I have a great affection for reporters, who hide their idealism behind a thin veneer of cynicism and worldliness. I also harbor a deep distrust and even loathing for the careerists who rise up the food chain to become managers and editors.



AP / Joseph Kaczmarek

The newsroom of The Philadelphia Inquirer in 2009, the year the paper filed for bankruptcy.

Sydney Schanberg was nearly killed in Cambodia in 1975 after staying there for The New York Times to cover the conquest of Phnom Penh by the Khmer Rouge, reporting for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. Later he went back to New York from Cambodia and ran the city desk. He pushed reporters to report about the homeless, the poor and the victims of developers who were forcing families out of their rent-controlled apartments. But it was not a good time to give a voice to the weak and the poor. The social movements built around the opposition to the Vietnam War had dissolved. Alternative publications, including the magazine **Ramparts**, which through a series of exposés had embarrassed the established media organizations into doing real reporting, had gone out of business.

The commercial press had, once again, become lethargic. It had less and less incentive to challenge the power elite. Many editors viewed Schanberg's concerns as relics of a dead era. He was removed as city editor and assigned to write a column about New York. He used the column, however, to again decry the abuse of the powerful, especially developers. The then-editor of the paper, Abe Rosenthal, began to acridly refer to Schanberg as the resident "Commie" and address him as "St. Francis." Rosenthal, who met William F. Buckley almost weekly for lunch along with the paper's publisher, Arthur "Punch" Sulzberger, grew increasingly impatient with Schanberg, who was challenging the activities of their powerful friends. Schanberg became a pariah. He was not invited to the paper's table at two consecutive **Inner Circle** dinners held for New York reporters. The senior editors and the publisher did not attend the previews for the film "The Killing Fields," based on Schanberg's experience in Cambodia. His days at the newspaper were numbered.

The city Schanberg profiled in his column did not look like the glossy ads in Rosenthal's

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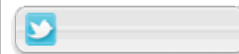
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But Schanberg also argues, as do I, that newspapers prove a vital bulwark for a democratic state. It is possible to decry their numerous failings and compromises with the power elite and yet finally honor them as important to the maintenance of democracy. Traditionally, if a reporter goes out and reports on an event, the information is usually trustworthy and accurate. The report can be slanted or biased. It can leave out vital facts. But it is not fiction. The day The New York Times and other great city newspapers die, if such a day comes, will be a black day for the nation.

Newspapers "do more than anyone else, although they left out a lot of things," Schanberg said. "There are stories on their blackout list. But it is important the paper is there because they spend money on what they chose to cover. Most of the problem of mainstream journalism is what they leave out. But what they do, aside from the daily boiler plate, press releases and so forth, is very, very important to the democratic process."

"Papers function as a guide to newcomers, to immigrants, as to what the ethos is, what the rules are, how we are supposed to behave," Schanberg added. "That is not always good, obviously, because this is the consensus of the Establishment. But papers, probably more in the earlier years than now, print texts of things people will never see elsewhere. It tells them what you have to do to cast a vote. It covers things like the swearing in of immigrants. They are a positive force. I don't think The New York Times was ever a fully committed accountability paper. I am not sure there is one. I don't know who coined the phrase *Afghanistanism*, but it fits for newspapers. Afghanistanism means you can cover all the corruption you find in Afghanistan, but don't try to do it in your own backyard. The Washington Post does not cover Washington. It covers official Washington. The Times ignores lots of omissions and worse by members of the Establishment."

"Newspapers do not erase bad things," Schanberg went on. "Newspapers keep the swamp from getting any deeper, from rising higher. We do it in spurts. We discover the civil rights movement. We discover the women's rights movement. We go at it hellbent because now it is kosher to write about those who have been neglected and treated like half citizens. And then when things calm down it becomes easy not to do that anymore."

The death of newspapers means, as Schanberg points out, that we will lose

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AP / Joseph Kaczmarek

The newsroom of The Philadelphia Inquirer in 2009, the year the paper filed for bankruptcy.

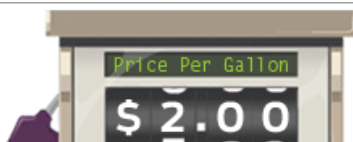
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Posted on Jun 27, 2011

By Chris Hedges

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Our political apparatus and systems of information have been diminished and taken hostage by corporations. Our government no longer responds to the needs or rights of citizens. We have been left disempowered without the traditional mechanisms to be heard. Those who battle the corporate destruction of the ecosystem and seek to protect the remnants of our civil society must again take to the streets. They have to engage in acts of civil disobedience. But this time around the media and the systems of communication have dramatically changed.



AP / Joseph Kaczmarek

The newsroom of The Philadelphia Inquirer in 2009, the year the paper filed for bankruptcy.

The death of journalism, the loss of reporters on the airwaves and in print who believed the plight of the ordinary citizen should be reported, means that it will be harder for ordinary voices and dissenters to reach the wider public. The preoccupation with news as entertainment and the loss of sustained reporting will effectively marginalize and silence those who seek to be heard or to defy established power. Protests, unlike in the 1960s, will have a difficult time garnering the daily national coverage that characterized the reporting on the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement and in the end threatened the power elite. Acts of protest, no longer covered or barely covered, will leap up like disconnected wildfires, more easily snuffed out or ignored. It will be hard if not impossible for resistance leaders to have their voices amplified across the nation, to build a national movement for change. The failings of newspapers were huge, but in the years ahead, as the last battle for democracy means dissent, civil disobedience and protest, we will miss them.

Chris Hedges is a weekly Truthdig columnist and a fellow at The Nation Institute. His newest book is "The World As It Is: Dispatches on the Myth of Human Progress."

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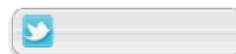
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