

## ***CONSIDER THE SOURCE OF THE CRISIS IN THE NEWSPAPER COMIC STRIP KINGDOM***

*A Perverse and Cynical Contrary View Full of Hope*

**By R. C. Harvey**

Every time I am confronted anew by yet another chorus of “comic strips are a dying medium,” I’m compelled to rush to the barricades again. I don’t agree. In fact, I disagree as strenuously as possible, and I fear that those who join the chorus are nurturing a myth, and the more powerful the myth, the more likely it is to achieve some of the status of truth. I don’t think comic strips are a dying artform; nor do I think newspapers are dying—the proposition upon which the death of comic strips is predicated. Why my stubborn failure to subscribe to a notion the rest of the world seems to endorse?

To start near the root of the matter, it is the plight of metropolitan newspapers that has precipitated predictions of the death of comic strips. Newspapers are in financial trouble, and because they are the platform for comic strips, comic strips must also be in trouble. And there’s some evidence to support both contentions. Some but not enough.

First, consider the source of the stories about the death of newspapers. That news is lofted mostly by large, metropolitan newspapers. Small city newspapers (dailies and weeklies) aren’t complaining. Why not? Because they’re not in the kind of trouble big city papers are in. They still get sufficient revenue from advertising, display and classified: local businesses have no place else to advertise. In big cities with hordes of national chain stores (rather than small town Mom ‘n’ Pop establishments), businesses advertise nationally via television. Newspapers lose out. And classified advertising has all but disappeared. Newspapers lose out big time.

Finally, to drive the nail in the coffin, readership is evaporating. The most populous newspaper reading demographic is the 55-and-older category. And newspapers appear too busy wringing their hands at the loss of the 18-35 age group to find ways to exploit the other demographic. I’ll come back to this in a trice. But before I leave small city newspapers, their apparent fiscal health is small comfort to us: few of them run comic strips, and those that do, don’t run many. But that is, for the nonce, beside the point. The continued existence of small town papers serves simply to make my point: the newspapers that are in trouble financially in this country are big city papers.

Still considering the source of all the dire information: until classified advertising disappeared into the Internet, newspapers generally—and particularly those in big cities—had profit margins of roughly 30%. No other American business had profits so bountiful. And in the flush years before, say, 1999, big city newspapers did two things that proved disastrous.

First, they modernized their printing plants and built new offices and expanded their circulation areas—all of which was underwritten by that robust 30% profit. When the profit margin dropped (due to loss of advertising and subscribers to the Internet), the papers were left with the huge debts (or expensive circulation obligations) they’d rung up during their financial heydays. And their revenue was no longer great enough to service their debts handily. So they started complaining.

The second disaster that newspapers made for themselves is that they went public: they became corporations with shareholders whose avaricious appetite for more and more revenue was virtually insatiable.

Newspapers, then—mostly the big city papers—were caught in a contradictory conundrum: dwindling income could not satisfy the shareholders' growing demand for greater and greater profit.

The first reaction was to reduce expenses—cut staff, shrink the circulation area. A secondary response was to shift content to the Internet, creating digital editions to attract the young readers who weren't buying print papers anymore. This maneuver seems doomed since the revenue from Internet subscribers is never likely to make up for the loss of print subscribers and advertising revenue. But papers are doing it anyhow.

I don't mean to say that newspapers are not in financial straits. They are. And like any capitalistic enterprise worthy of the name, they seek to minimize their losses. They reduce costs by cutting back the quality of the product and justify the cutbacks by complaining loudly about how dire their financial strait is.

To what purpose? Bellyaching about how dire their situation is won't make it better. Not by itself. But it does lay the groundwork for increasing fees for the service. Subscription rates are certain to escalate before long. Just as airlines, pleading poverty because of the cost of fuel, convinced us that they had to charge for baggage in order to cover operating costs—and then introduced charges for carry-on bags, and then for snacks, then for water to drink (next, they'll charge for stowing our footwear for the duration of the flight)—so will newspapers soon charge more for subscriptions. And then they'll introduce add-on fees depending upon how far away from the printing plant the subscriber's domicile is.

Yes, big city papers are in trouble, but they're not in as much trouble as they'd have us believe. They've lost that abundant 30% profit margin, and they are understandably weeping and wailing over the loss, but I'm pretty sure they're still making a profit. Not 30% anymore, but a profit nonetheless. If they weren't making a profit, they'd be out of business. So they're getting used to smaller profits even if they don't like it much and complain about it endlessly.

My local paper, a sizable metropolitan daily, is not as poor as it wants us to believe it is. A few years ago, it renegotiated the largest of its debts by making those to whom it owed the most money share holders in the business. Other metropolitan newspapers have survived by similar maneuvers. Several years ago, *Time* magazine predicted the deaths of ten major newspapers in the country; all ten are still publishing. They've found a way—as all capitalists do.

Still, it's true, irrefutable actually, that newspapers are in financial trouble (largely of their own making, as I said) and comic strips (and staff editorial cartoonists) are in trouble as a direct consequence. Dave Kellett's documentary film on the newspaper comics, "Stripped," lists 166 newspapers that have died since 2008. Catastrophic, no question. But not as disastrous as it seems once we examine the statistic he pulls from.

The figure 166 includes papers that have given up just their print editions as well as those that have ceased publication altogether; but digital newspapers are not, technically, dead.

And the date cited is significant: 2008 is when the country's economy started tanking. Lots of businesses went under. Newspapers were not alone, and the death of so many says more about the economy generally than it does about the newspaper business particularly. Moreover, the number of papers expiring peaked at the onset of the Great Recession, and the annual death rate has been growing less and less as the years unravel. The newspaper dilemma is still serious, but it's not quite as calamitous as Kellett and big city newspapers want us to believe.

Meanwhile, there are about 1,400 daily newspapers still publishing, many in small towns and apparently thriving because they didn't invest their profits extravagantly in the halcyon days of the last century when everyone in the newspaper business was going to the bank pretty often. We, the general public, are morbidly fond of disaster stories, and so we have fastened on the death of newspapers as a particularly juicy one. But perhaps we ought to be more circumspect about our entertainments: some of them are fictional. Like the impending death of comics.

Comics are being dragged along into the big city newspaper financial crisis. Some newspapers have a considerable line-up of comic strips in their online editions. In the print edition, some papers have cut back on the number of strips they run, compensating with the online roster. My local paper dropped both Classic *Peanuts* and *Doonesbury* last year (I can't think of two strips that seemed more immune to such cost-cutting moves, but there you are), but both are offered in the online edition for which the local paper pays fees that are minuscule compared to the fees for publishing strips in print.

But newspapers are still buying comic strips for their print editions, despite their groans about looming financial disaster. At Universal Uclick, president John Glynn was "beaming," according to Rob Tornoe's report in the July *Editor & Publisher*, because Dana Simpson's *Phoebe and Her Unicorn* was launched with 100 newspapers last spring. *WuMo*, an import from Denmark that began in November 2013, experienced similar success at its debut—in more than 100 newspapers.

And at King Features, the Swedish comic strip *Carpe Diem* by Niklas Eriksson started with 80 papers, "an astounding number in today's rocky economic environment," enthused Tornoe.

Those who predict the end of both newspapers and their comic strips have been seduced into that belief by the seemingly sensible conviction that change is inevitable and that change implies the destruction of whatever it takes the place of. These disciples of change are ignoring an overriding principle in a capitalist society: money rules, and the profit motive decides everything. And the profit motive suggests a cheerier future for both newspapers and comics.

My take on the present predicament is that the shareholders who are demanding greater and greater profits from newspapers that suffer dropping revenues will eventually lose patience. As they tire of waiting for the return of those whopping revenues of the last century, they'll bail out, selling their shares at a loss if need be just to escape a situation that is no longer making bales of money for them. And eventually, newspaper ownership will fall once again into the hands of private persons, billionaires with nothing to do with their money but have fun. And running a newspaper for fun and power is the traditional name of the game.

Individual owners will revert to the purposes individual newspaper owners have always espoused: they'll opt for journalism again, not investment and profit, and they'll practice journalism for all the good and noble reasons it has always been practiced—to inform the public and to foster power (political and financial) for the newspaper owner.

This sea change is already setting in. Two large metropolitan dailies—the *Washington Post* and the *Boston Globe*—have been acquired by individual billionaires. What we need now is more billionaires.

In seeking to regain lost power, the new generation of newspaper owners will probably continue digital editions, but they'll also refurbish print edition tactics. If I were one of those owners, I'd cultivate the older demographic that constitutes most of the present readership of newspapers. That population has more discretionary income than the younger (and supposedly wealthier) demographic. The older generation no longer has the cost of raising and educating

children. They want to go on trips and buy expensive automobiles. Newspapers ought to be appealing to those interests.

Forget about the young folks: they'll grow into older readers soon enough, and if a newspaper plays its cards right, it'll get those erstwhile young and carefree persons when they're ripe.

And comics will continue to appear in newspapers for all the best of reasons: people love them. Comic strip characters are old friends, familiar faces that we all like to see every day.

Beyond pleasing (and attracting) readers, newspapers have other, purely financial, reasons for continuing to publish comics. They need to fill pages. With something. Still feeling the pinch of smaller profits, papers will doubtless have smaller staffs than ever, so how will they fill pages? With "evergreen" material offered by syndicates at a cost less than staff salaries (with benefits)—comics and other features.

Finally, in appealing to an older readership, newspapers will start publishing comic strips large enough for old guys like me to be able to read the words in the speech balloons.

And so comic strips aren't doomed at all: they seem poised on the cusp of another Golden Age. The newspapers that provide their platform are not dying after all; and the comics—one of the two or three most popular things people find in newspapers—will surely go on as long as those newspapers continue to publish, which, I stubbornly contend and hope to have demonstrated, will be for some time yet.

They'll go on for as long as grocery stores are operating—because of the coupons.

So let's not join that phony chorus of doomsayers. Even if all of what I've been spouting off about isn't exactly true, syllable by syllable, it has about it the persuasive aura of truthiness. And if we can't have absolute truth, let us at least embrace as much of it as we can find and refrain from whining about our plight, and we thereby avoid giving the myth a kind of reality it otherwise lacks, the kind that translates into charging for baggage.