



BY COLIN WOODARD | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK MARCHESI

FIT TO PRINT?

HOW MAINE'S NEWSPAPERS ARE WEATHERING AN INDUSTRY-WIDE CRISIS

Last year was a particularly bad one at 390 Congress Street in Portland, the seven-story building that's been home to the *Portland Press Herald* since 1923. Four rounds of layoffs have left so few reporters that Maine's newspaper of record is barely managing to keep up with the news. A former obituary writer covers city hall, business reporters are covering politics, arts writers are covering local news, and others struggle to follow events once reported by their Augusta, Biddeford, Bath, and Washington, D.C. bureaus, all of which were closed in March.

"Keeping people informed on what is going on is difficult when you don't have the staff you used to," says *Press Herald* staff reporter Tom Bell, president of the local

chapter of the Newspaper Guild. "We're thinner than we used to be, and you can see the results of that."

These are dark days for daily newspapers nationwide. With readers defecting to the Internet and the recession hammering those advertisers who haven't already followed them, papers across the country have done what the *Press Herald* has: slashed staff (the Portland paper eliminated 71 jobs in 2008), closed bureaus, and reduced the number of pages they produce.

Maine's dailies are facing declining ad revenues, shrinking print circulation, and increased costs for everything from newsprint to health care benefits. The *Bangor Daily News*' circulation declined by five and a

top: The home of the Portland Press Herald as seen from Exchange Street. The newspaper has seen a sharp decline, but new investors hope to revive it.

half percent last year, the Lewiston *Sun Journal's* by four percent, while the *News*, the *Brunswick Times Record*, and Biddeford's *Journal Tribune* have all reduced staff in recent years.

"The little papers and other ad venues have basically stolen the ads that big dailies have had a monopoly on forever," says David Platt, former editor of *Maine Times* and *Working Waterfront*. "With the weeklies, television, and the Internet, the dear old gray paper isn't quite as compelling as it once was."

As the dailies shrink their staffs, budgets, and journalistic ambitions, many Mainers are finding it increasingly difficult to keep tabs on the people and institutions that shape their lives. In most media markets, daily newspapers still do the heavy lifting: breaking and investigating the stories that set much of the agenda for television, radio, magazines, and the blogosphere. As Maine's dailies falter, that newsgathering system breaks down, depriving citizens and policy makers much of the information they need to make educated decisions.

"These days if you want to get inside information on Augusta or city hall, you have to read special interest publications or online journals that can be a lot like talk radio: a few facts, many opinions, and a lot of axes to grind," says Edgar Allen Beem, who's written for Maine newspapers since 1965.

FACING DECLINING READERSHIP AND AD REVENUES, THE PORTLAND PRESS HERALD HAS DONE WHAT NEWSPAPERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY HAVE HAD TO DO: SLASHED STAFF, CLOSED BUREAUS, AND REDUCED THE NUMBER OF PAGES THEY PRODUCE.

Nowhere has the decline been as sharp or profound as at the *Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram* and its sister papers, the *Kennebec Journal* and *Waterville Morning Sentinel*, all owned by the Seattle Times Company. All three papers were put up for sale last March, and in a court affidavit made public last summer, *Press Herald* publisher Charles Cochrane wrote that without a sale, the company's Maine holdings could be "dismantled altogether" and their employees put out of work. (At press time in late November, a deal was inked by which a Maine-based investment group would buy the papers, but some important details had yet to be worked out.) Current and former employees say staff and budget reductions have cut the newsrooms to the bone, challenging their ability to adequately serve their readership.

"In the past, there were just a lot more reporters in general and a lot more veteran editors and journalists who had the confidence and maturity to go out on a limb or stand behind a tough story," says a former member of the newsroom who declined to be identified. "Inevitably, controversial stories take longer and require more resources, so in tough times it's a lot harder justifying having a reporter take a lot of time pursuing one."

But the scope of the newspaper's coverage has been noticeably declining since 1998, when the Seattle

Times Co. purchased it and its sister papers from the heirs of their founder, Guy P. Gannett. The new owner, Frank Blethen, Jr., made two decisions that made the papers vulnerable when the Internet took hold as a popular news source a few years later. First, Blethen paid an estimated \$230 million for newspapers now thought to be worth a small fraction of that. Almost all of that money was borrowed, leaving little to invest in the papers, according to Bill Richards, a former *Wall Street Journal* staffer in Seattle who has been following the company for several years.

"Portland is a special case where the new owner possibly paid too much for the paper, and the bill has come due at the very time when the newspaper industry is going through a difficult period," says Lou Ureneck, chair of Boston University's journalism department and editor of the *Press Herald* from 1989 to 1996. "Many papers in markets the size of Portland are doing fine: they're not making as much money, but they are optimistic for the future."

"If they had more cash available, then maybe they could have bought some of the weeklies instead of being encircled by them," says Bell, the staff reporter. "The big debt load made them much more vulnerable."

There was also a clear failure of newsroom leadership, say many readers and journalism professionals. Under the Blethens the *Press Herald* went from one of New England's most respected publications to one of its least, unable to effectively cover either the city or the state. Just prior to the 2000 presidential election, the paper gained national notoriety when it was revealed that one of its reporters had uncovered George W. Bush's 1976 drunk driving incident months earlier, but that the editors had decided it wasn't newsworthy. Weekly papers with tiny staffs began scooping the larger paper with regularity, including events at Portland City Hall, which is literally across Congress Street from the *Press Herald* building.

"It's a fact of life with a weekly that [the *Press Herald*] is going to have six opportunities a week to get a story before you do, and I think it says a lot that we can continuously beat them for stories," says Mo Mehlsak, editor of the four *Forecaster* weeklies, which together cover Greater Portland and Bath-Brunswick with a reporting staff of eight. The *Sun Journal* is the paper's parent company.

Veteran journalist Al Diamon, author of *Media Mutt*, a media criticism blog, agrees that weeklies and alternative papers have been scooping the daily way too often. "What's weird is that the *Press Herald* doesn't seem to care," he says. "The attitude is, if we don't cover it, it's not really news. Well, that's just not the case anymore."

Ted Cohen, a 29-year veteran of the *Press Herald* who first uncovered Bush's O.U.I., is now a long-haul truck driver. "If Ureneck had been in charge when I found that story, we would have been all over it like a blanket. As it turned out, [editor Jeannine] Guttman was in charge and failed to publish what I believe was a historical blockbuster of a story."

Guttman did not return phone calls. After consulting with Cochrane and Blethen's offices, Seattle Times Co. spokesperson Corey Digiacinto said nobody in the company wished to comment or be interviewed for this story.



above: Portland Press Herald staff reporter Tom Bell, president of the local chapter of the Newspaper Guild. The Portland paper eliminated 71 jobs in 2008.

below: Mo Mehlsak, editor of four Forecaster weeklies. His strictly local papers have a combined reporting staff of eight and cover news in Greater Portland and Bath-Brunswick.



Cuttman does regularly share her views in a weekly column in the *Maine Sunday Telegram*. “Nearly every newspaper in America is faced with this wrenching transformation from print to a combined print/web future,” she wrote on July 6. “In this new world, there are only two options: Adapt or fade away. We are choosing to adapt” by devoting more resources to the web.

Ten years ago, Portland resident Mike Roland led Save Our Hometown News, a citizen’s group that backed Blethen’s bid to buy the Gannett papers, hoping the family-owned Seattle Times Co. would be a better parent than a giant corporate chain. “I think the paper wasn’t saved, and it’s been pretty disappointing,” he says. “They came in saying local coverage would be improved, but that’s not what happened. They’ve been isolated from the community, and their recent downturn is partly the result of that.”

By contrast, the previous owners, the Gannett family, were deeply involved in community affairs. Guy Gannett, heir to an Augusta-based magazine fortune, bought the *Portland Press* and *Portland Herald* in 1921 and merged them into the present paper. The *Telegram*, *Kennebec Journal*, *Morning Sentinel*, Portland’s *Evening Express*, and what’s now WGME were soon added, creating a powerful media empire. His daughter, Jean Gannett Hawley, ran the company from 1954 until her death in 1994, softening the partisan tone and ramping up support for civic and cultural institutions.

“Jean Gannett Hawley made it her business to sustain high quality journalism by keeping her profit expectations low,” says Ureneck. “By the time I was editor, we had over 160 people on the news staff, and we did lots of intensive investigative work and were traveling everywhere.” (Today the news staff is 88.) “Local family ownership isn’t a panacea,” he continues, “but because they feel some connection and responsibility to the community, they are more often than not better newspapers.”

Blethen’s Maine papers may soon return to local control. In November, an investment group headed by former U.S. Senator William Cohen and real estate developers Michael Liberty and Robert Baldacci (the governor’s brother) signed a purchase agreement for the papers, although financing and other details had yet to be ironed out.

“A local publisher with local investors has got to be a good thing for our readers,” says Bell, who thinks the group can turn the *Press Herald* around.

The new publisher-apparent, Richard Connor, is expected to assume the editorship and intends to restore the Augusta and Washington bureaus, according to the investors’ spokesperson, Dennis Bailey. “They’re all Maine people and they aren’t buying it to sell it off,” he says. “They are trying to run a newspaper again.”

“We’re very lucky that there’s local ownership and people who care about having a newspaper that’s part of the community,” says Meg Weston,

who was president of the *Press Herald* and its sister papers from 1997 to 1999. "Their challenge will be finding a sustainable model to keep it going and keep it relevant."

AS MAINE'S DAILIES FALTER, CITIZENS AND POLICY MAKERS ARE DEPRIVED OF MUCH OF THE INFORMATION THEY NEED TO MAKE EDUCATED DECISIONS.

Local ownership is part of the reason the Lewiston *Sun Journal* and the *Bangor Daily News* are weathering the storm relatively well, says Platt, who was a staff reporter at the *News* in the 1970s. "In my day, the owners in Bangor went to the Rotary and saw people every day and had to answer to the community," he says. "If Portland wasn't owned by somebody from Seattle, I suspect they would still be bumping along as they always did."

The *News* was purchased by J. Norman Towle in 1895 and is now controlled by his great-grandson, Richard J. Warren, who works at its offices at the corner of Main and Buck streets. "I've been at this newspaper for, goodness, 37 years now, and I can think of no more benevolent, supportive, and clearly caring work environment anyone could possibly ask for to spend their professional life," says Mark Woodward, the paper's executive editor, who also notes that the paper has faced less disruption from the Internet to date, on account of eastern Maine's poorer bandwidth and aging population.

But Woodward will always remember the morning of January 9, 1998, when against the odds they managed to publish the paper in the midst of Maine's worst natural disaster, the Ice Storm.

"We couldn't deliver people's papers, but we announced we were giving them away at our offices," he recalls. Warren was there, handing papers out to whomever came by. "Everything was encased in ice, but cars just started lining Buck Street as people just kept coming in, relieved that at least one of their institutions was still functioning."

"That incident epitomized the whole responsibility of being a daily newspaper," he says, "To be one of the pillars that supports your community, giving it both information and a sense of self." *

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