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FEATURE | Prepared to go down with the ship (Part 1)

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Published: Sunday, April 26, 2009
Updated: Wednesday, April 29, 2009

Just before his week ended, Boston Globe political reporter Brian C. Mooney overheard conversations which would spread through the newsroom at 135 Morrissey Boulevard in Dorchester, Mass., like wildfire. Fifteen feet away from his desk, a reporter from the business section and the business editor discussed an article nearing its deadline for the next morning's paper. Despite word leaking out fewer than 48 hours after April Fool's Day, the story was no joke and prompted anything but laughter from Mooney and his co-workers.

"It was shock; it was worry; it was anger," he recalled.

After 137 years, New England's largest newspaper, its 1.84 million weekly print readers, four million unique online monthly visitors and its 2,200 full-time and 550 part-time employees learned The Boston Globe had a 30-day, May 1st

Matt Rocheleau/Collegian

The Boston Globe headquarters at 135 Morrissey Boulevard in Dorchester may shut down if the company cannot meet The New York Times Co.'s demands to cut $20 million by May 1.

The New York Times Co. threatens to close The Boston Globe if demands aren't met by May 1st.

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deadline from The New York Times Company to cut $20 million, or else the publication's presses will stop and its doors will shut – for good.

The lucky one

As a Boston College undergraduate, George Rizer joined The Globe for a photography internship in 1970. When the 23-year-old, Bridgewater, Mass., landed his first "real job" with the newspaper, he ended his studies several courses shy of earning a bachelor's from B.C. Thirty-nine years later he is poised to leave his beloved career the same way he left college – slightly sooner than planned.

In March, Rizer accepted a buyout package with 23 other newsroom staff members including fellow photographers Mark Wilson and Steve Haines. Rizer's last day will be June 26, assuming the newspaper survives that long.

Seated at a large, vacant desk in a lowly-lit room just after 6 a.m., the 62-year-old photojournalist looked over his assignments for the day from his Macintosh notebook. On either side him were two police scanners set at different frequencies. Rizer has three more scanners in his tan-colored Buick, and what he refers to as his "background music" is almost always kept on and at an audible level, whether at home or work.

But, as helpful as the scanners have been over the years in helping Rizer develop a niche for spot news, not even they were able to tip him off to The Times Co.'s threat to shutter the paper.

"It hit like a ton of bricks," he remembers.

When he had volunteered for the buyout just weeks before the threat came down, he knew The Globe was struggling financially, but so was the rest of the media industry. The economy was in similar shape. Nearing retirement age, Rizer felt the incentive package, which included a good chunk of money and medical coverage for a year, was too appealing to pass up. He knew he would miss The Globe, his work and colleagues, but the buyout would enable him to be reasonably comfortable while he looks for another job, possibly teaching and doing freelance photography on the side. However, Rizer's departure does not mean his wallet is immune from feeling the company's next cuts as retirement benefits are rumored to be on the chopping block.

Yet, looking back on the decision to leave the job he loves, Rizer now considers himself lucky when he thinks of what may be in store for many of his co-workers.

"I feel guilty because I'm the one getting out just in the nick of time," he said. "There are certainly a lot of people who are worried about the future of the place."

"We're not running on skeleton staff right now," he continued. "But we're certainly considerably reduced. And maybe we could take a small hit in the near future, but then, how much more are you going to reduce?"

Worried and uncertain, but still optimistic

Writer's note: For this story, about 200 of The Globe's 300-person editorial staff were e-mailed in mid-April requesting their thoughts on the paper's current circumstances and its uncertain future. Twenty-five of them responded, 18 of these declined to comment, commonly citing such reasons as being too busy or being uncomfortable to speak on the topic.

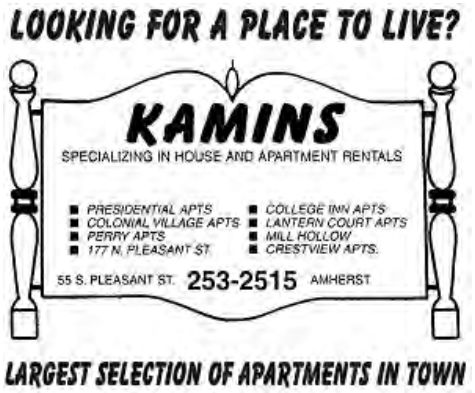
But, of the seven Globe newsroom staff members interviewed – Rizer, Mooney, sports columnist Dan Shaughnessy, chief imaging technician John Ioven, an editor who requested anonymity, deputy bureau chief Joseph Williams and foreign policy reporter Farah Stockman, both from the Washington D.C. bureau – each expressed concern for their company's future.

The editor who asked to remain anonymous was in the process of leaving The Globe for another career entirely when they were interviewed.

"I left The Globe because I was concerned about its future," said the editor, who has since left the paper.

The 42-year-old has two children in grade school to support and was "worried that there would not be an outlet for the [kind of stories I write] in the new, trimmer Globe."

"I tried for a long time to find another job that would allow me to still consider myself a 'journalist,' but



the industry as a whole is in such terrible shape right now," the editor said after spending two decades in journalism.

When the editor joined The Globe over eight years ago, the editorial staff was over 500. Since then, 200 have been cut and the editor expects the newsroom staff to dip below 100 over the next couple of years before eventually settling near 50.

"It's a very scary time, and there's been a lot of uncertainty in the industry," said Shaughnessy. "This certainly is kind of a shocking thing to deal with. We're putting out a good paper and just hoping for the best. That's about all you can do at this point. It's not a good time."

After a 32-year career in journalism with other gigs in sports media, including 11 books, television appearances on NESN and contributions to ESPN Magazine, Shaughnessy is less worried about his own situation and is instead concerned about his colleagues'.

"I'm more worried about people with young children, and this is their only means – their livelihood," he said.

Shaughnessy, who grew up in Groton, Mass., reading The Globe, said if the paper closed he would just hope the phone rang, but the prospect of landing a job with a newspaper – especially with his 300 co-workers also seeking employment – would be grim in an already "shrinking landscape."

The paper's threatened future has spurred a steady buzz of rumors among the staff about what has been happening during the non-public negotiations between union officials, management and ownership, and all that talk has hurt employee morale around company headquarters, Shaughnessy said.

Daniel Totten, president of the Boston Newspaper Guild (BNG) which represents over 700 Globe employees, also said the rumors regarding The Globe's fate are prevalent in the newsroom.

"They do nothing to help an already-stressful situation. They only fuel the fire as speculation, innuendo and the like have no value to our members' futures," said Totten, who has worked at The Globe's advertising sales department since 1980.

In Washington D.C., speculation and uncertainty exist as well. The bureau includes nine, soon-to-be eight, staff members – Williams, bureau chief Peter Canellos, an office manager and six reporters. Reporter Sasha Issenberg is expected to leave the bureau in coming months, having just accepted a buyout.

Stockman, 34, who started with The Globe in 2000, remembered how she and fellow D.C. staff first heard of The Times Co.'s recent threat in an article posted on the Romenesko blog, which initially caused confusion for Stockman and crew since they had not yet been contacted by management or union representatives.

One of the largest D.C. bureaus of any regional newspaper, closing the location could be a quick cost-cutting method. Politico.com reporter Michael Calderone noted in an article published April 9 titled, "Will Globe close shop in D.C.?" that closing bureaus in the nation's capital has been a common money-saving approach other newspapers have taken.

Stockman, a Harvard grad, said Calderone's article has been well-read by the bureau's personnel.

"I think everybody in the industry right now has to look at what their options are and whether it's realistic to think you'll be a newspaper reporter for the rest of your life or whether there are other things that should be considered," she said.

Ioven started with The Globe when he was 19 and stuck with his hometown paper for 32 years as plans to be a police officer fell through, despite scoring a 96 on his application exam. Now 51, married with two kids, he said despite most employees having their own sources from management to find out what's going on with negotiations, "a lot of people look like they're running scared."

"They're making poor decisions," he continued. "I have no control over that. If shit hits the fan I want to know that I did my best. But, I'm scared, too."

Williams, Stockman's co-worker who has spent 25 of his 47 years in journalism, said he's reminded daily of the frustration sweeping the newspaper industry. He rides a bus, then the Metro, to get to his office in the nation's capital, and on his way to work, he sees people of all ages reading various print publications. Every morning, like clockwork, an older man drives up to Williams' bus stop in a Lexus SUV, pulls over, parks, gets out of his car, walks past the coin box for The Washington Post and past the coin box for The New York Times to grab a free copy of The Washington Metro. It's frustrating because people want to read, said Williams, but print newspapers are missing something that many readers are looking for, and the Internet has yet to provide a cost-effective business model.

As Rizer put it, "it's an ugly scene across the country."

(Editor's Note: This is the first part in a three-part series published in print and on DailyCollegian.com on subsequent days beginning Monday, April 27. Readers can view parts two and three on

DailyCollegian.com.)

This story will also be published online at GazetteNET.com by The Daily Hampshire Gazette, where Matt Rocheleau is a contributing writer.

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Comments

6 comments

Deven — Wed Apr 29 2009 14:52

Great article. I haven't heard many people talk about this aspect, but if the newspaper style of journalism goes away, the news product that is left will be woefully incomplete due to a lack of robust sources. Sources will be hesitant to put their mug on TV or talk to a blogger because they're nowhere near as credible as newspapers have been over the years. The more trustworthy blogs will probably gain that credibility in a few years, but TV's visual-first attitude will always hamper its news credibility, except in the case of longform exclusive interviews.

Charlie Knight — Mon Apr 27 2009 23:30

I don't see as I have any choice.
I have made the decision to cease buying the New York Times.
Now all I need to know
is what other products "The New York Times Company" gains money from.
And for the rest of us, where will we be without print journalism if
the economy gets to a point so that on-line electricity becomes a "luxury" we can not afford?

Rick at ILovePhotoblogs — Mon Apr 27 2009 11:35

Sad to see the true foundation of American journalism being flushed down the tube. While the Internet has been great on many fronts, it presents an extremely poor business model for the news gathering industry. Paid subscriptions for online content is the only answer. Viewers have become numb to all the spam advertising on these pages, so even with existing ads, revenue is declining. It is an unrealistic expectation that everything should continue to be free with online content. However, as long as people are willing to receive there news via Twitter, Digg, and the like, this trend will continue. Here's to the good ol' days!

Katie H — Mon Apr 27 2009 11:27

This is a really great article, if heartbreaking. Thanks.

print journalist — Mon Apr 27 2009 11:16

Great article, I'm looking forward to reading the next two.

The decline of print journalism is an absolute tragedy. People don't always realize that newspaper journalists are the real reporters.... not the people you see on TV, who get all their news from the newspaper then regurgetate (sp?) it back on the air. Once the Globe goes out of business there will be dramatically less news on TV (and everywhere)... you watch.

Don Ricardo — Mon Apr 27 2009 00:42

If you find the real news and print it, people will read it... but not faux news, no matter how pretty it is packaged.

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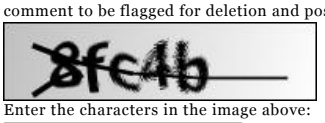

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