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GazetteNET Extra: Is 137 years of Boston Globe history hanging in the balance?

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BOSTON - 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, 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 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

Popular stories

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

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 University 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 s--- 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."

Industry-wide plague

One hundred and twenty newspapers have closed across the nation in the past year and a total of 16,000 reporters lost employment in 2008 - a trend with no end in sight.

In February, The Rocky Mountain News in Denver, Colorado shut down after 150 years in the business. Hopeful to move the publication's readers to the Web, 30 of the Rocky Mountain News' former editorial staff members planned to launch InDenverTimes.com on May 4 with a goal of 50,000 subscriptions to fund the operation. A week ago, site developers revealed only around 3,000 people pledged to subscribe causing some of the staff to abandon the idea and jeopardizing the project's future.

The Christian Science Monitor has switched from a daily print paper to a weekly, online news source. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer ceased print as well to focus on the Web. Meanwhile, The Hartford Courant, The Chicago Tribune, The Chicago Sun-Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer and The Minneapolis Star-Tribune are among a list of well-known regional newspapers who have filed for bankruptcy recently.

So, why are many newspapers' profits plummeting?

The main reason is advertising. Readership has declined, but companies are investing less in advertising due to the weak economy. And, when companies are investing, most look to the Internet, TV or radio - not print - and the majority of news Web sites do not generate enough revenue to make a profit. Classified ads and job postings have moved online as well to sites, like Craigslist, which allow users free or cheaper listings than newspaper classifieds.

As the country's 14th-largest paper, The Globe lost a reported $50 million in 2008 and is on track to lose $85 million more this year. If it closes it will be the largest paper to do so.

How serious The Times Co.'s threats are, no one really knows; or, at least, the people who do know aren't talking.

The Times Co. has refused to talk about the threat other than confirming the deadline date, while Globe management have said little on the looming deadline and negotiation process.

"We are in the midst of negotiations with our unions. Because of that, we are going to decline to comment," said an e-mail from senior vice president of corporate communications at The Times Co., Catherine Mathis.

The BNG has tried to urge The Times Co. and Globe management to allow the negotiations to be done in public, but both sides have refused so far.

Former Pulitzer-Prize winning Globe columnist Eileen McNamara called The Times Co.'s silence, "a curious position for a newspaper that's in the information business."

McNamara worked at the Boston publication for 30 years, including 10 as a columnist, and earned herself a Pulitzer Prize in Commentary in 1997. Feeling that she had "sort of run [her] course" at The Globe, in 2007 the North Cambridge native took a buyout to teach journalism full-time at Brandeis University where she had been working part-time since 1994.

Three days after The Times Co. announced its threat to shutter The Globe, The Boston Herald published her column, "Times pimps, pillages Globe," which resonated with what many Globe

employees - both journalists and those on the production end.

McNamara received calls or e-mails thanking her for the piece because, "they felt that, in part, the column in The Herald was speaking for them, too," she said.

Summarizing her column, she said, "I don't think The New York Times cares about The Boston Globe, I don't think it ever did, except as an economic engine that was going to pump money into New York. And since they've bought the paper, they've done nothing but strip it of the things that made it a distinctive newspaper."

The scenario of ownership trying to cut back or close its publications altogether is common across the country, but what she said distinguishes The Globe's situation is that its owners are direct competitors in the newspaper business.

Since the Taylor family sold their local ownership of The Globe to Times Co. CEO Arthur O. Sulzberger for $1.1 billion in 1993, The Globe has faced several rounds of layoffs, pay cuts and buyouts. The Globe's three remaining foreign bureaus were closed in 2007 and the Boston paper has just its D.C. bureau left outside of the offices in Massachusetts. The daily editions of 80 to 90 pages from 10 years ago are now 50 to 60 pages, Rizer pointed out.

"The Paper of Record," as The New York Times is sometimes referred to, has had financial troubles of its own. Shares have dropped from a high of over $50 in 2002 to about $5 now. In March, 100 Times Co. employees were laid off and salaries were cut by 5 percent. Earlier this month, The Times Co. reported a loss of $74.5 million and revenue dropped 19 in the first-quarter of 2009.

Contingency plans

But, for some Globe staffers, The Times Co.'s losses come from mismanagement, and some feel the cuts in New York have not been fair when compared with what employees in Boston have been forced to concede.

"I think The Times [Co.] has made it pretty clear that their concern is for The New York Times, not for The Boston Globe," said Mooney, who has worked in the newspaper business for over 35 years and with The Globe for 21 of those years. "The Times will do what The Times has to do to save The New York Times."

Rizer said McNamara's column speaks for a lot of the newsroom staff, while Totten expressed similar frustrations as McNamara.

"The Times Co.'s investment in The Boston Globe has been nonexistent from the beginning - The Times gladly took profits for over 16 years now, while not investing in the future of The Globe in any measurable and consistent fashion," Totten said.

But, whoever or whatever is to blame for The Globe's current economic state will not change the paper's current situation.

The seven current newsroom workers interviewed said they were optimistic in The Globe enduring beyond May 1, but in what form and for how long it will last remains uncertain.

On whether The Times Co. would make good on its threat to close The Globe if demands are not met by May 1, Rizer said, "you'd really have to have a real snit to say well they didn't give in in 30 days so let's shut it down."

Then again, "Anything is possible. No one is saying entirely that the paper shutting down is a bluff or a myth. Because, who really does know?," he said.

Shaughnessy agreed.

"I have a hard time believing they would do that, but maybe I'm naïve," he said. "I just think that there has got to be something. I don't see how we can be erased off the face of the earth in 30 days."

There have been rumors that The Times Co. is hoping the cuts will make The Globe more appealing for a potential buyer, something Ioven said he thinks will happen eventually. In the meantime, he tries not to think about it too much since he has no control over what happens in negotiations. He will just continue working like he has for the past three decades.

If Williams were to wager on it, he'd bet the paper will still be around after the 30-day deadline passes, but what The Globe will look like after May 1 and beyond is anyone's guess, he said. Conceiving of life after journalism is not something Williams finds easy; but having a contingency has crossed his mind, and he said it would be foolish if it hadn't.

"I've got a few ideas, most of which I haven't acted on yet because I'm still holding out hope that the newspaper industry will come back." he said. "I've been doing this for more than half of my life. I love this business. I love what I do and it's very difficult to give it up or see it go away."

Stockman said she will always be a writer and will always want to writer, but she is unsure of whether or not she will be a journalist five years from now.

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"I think one of the great things about journalism is it is full of people who can learn quickly and process information and go on to do lots of other really interesting things."

However versatile journalists may be, Mooney is not planning to leave the profession without a fight.

"No one's heading for the exits here; we're trying to save the paper."

Saving The Globe

For the first time since mid-September the mercury read 80 degrees in Boston on April 24 as a "Save the Globe" rally put on by the BNG drew several hundred supporters to Faneuil Hall to listen to 14 speakers, including Mooney.

The crowd gathered for the noon-time affair was a mix of reporters, editors, their family members, readers young and old, city union workers, media covering the rally and local politicians. Signs, which read "The Globe belongs to Boston," "Preserve free speech," "Support Globe workers" and "Save the Boston Globe" were distributed to the audience, many of whom adorned stickers advertising the newly created SaveTheBostonGlobe.com.

Globe reporter Bella English's speech talked about how event organizers had some trouble getting more newsroom people than were in attendance to come; not because they were worried about their jobs nor because they didn't care, but because they were working on deadline.

English had two stories of her own to complete after the rally.

"Until the last bell is rung"

Two weeks earlier while stuck at a traffic light, Rizer said aloud, as if directed towards an imaginary person who could turn the light green and speed up traffic, "gotta go, gotta go, gotta go."

Rizer repeated the phrase several times throughout the day - while waiting in line at a MassPike toll booth on his way to a photo assignment at Harvard and waiting at 7 a.m. for the Globe headquarters' slow-moving elevator to bring him to the third-floor cafeteria for an omelet and home fries.

His attitude was more curious than impatient.

If he does go into teaching after he leaves The Globe, Rizer is not sure if he'll be able to deal with the structure and monotony of working in a classroom five days a week.

Rizer said he just likes to know what's going on in the world around him, to be informed and to stay busy. It's why he was on his sixth-straight day at The Globe. It's why he stood on the hood of his Buick to get a higher angle for a photo of students from Boston College High School as they processed to several different churches as part of a Good Friday ritual. It's why he has taken the time to learn about the new technology in journalism, including how to shoot and edit video. And, it's why he does not plan to shut off his police scanners even after he leaves The Globe.

For Ioven, it's why he "plan[s] on working here until the last bell is rung."

As Williams put it, "people don't get into journalism to make money and they don't get into journalism to have nice careers or to be stars. You get into it for the work. You get into it because this is what you want to do. You get into it because you'd do it for free."

Mooney echoed that sentiment.

"This is all I've ever really wanted to do," he said. "I'm from this area, and working at The Globe was my idea of the best job I could have."

"I'm sort of prepared to go down with the ship if it comes to it," he added.

Matt Rocheleau, a student at the University of Massachusetts, wrote this story for the Daily Hampshire Gazette and for the Massachusetts Daily Collegian.

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