

# The Daily News (Nanaimo)

Extra! Extra!; Reading the newspaper isn't what it used to be. Between TV, radio and the Internet -- not to mention a disinterested generation or two -- it's getting tougher and tougher to keep readers interested.

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Illustrations: Colour Photo: Krista Charke/Daily News / Julie McManus, a third-year media studies student at Malaspina University-College, mainly uses the Internet to keep up to date on local and world events, but she sometimes picks up a newspaper to find the movie schedule.

Whoever newspaper slaps against his front door step first, Jerry McWhinnie is usually outside by 6 a.m. to collect it.

The retired Nanaimo man has scoured three local papers from start to finish every day since he arrived in the city 27 years ago and occasionally splurges on an edition of the Vancouver Sun. But when he's done, his fingers stained with ink, he's rarely void of strong criticism of what he reads. He voices those criticisms in letters to the editor.

"Some days I find myself wondering, 'Why is this in the paper?'" McWhinnie said. "I mean, who cares?"

Though their potential for extinction is debated daily, newspapers have yet to become obsolete. Profit bleeding caused by falling circulation rates has, in part, been quelled by online editions and well-designed websites. But the independent emergence of online media, and its instant dissemination of news, has left community papers and big-city broadsheets struggling to satisfy longtime subscribers and attract new readers.

Once the centre piece of a community, and the trusted hub for reports on politics, sports, entertainment and advertising, and debates about new legislation, newspapers must now compete with Google News, which gathers headlines from around the world and delivers them to a reader's inbox.

Because readers don't have to rely on one local newspaper to feel connected to the world, they can demand in-depth stories from their hometown papers that assure accountability and go beyond what press releases and official sources are willing to say.

Marketing executives struggle to sell their clients on the efficacy of newspaper advertising, particularly if that client is going after the 20-something demographic.

As revenue falls, media conglomerates are inclined to spend less money on the industry, even though a 2007 study out of the Missouri School of Journalism found that investing in the newsroom yields greater profits. More investment in the newsroom should facilitate better journalism.

But even if readers can decide what they want from their newspaper, they can't seem to agree on what that is.

McWhinnie said he often has difficulty deciphering the motivation behind the presence of certain stories in the paper.

"I don't like the entertainment page," he said. "I don't care about Britney Spears. I guess some people do."

He can't stand typos, pieces with no substance and inconsistent reporting.

He fills in news gaps using the Internet, but doesn't think local papers should be let off the hook for failing to cover a major world event, because not everyone can access their news online.

"I don't know if newspapers have gotten worse. They're digging deeper for stories and it just seems desperate. But I know they can't please everybody."

Mary Lynn Young was inclined to say newspapers must dig for deeper for stories, if they want to discourage their readers from straying.

"I think people want certain kinds of information that haven't been in the newspaper," said Young, a professor of journalism at the University of British Columbia. "Twenty-five per cent of the space is devoted to crime and 80% of the content comes from official sources."

Readers want comprehensive, untold stories about education, health, science and the environment, according to Young, because tidbits about current events have already been reported on the web.

"For this, they look to their daily newspapers," she said.

The stakes are higher, too. Because readers have become accustomed to reading the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal in the morning as though it were their local rag, said Young.

"You can get a very good international perspective on news," she said. "That has an impact on what people want from their daily newspaper. They want high-quality, relevant and rigorously reported journalism."

A 22-year-old media studies student in Nanaimo reads newspapers, but she does it sitting behind a

computer monitor.

"It's partly because I live in a small apartment and it would just get cluttered by the end of the week with all those papers," said Julie McManus.

She said she mostly enjoys how-to articles and human interest stories, but makes sure is up to date on international conflicts like the war in Afghanistan. She doesn't pick up local newspapers in Nanaimo because she doesn't find them relevant, and believes they should include more stories that relate to a broad range of people. Instead, she uses them for practical reasons, such as finding the movie schedule or upcoming events.

McManus' behaviour isn't unique for her age demographic.

A study conducted by Claire Boily from the Observatoire Jeune et Société at the Université du Québec from 2006 said young people aged 18 to 24 used traditional media the least for social and political information.

The study also found youth who did not appreciate being measured by low voting rates or newspaper readership, because neither should be considered indicative of how much they care.

Bob Hackett, professor of communication at Simon Fraser University and the co-founder of Canadians for Democratic Media, said newspapers need to confront shifting demographics if they want to survive.

"People are more mobile and they have less of an attachment to their community," he said. "(They need to ask) 'What does the public need? Journalists have a responsibility to cultivate an audience that needs journalism."

Reporters have to rock the boat, Hackett said, and their bosses need to stop fearing the Internet.

"You can publish much of what you already do online and the delivery costs are lower," he said. "Maybe newspapers are being too conservative about their websites. Making people buy their subscription is not always the way to go."

The newspaper is a vital component in an advertising campaign, but they need to stay sharp if Pat Bugera's clients are going to have any interest in them.

"If the web is something that's suited to a particular client or to a product, we look to the newspaper as the support to drive the audience to the website," said Bugera, who has worked in marketing and public relations for 18 years.

Sorting out what readers want from newspapers isn't only about editorial content, she said, but knowing how to properly spend advertising dollars.

As a marketing, a newspaper might become more relevant as she works on a public relations campaign and she wants to discuss ideas and opinions, rather

than promote a product.

"When I want to use the newspaper as a support for a client, I need to know what the demographic is. That tactile piece of paper is still very important to the baby boomers," she said.

Richard Dunstan is one of those baby boomers who likes to hold a newspaper in his hands. The 58-year-old is a former city editor for a daily newspaper.

He doesn't consider a story printed in the newspaper as the definitive answer to whatever issue that story confronts, because journalism has its limits when it comes to time and space limitations.

He plans to keep reading.

"I don't like newspapers online. I love the printed word. I don't relax with a computer," he said. "I don't think newspapers will go away."

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