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The long goodbye

Peggy Drexler
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.I'm going to miss my newspaper.

We've been together a long time. I care about it. I need it.

I'm one of the people whom the godfather of medium and message Marshall McLuhan was talking about when he said: "People don't read newspapers. They slip into them like a warm bath."

I have been watching newspapers like you watch a cherished friend who has a slow debilitating illness. You wonder: Even if they survive, will they ever be the same?

The signs are not encouraging.

It's not that the media companies are speeding toward the edge of a cliff. On any given day, 51 million people buy a paper, and 124 million read one. Just for perspective, the Giants and Patriots set a Super Bowl record with an audience of 97.5 million. Profit margins are still in the high teens, and newspapers are touting their success in moving readers online.

This is not an industry that is going to go the way of carbon paper and rotary phones. It's worse than that. It's an industry with a wasting disease that will rob us of essential benefits that we have forgotten how to appreciate.

Sometimes flawed, they are more often magnificent. They are the place where lies, distortions and manipulations are dragged into the town square, even - as in the early cheerleading for invasion of Iraq - if it takes awhile to get there.

New York Times Publisher Arthur Sulzberger was asked last year whether he thought the Times would still be printed in five years. His answer: "I don't know ... and you know what? I don't care." He later added, "The Internet is a wonderful place to be."

As newspaper companies adapt to the realities of consumers who can travel the world on their iPhone, I am afraid they are going to become a shell of their purpose; a brand name for a collection of niche publications, free tabloids and assorted Web sites. The center, that gravitational force that holds the parts of a community in its orbit, will be gone.

Sure, the Internet is a wonderful place to be. But the digital newspaper shares space with those who post because they have a position to promote, a score to settle, a diet to sell or that voice in the microwave told them to.

Newspapers are better than that. They are apart from that. No, they don't always get it right. But they are the only daily medium of depth that has the resources and the responsibility to try.

They are the alternative to wrapping our lives in the perspectives of those who believe exactly as we do - cheering as the Bill O'Reillys and Keith Obermanns lob rhetorical loogies at each from behind the battlements.

A good - but disillusioned - friend in the business said this is how the center will fail.

Newspaper companies will try to keep eyeballs and advertisers by investing in the Web. But a medium that was born free and has been ingenious in staying that way may or may not ever make enough money to sustain the kind of journalism it would replace.

Coverage will trend toward local-lite - ignoring the world, avoiding uncomfortable positions and only paying serious attention to the community issues that sell. In the process, thoughtful readers and true journalistic talent will have little reason to stay. And the talent that stays will worry more about winning prizes than serving readers - because prizes are the path to the very top of a dwindling pyramid of real reporting.

As Sulzberger talked about this downward spiral in essentialness of the American newspaper, I realized there is nobody to blame because it is nobody's fault. You don't

blame cell phones when you can't find a phone booth. It's simply the onslaught of technology and the inevitability of consumer choice.

We've seen it before. But this time there is more at stake.

I worry about the quality of debate. I worry about the truth. I worry about a community's ability to examine itself. I worry about the abuse of power when nobody is watching. I worry about losing the sheer enjoyment of great writing and reporting.

But most of all, I just feel sad.

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