



Disappearing City Stories

The other day, while waiting for an event to begin, I was going through my RSSs on my iPhone, when a headline appeared in the BBC News, “Dark day at *Baltimore Sun*, say critics.” The gist of the story was that the mighty *Baltimore Sun* was being transformed into a “leaner, Internet-ready machine.” Management has cut the staff to one-third of its size in 2000. The *Sun*’s editor says that they will preserve its “core values” including a commitment to investigative reporting and beat reporting. They closed the local bureau in the state capital, Annapolis. Last April, two sportswriters for the *Sun* walked over to Camden Yards to cover an Orioles baseball game. By the time the game ended, they had been laid off.

It has become increasingly more difficult for newspapers and other forms of print journalism to maintain large staffs with the support of traditional print advertising. Web-based versions of these journals have proved useful to readers, but the electronic format has produced a fraction of the money earned by print ads. This has led to a downward spiral as newspapers close or retreat to all-digital delivery. A cogent analysis of this predicament by Frank Rich of the *New York Times* can be found in a recent column, “The American Press on Suicide Watch” (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/10/opinion/10rich.html>). After describing previous changes in American media (newspapers followed by radio then television and cable television and now the Internet), he concludes that in one form or another the public will get the journalism they are willing to pay for.

Although some local, even neighborhood, news will be covered by blogs, city newspapers give the readers in the area a sense of their community and connect disparate parts of an urban area with each other. This is why the shriveling of the *Baltimore Sun* has affected me. When I was doing my doctoral work at Johns Hopkins, the *Evening Sun* was our newspaper. Tucked down in the lower left-hand corner of the first page of the second section was a weekday column, “Mr. Peep’s Diary.” (The title of the column is play on the name of Samuel Pepys, the author of a diary written during the Restoration.) For 17 years the writer, John Goodspeed, provided a chronicle of the city’s neighborhoods and collected examples of the

local dialect, which he christened “Baltimorese.” As a graduate student, confined by academic indenture to Hopkins’ Homewood campus, the column gave me a sense of the city that I only began to explore as my thesis work progressed.

During my postdoc in the Boston area, there was really nothing like Mr. Peep’s Diary in the *Boston Globe*. Perhaps the Boston area was too ethnically segregated for anyone to speak for and of the neighborhoods. In any case, the presence of a columnist like Goodspeed was missed. When I got to Atlanta in 1970, I was surprised to find in the *Atlanta Constitution*, in the same page location, a column by one Celestine Sibley, a columnist/author/reporter with a wicked sense of humor, who told wonderful stories daily. She had been page-one and courtroom reporter, did a stint as the Hollywood correspondent, and was the first female editor at the paper. In addition, she wrote stories for detective and confession magazines. Again, a Yankee, coming South, was given a glimpse at his adopted city by a master writer.

Ten years ago, Sibley died of cancer at the age of 85. Her last column ran about a month after she died. Since that time no one has replaced her, although there were some feeble attempts. In this digital age, will there be anyone to act as urban chroniclers like Goodspeed and Sibley? There are, to be sure, local reporters like Peter Applebome of the *New York Times*, whose column, “Our Towns,” covers the New York area, and his colleague Jim Dwyer, who concentrates on New York City. But these reporters do not incorporate the recurring characters and themes that made the chroniclers so appealing. The task is certainly appropriate for an interested blogger, but will anyone have the inclination and experience to produce compelling work for a local audience? It almost surely would have to be an avocation, since papers aren’t adding to their staff these days.

Currently I content myself with the daily description of life in London in 1666. I have an RSS that links me to the page of Samuel Pepys’ diary about his work activities as a naval administrator on the same day 343 years earlier in the time of the Great Plague and the Great Fire of London. Although not a trained scientist, he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society, attended the scientific demonstrations of Robert Hooke, and served as president of the society when it published Newton’s *Principia* (Pepys’ name is on the title page). Although it isn’t present-day Atlanta, whose fortunes I follow in the morning paper and the TV news, it provides a sense of a time and life beyond my day and place.

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Note: The diary entry by Pepys for each day can be found at <http://www.pepysdiary.com/>. You can start at the current date or do some catching up with summary pages for each year. They are available as entries by e-mail subscription or RSS and (heaven help us!) as multiple excerpts on Twitter.