

NATION

Losing reporters where it matters most

By Karl Vick

THE NEW YORK DAILY NEWS WAS CUT IN HALF BY something called a Tronc. That sounds like the sort of thing you'd find in a tabloid, and there it was in the July 23 edition of "New York's Hometown Newspaper" on page 2: "News cuts staff. Half laid off in retool ..."

Tronc turns out to be not a monster from the future, but a company from the past, Tribune Publishing, which renamed itself in a bid to remain relevant in a profoundly inhospitable present. That newspapers are a casualty of the Information Age may qualify as irony, but there are deep veins of tragedy involved, especially for communities that used to have a lot more people paid, by the local paper, to pay attention to what was happening there.

We all know why they're gone. The bad news about the *Daily News* was almost a day old by the time it appeared in its own pages. The announcement had been made at 9 a.m. the day before, as millions of office workers were sitting down at their desks, opening web browsers and toggling between work screens and whatever caught their attention on the web. A 2017 Pew Research Center study found that 67% of the U.S. population consumes the news in bits on social feeds and streams, rather than from anything brought in from the front porch or the bushes beside it. Daily newspaper circulation is right about where it was in 1940, a heyday for the printed word. The nation had only 40% of today's population back then, but the *Daily News* circulation was nearly 2 million; it's now one-tenth that.

A June report from Pew lays out the damage: newspapers' revenue from ads is where it was in 1981. Papers employ barely half the number of people they did 14 years ago, and pay them a median salary of \$34,000. Regional papers that once vied for Pulitzer Prizes—the *Mercury News* of San Jose, the *Denver Post*, the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*—have been gathered up by hedge funds skilled at wringing profits from diminishing assets.

Only a tiny handful of papers, most visibly the *New York Times*, have remained vibrant by investing constantly in digital and persuading subscribers to pay handsomely for a top-quality product. But they are "national" newspapers, conspicuous as a check on the federal government; the *Times* saw a surge in subscriptions after Donald Trump was elected. As papers like the *Daily News* shrink or die, the local is what's left behind. Even the *Times* stopped publishing a Metro section.

"The thing I love about local news is that it doesn't

scale," *Daily News* columnist Harry Siegel wrote the day before the cuts came. *Scale* is tech's magic word. Venture-capital firms are flush with money for the next idea that can grow from a person to a city to a region to ... well, global domination is always the goal. And so scale is the opposite of city limits or school colors or a local housing authority, all of which matter a great amount to a relative few. "There's really no way to scale that reporting work or automate it or make it go viral," Siegel observed, then had fun imagining the effort: "This woman gave a disjointed speech in the form of a question at a community board meeting. What happened next will shock you!"

SO WHO'S WATCHING town hall? Or our famously corrupt state capitals? Some communities are stepping in to try to salvage their local papers, often with the help of wealthy individuals. In Southern California, a UCLA surgeon turned billionaire named Patrick Soon-Shiong bought the *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Diego Union-Tribune* from Tronc in June. Local magnates purchased the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis and the *Globe* in Boston. (Even Jeff Bezos' purchase of the *Washington Post* might turn out local; he bought a house in the city after buying its paper.)

But deep pockets don't change basic economics—people will not buy a classified ad to sell the bookcase they can advertise for free on Craigslist, and revenue from stories published online will always be diluted by the zillions of sites that also post ads. And depending on individuals comes with its own risks. Joe Ricketts, the billionaire behind the online website *Gothamist*, ditched it after the newsroom voted to unionize; it found a home at WNYC, New York's public radio station. (In a twist, Chance the Rapper—who has his own history of feuding with the media—announced on July 19 that he'd purchased sister site *Chicagoist*.)

For altruism, there does seem to be a certain refuge in nonprofits. Diligent ones are doing solid work both at the national level (in the newsroom of investigative journalists at ProPublica and the Marshall Project) and at the state level (Texas *Tribune*, Iowa *Watch*) and local (the Austin Bulldog, My Everett News). But news isn't all about altruism. Sometimes it's just what's interesting.

The story that brought Jarrod Warren Ramos into the undefended lobby of the *Capital Gazette* in Annapolis, Md., on June 28 had appeared seven years earlier, under the headline: JARROD WANTS TO BE YOUR FRIEND. It reported on a court case about his online harassment of a woman Ramos remembered from high school. Ramos stands charged with killing five people in that newsroom, which a few years employed dozens more. But the *Gazette's* staff of 20 at the time of the shooting is nearly half the 44 who are being left to put out the *Daily News*.

Tronc stands for Tribune Online Content. In its statement announcing the layoffs, a senior executive said the company remains "committed to print." □

67%

Portion of American adults who in 2017 relied on social-media sites for at least some of their news, according to a Pew Research Center report

\$34K

Median salary for American newspaper reporters in 2017, according to Pew analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data

9

Number of staff journalists remaining in the *Daily News* sports department, down from 34 prior to the cuts