

THE MORNING CALL

Opinion

Your View: Newspapers vital to democracy in U.S.



Mike Albanese of Bethlehem, left, and Chuck Savitske of Hellertown on Dec. 8, 2021, load a portion of an antique press that had been on display in the lobby of The Morning Call building in Allentown. The press was donated to the National Museum of Industrial History in Bethlehem. (Rick Kintzel/The Morning Call)

By **JACK A PANELLA**

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Very distressing news: This past year, approximately 130 newspapers across the country were closed down by either mergers with other newspapers or ceasing publication entirely.

Very optimistic news: The Morning Call will continue to operate in the Lehigh Valley. Even better news: The Morning Call will continue with its print edition, with its new editor promising to give attention to the print edition and acknowledging that there is “an audience that still relies on that.”

Yes, positive plans, but to a dinosaur like me, and many others, the loss of print editions of newspapers across the country is yet another tragic consequence of the digital era.

We need newspapers. We need the news media. Forty-two years ago, at my commencement ceremony, Edward Bennett Williams, the then esteemed lawyer and notable member of the business community, told my graduating class that three documents separated America from every other country in the world. First, the Declaration of Independence in which we recognized that we all have certain inalienable rights that no government can take away from us. Second, the United States Constitution, which set up a system of government which would ensure that these rights are protected. Lastly, and I can remember it very distinctly, Mr. Williams held up a newspaper and said the news media is the third document. He said without a free and competent news media, we would not know what our government was up to. Look at the dictatorships around the world, Mr. Williams said, “the first thing they do is take away the free press, and you only know what they want you to know.” His wise comments have always stayed with me, and I have repeated them many times, especially when speaking to students. In my 33 years of full-time public service, I have learned that corruption occurs more often when the fear of exposure is limited or nonexistent. This country needs a free press.

When I first moved to the Easton area in 1980, there were three printed daily newspapers. If you were involved in government as I was, you had to read them every day. There was The Morning Call, one from Bethlehem and the other from Easton, which came out in the afternoon. My day was not complete without reading The Morning Call every day; I even loved the Saturday edition, which was formatted differently back in those days.

My generation is attuned to the printed news media. Whether it was catching up on political developments of the day before, finding out how Dr. J led the 76ers to another victory, or reading the current post by Bill White, the printed version of The Morning Call was an indispensable, and enjoyable, part of my life.

This is not to say that I, and my friends, have not joined the digital era. It is now common that when I reach the breakfast table, I have already read The Morning Call on my phone. My wife customarily will take control of the newspaper and begin work on the crossword puzzle over her first cup of coffee.

But it remains true that despite watching news on television (I have lost count as to the number of streaming news channels) or listening to the news on the radio as I drive to work, or annoyingly getting news updates on my phone all day long, the printed newspaper is my fallback primary source of news and information. Even articles that I have already read on digital, if important enough, I will reread in the printed newspaper.

The bottom line is that the move by newspapers to all digital, although the fortunate means by which local news agencies can survive, is bittersweet. Necessary but regretful, nonetheless. We are very fortunate that The Morning Call, our hometown print newspaper,

will continue, unlike newspapers in cities and towns across the country, which are becoming a thing of the past. Much of the information on the web and social media is not fact-checked nor subject to editorial scrutiny, and accordingly we need professional and reliable news sources like The Morning Call, and others serving the Lehigh Valley, more than ever. If the only way we can ensure having independent journalists, a free press, and access to the news, is through digital service, then I welcome it. But I'm not hesitant to say that I like the printed version and feel grateful the printed Morning Call will continue.

*Jack A. Panella is president judge emeritus of the Superior Court of Pennsylvania.
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