

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM

ALTERNATIVE NEWSWEEKLIES AND THE FUTURE OF CITY REPORTING

ANDREW MCGILL
Spring 2010

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Journalism
with honors in Journalism

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Russell Eshleman
Senior Lecturer
Associate Head of the Dept. of Journalism
Thesis Supervisor

Russell Frank
Associate Professor
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

For more than 30 years, alternative newsweeklies have given cities a second look at themselves, offering off-center takes on the news. Known for their vibrant design, a focus on feature writing and a wealth of entertainment listings, such weeklies have carved out niches in nearly every major American city. But as debt-wracked metropolitan dailies bleed cash and readers, their alternative cousins are finding that their free-distribution business models have not protected them from industry woes either. Nowhere is this more evident than at the offices of Philadelphia City Paper, a proud 30-year-old alt weekly in the midst of a midlife crisis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCING PHILADELPHIA CITY PAPER.....	1
CITY PAPER’S CREATION MYTH – AN ABBREVIATED HISTORY	6
THE STATE OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA	15
WHAT’S BROKEN AT CITY PAPER – AND HOW IT’S GETTING FIXED.....	22
THE PATH FORWARD: ADVERTISING AND SALES.....	26
THE PATH FORWARD: EDITORIAL	31
THE PATH FORWARD: MANAGEMENT.....	35
KEEPING THE VISION.....	40
WORKS CITED.....	51

INTRODUCING PHILADELPHIA CITY PAPER

It was time to call a meeting.

When you've been with an organization long enough, you can tell when something's going wrong. Brian Howard could certainly qualify on longevity. A veritable lifer in this cramped newsroom above Second Street in Philadelphia's Old City district, the editor knew he needed to take action.

He called the whole crew together, took them to The Pub and Kitchen, a downtown gastropub known for its fish and chips and room for conversation. They sat upstairs and sipped their beers, and Howard just came out and said it:

“Let's define our mission.”

They threw around slogan ideas for a while, the dozen or so of them. “Philadelphia's only newspaper,” someone suggested. No, Seattle had that one. “Inform without boring,” another staffer said. That didn't catch on either.

Then Isaiah Thompson, the paper's only full-time writer at the time, spoke up. “Making Philadelphia interesting for Philadelphians,” he said.

Brian considered. “Interesting” was one of those vague words he'd usually avoid, a friend later remarked, but he had to admit the phrase had a certain ring to it. It was quick and pithy, easy to reel off. The repetition was nice. And it spoke to the singular conviction a former editor had passed down to him long ago – that his little publication, a weekly facing a midlife crisis at 30 years old in one of the country's toughest media markets, was a reward. It was a reward for those special 1.5 million people, the holdouts who looked out at the suburbs and Washington and Baltimore and New York City and the great green swaths of land past Reading and the McMansions climbing up Bucks

County and thought to themselves: Hell, there's no way I'm leaving Philly. That's a decision he himself had made, not so long ago.

Isaiah won. Philadelphia City Paper, the city's first alternative weekly, had its mission.

City Paper has been around longer than many of its writers have been alive. Definitely longer than the interns. It's a curious product, managed and created by the young but old enough itself to remember when times were different.

But its basic body image hasn't changed: a few dozen sheaves of newsprint, folded over and stuffed together to make a makeshift magazine. No staples. Make the cover bombastic – catchy, artsy, something to grab eyeballs – maybe a tight portrait of an up-and-coming rapper, the headline type as stark as his expression: “STAKES IS HIGH.” Keep up the pace at the front of the book, a snappy letter from the editor, a smart news item. Ads, too, plenty of ads – bars, concerts, movies, restaurants, retailers – but keep them interesting. People read the ads, they say, as much as they read the articles.

Here's the main show: the cover story, the piece de resistance. Give it what it needs – two pages? Four? Eight? – and design the crap out of it, art and type and graphics. Spare no expense. It's about slot machine gambling? Get one of the art guys to draw a slot-machine hooker, a really sexy one, big busty spinning reels and the like. Story on life in a subway concourse? You'd sure as hell better have shots of the guys living down there in their natural filth, three in the morning, long after the traffic cops have already locked the entrance gates.

Then there's the bread and butter, the arts and entertainment section. Reviews are

nice, and everyone likes a good profile of a tangle-haired local guitarist, but publications like City Paper live and die by their listings. People pick it up to know what they're doing this weekend. So dedicate a dozen pages every week to telling them, cramming that eye-achingly small text into columns just wide enough to get the gist and the cover charge across, a veritable phone book of every concert, play, dance, exhibit, topless night and bar special the city of Philadelphia can cook up on a Saturday night. It's got to be complete, or damn close – every publication worth its salt, mainstream or alternative, is trying to outdo you. And for the select but sizable population that jumps straight to the back, well, that's where the adult ads are.

That's an alternative weekly, the special breed of free throwaways that has risen from relative obscurity beyond the tattoo-and-facial-piercing set to become an integral part of most cities' cultures. City Paper's orange honor boxes are nearly as ubiquitous as steak shops and Rocky references in Philadelphia, dotting every other street corner, train station and subway platform. You can find issues piled in coffee shops, left on bus seats, on the desks of city politicians. Occupying a distinct stratum in the city's media hierarchy – more irreverent than the weighty Philadelphia Inquirer, more comprehensive than community weeklies like the South Philadelphia Review, and meatier than the bare-bones commuter tabloid Metro – it is Philadelphia's in-print blog, mixing commentary and reporting in a combination that keeps the best of both journalistic convention and underground-press snark. Free to let the city dailies shoulder paper-of-record responsibilities, it's been free for the past 30 years to seek out the little-known stories.

Nationwide, nearly every major and minor city has some form of an alternative newsweekly. The Association of Alternative Newsweeklies, the industry's premier trade

group, counts 130 publications as members, boasting a combined circulation of 6.3 million and a readership of nearly 17 million.

By most standards, alternative papers are more than just weekly arts-in-reviews and weekly previews: As AAN puts it, “What ties them together are a strong focus on local news, culture and the arts; an informal and sometimes profane style; an emphasis on point-of-view reporting and narrative journalism; a tolerance for individual freedoms and social differences; and an eagerness to report on issues and communities that many mainstream media outlets ignore.”

Many consider themselves watchdogs of the mainstream media, and brand themselves so. Others dedicate their pages to the underdogs of culture, taking on the mantle of social crusader. Most have substantial arts coverage and an independent streak a mile long.

And in the midst of the greatest crisis print journalism has ever seen, one that has mortally wounded some metropolitan dailies, most are struggling.

Circulation is down. Revenue is falling, too. The Village Voice, perhaps the best-known “underground newspaper” in the country, has cut 50-year staffers, and the bankruptcy of Creative Loafing, owner of Chicago Reader and Washington City Paper, has shown that even the mighty big-market flagships aren’t safe from the rising tide of red ink. Editors are being handed tough choices – whom to lay off, which sections to cut. Some are weathering the storm well: The Phoenix New Times, owned by Village Voice Media in the sunny Southwest, has stayed steady at about 100 pages for some time, publishers say. But it’s a different story at The Pitch in Kansas City, where page count has dropped to around 40. And as print ad revenue drops, many publishers are seeking to

wring more money out of the Web, fueling further speculation from industry Cassandras that the print alt weekly is going the way of the dinosaurs.

Alternative weeklies' free-distribution business model has not spared them falling circulation, and their focus on hyper-local advertising hasn't proved any more resilient in a recession. While cuts haven't been as deep as the ones seen at some struggling metropolitan dailies, they still hurt. And when your issue size is half of what it was three years ago – well, readers notice.

But it's a recession, some say. That doesn't mean that the industry is broken. Far from it. After all, a certain Philadelphia weekly was founded in the midst of a recession.

CITY PAPER'S CREATION MYTH – AN ABBREVIATED HISTORY

Philadelphia, circa 1981. The Oakland Raiders had just defeated the Eagles 27-10 in Super Bowl XV. A former Hollywood cowboy was now president. The city was still the gritty mid-rise metropolis glamorized in 1976's "Rocky" but hadn't yet begun to feel the ravages of the oncoming crack epidemic. And Bruce Schimmel, a "perennial humanities grad" moonlighting as a dance critic, was dissatisfied.

Express, the monthly culture tabloid he helped publish under the auspices of Philadelphia public radio station WXPB, just wasn't working out. The broadcaster's shoestring operation was precarious enough as it was, and he could see the small publication he'd built with XPN public information director Chris Hill two years ago didn't have much time left.

But the University of Rochester graduate and former ballet critic saw opportunity. Yes, Philadelphia had its morning and evening dailies, its healthy smattering of community weeklies and more than a few citywide periodicals. But in his eyes, it was missing a publication that recognized the hazy distinction between arts and politics, one willing to rise above the relative tedium of the mainstream and offer a more holistic take on city life. The Inquirer partitioned its news into sections: Local, Sports, Arts and Entertainment. The time was right, he said, for a newspaper that would throw everything into the mix at once, like The Village Voice was doing in New York and Baltimore City Paper was doing to the south.

"Politics and arts are different sides of the same coin," he said in a 2009 interview. "We really saw things as one big culture. We kind of put it all together. It was just a different mindset – we tried to create a separate world."

Then again, the partners knew well the dangers of breaking out on their own. Hill had previously worked at the weekly Distant Drummer, a precursor of sorts to the publication he now envisioned. That was long gone in 1981, along with Electricity, PhillyWeek, the Olde City Digest, the South Street Star – all alt-wannabes who hadn't mustered the financial chops to stay in business.

But even now, the 57-year-old speaks with the same infectious sense of purpose that sometimes stumbles into overconfidence. Some call that the key to his success.

“I think of myself as a loose cannon,” Schimmel said. “It's kind of interesting as a philosophy, to have someone from the outside looking in ... there's a certain amount of strength to be drawn.”

So screw it all. Schimmel and Hill moved operations into his house in the Mt. Airy section of Philadelphia, a gentrifying area that still ran trolley cars up and down its arterial Germantown Avenue. Schimmel lived upstairs, appropriating the 400-square-foot former drugstore underneath as his newsroom. They set up a typesetting machine – seven lines a minute – and opened their doors. The reporters and material came to them.

The first issue lacked polish – cover art of two kids hunched over homework, a bare-bones headline, “Down to Basics.” In those days, they ran the text of the cover story on the front page, something the editors didn't drop until the late '80s. But as a more mature City Paper acknowledged 25 years later in an anniversary issue, it was the open letter on the inside page that mattered most.

“Philadelphia doesn't so much need another paper as it needs another voice,” Hill wrote in an editorial that future editors said outlined the “genetic code” for the publication. “We think Philadelphia City Paper is that new voice, a casual, humane voice,

unconstrained by the pressures and limitations of the daily newspaper grind, unmarred by aggressive materialism, and not limited to one geographic neighborhood ... As the editors of this paper, we pledge to address the ethical, artistic, social and political concerns of the city.”

City Paper remained a monthly for two years. That was all the editors could manage – “I got along by getting jacked up on a mix of pot, coffee, aspirin and Nyquil,” Schimmel later wrote. But it wasn’t long before they were up to twice a month. More and more willing workers showed up at their Germantown Avenue office, squeezing past the people waiting on the porch for the trolley. People brought their stories in on foot – these were the days before e-mail. As the editors had hoped, the office was becoming a hub in the city, albeit one with an intestinally challenged guard dog. And so it became a weekly.

As it grew (and moved its headquarters, relocating to a downtown office in Philadelphia’s historic district) it gained relevance. City Paper reported on early trends in the city that would prove significant in time, including gentrification and the rise of the “Moonies” pseudo-religious movement. It also gained some of its lasting voices, including entertainment commentator A.D. Amorosi, who still writes his “Icepak” column today.

In 1983, it attracted the attention of Paul Curci, a young art school graduate who joined the organization as an ad salesman. “At that time, there were five employees,” he said. “I essentially became the advertising department.” Three decades later, he’s the paper’s publisher.

Enter the ’90s: Former Philadelphia District Attorney Ed Rendell became America’s Mayor, the Phillies lost the 1993 World Series, and Philadelphia native Will

Smith's "Fresh Prince" headed off to Bel Air. Philly was changing, long-time staffers say – growing more urbane, attracting a nightlife, becoming more than a Liberty Bell pit stop on the Northeast USA tourism track. It was in the 1990s that the city gained the cosmopolitan air that would eventually earn it the title of New York's "sixth borough" in Manhattan magazines. City Paper, becoming a bit more urbane itself, took the lead in covering this transformation.

In its rise, City Paper was soon joined by a new competitor. Welcomat, a longtime community weekly focusing on the Center City district, rebranded itself as Philadelphia Weekly, taking on the alternative weekly format and sensibilities. Accepted into the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies – a competitive process that has become a rite of passage for legitimate alt contenders – Philadelphia Weekly brought with it a comprehensive real estate section, a holdover from its earlier days that was among the best in the city. City Paper editors grudgingly respect the Weekly, calling it more overtly politically biased and prone to silliness. But publishers admit they'd give an arm and leg for just half of those real estate listings. (That includes City Paper associate publisher Nancy Stutski, who spent two years as publisher of the Weekly and headed its restyling into PW.)

City Paper was in a strong position. In 1996, the paper made \$4 million and enjoyed the largest weekly readership in the state. And as Schimmel proudly points out, it set the curve in a number of improvements that later became standard: first to debut a permanent color front page, first to post all of its stories to the Web, one of the first to have a Web site at all. Schimmel even ran his own social networking site for a while.

But in the midst of this success, the publisher was worried. More than worried, in

fact. He had one of the most successful papers in the state, and all indications showed that revenue was only increasing, but Schimmel felt very uneasy about the direction journalism was taking on the Web.

Yes, he gave away both the online edition and the print edition for free. But in print, he was making millions on advertising. On the Web, he was making practically nothing. He counts it as an epiphany – the year he prophesized the death of newspapers. “It dawned on me then: I was cutting my throat,” he said. “I realized – holy shit, newspapers are dead.”

So City Paper was ahead of the curve, too, on industry schadenfreude. In a decade when circulations nationwide were still surging and ad revenue was robust, Schimmel began to make the rounds for a buyer. The paper turned 15 years old that year.

He considered two offers, one from a small alt-weekly chain, one from a publisher who already owned another weekly. Neither appealed to him. He eventually accepted a bid from Art Howe, a former Pulitzer Prize winner at the Inquirer and the publisher of a number of traditional weekly newspapers in suburban Philadelphia whose operation was bankrolled by the Rocks, a prominent Philadelphia family known for their philanthropy. With the sale, Paul Curci took over as publisher.

For the first time since its birth, the paper Schimmel called his “baby” was on its own. He was moving on, headed to help Howe develop new publications and to find other projects worth his while. In his last column as publisher, he compared his departure to the long drive home his own mother had made after dropping him off at the University of Rochester.

“It was a seven-hour drive,” he wrote. “Mom helped me unpack, looked at her

first-born baby boy, and with tears in her eyes, she drove back home. She had other babies to care for. So do I.” (Despite these strong words, Schimmel would maintain a steady presence at the paper and continues to write his “Loose Canon” column today.)

Nationwide, Alt weeklies were growing up. Ad revenue hit \$383 million in 1997, with circulation reaching 6.9 million a week. Acquisitions flourished as competition pushed chains to snatch up profitable publications, in some cases buying out one weekly in a two-paper town and folding the organizations together. The big monster of the day was the New Times Corporation, founded as the Phoenix New Times in Arizona and the owner of a swath of weeklies across the Midwest. Reflecting the shifted role of the alt weekly, New Times owner Michael Lacey eschewed the “clenched fist” revolutionary journalism of the ’60s and ’70s, pushing his publications to focus on good features, excellent entertainment coverage and keeping an eye on the mainstream media. “Show me a [Village] Voice story and within two paragraphs I can tell you where it’s going, and what the writer’s political orientation is,” he told the Columbia Journalism Review, jabbing at the famously liberal New York publication.

Indeed, even the Village Voice was changing. Owned by the head of a pet food company, the corporatized publication acquired alt weeklies in Seattle, Minneapolis and Cleveland, while opening new properties in Long Island and Orange County, Calif. The two major chains differed in management style – with a unified masthead typeface and a strong headquarters in Phoenix, New Times was more centralized, while Stern Publishing Co. tended to the haphazard – but both fought over the same turf, with a bidding war over St. Louis’ Riverfront Times falling in favor of New Times. Both companies dismissed fears that the corporate model would corrupt their alt-weekly properties and that profit-

making was taking precedence over good journalism – but as critics pointed out, both also bought up competing independent weeklies just to shut them down. While both City Paper and Philadelphia Weekly have remained largely independent, it's a constant fear that a big chain will dive in, buy one of the papers up and drive the other out of business.

The new millennium dawned, followed by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Two days before publication and pushing up against production deadlines, the editors scrapped the planned Fall Guide issue, sending reporters and staffers out into the streets of Philadelphia to tell the story of the millions of city residents captivated by the terrible spectacle unfolding on their television screens. The cover spoke plainly: “NOTHING WILL EVER BE THE SAME,” laid over a blood-red image of the Twin Towers aflame. Needless to say, it was a striking image.

Indeed, City Paper's creative design was on the ascendancy, with an ever-growing page count giving a broad canvas for enthusiastic designers. The weekly debuted its now-familiar banner in 1998, heralding widening experimentation with covers and cover story centerfolds. The average cover story spread grew to five pages or more, not so much to feature longer stories as to accommodate huge art elements. Long gone was the mishmashed tabloid of the '80s, when it was not uncommon to squeeze two stories onto the cover and jump them wildly throughout the issue. A new wave of editors and technology replaced it with a sleeker product sporting a decidedly modern look and an almost airy disregard for space constraints. In retrospect, it sometimes got ridiculous: For a year or so, the paper's section labels took up nearly a quarter of the page. (In contrast, they're now cast in a typeface thinner than the body text and stand less than an inch and half high.)

City Paper also grew its presence online, expanding online classified, restaurant listings and editorial content. It debuted “The Clog,” a staff blog that started out chronicling the weird stuff editors came across on the Internet – as Web editor Drew Lazor later put it, “You can post news, or you could post funny kitten videos” – but eventually grew into an outlet for original reporting and commentary. With this new territory came new competitors: Phawker, Philebrity, Phillyist and others, a klatch of independent blogs determined to duplicate City Paper’s listings on the Web and ante up its characteristic snark.

At the same time, traditional print reporting charged full steam ahead. Longtime writer Mike Newall highlighted Philadelphia crime, shining a second-day light on a city Congressional Quarterly called one of the deadliest in the nation. Former music editor Brian Howard, later to become the paper’s editor-in-chief, ran wild with the city’s art scene, taking special notice of local up-and-coming bands. Former managing editor Brian Hickey debuted his “Why They’ll Lose” series covering the Philadelphia Eagles, correctly predicting their Super Bowl collapse against the Patriots in 2005. And fed by a reliable stream of staff content and experienced freelancers, the paper was seeing the best cover stories it ever had.

All in all, the paper was devoting 30 to 40 pages every week to reporting and reviews. The average issue weighed in at more than 100 pages, sometimes shooting up to as high as 140. Most publishers expect readers to spend nine minutes a day on their newspaper, but buoyed by their success and a devotion to Hill’s original mandate, City Paper editors aimed for their audience to take nearly an hour. And jumped up by a booming economy, the advertising dollars kept rolling in.

That was City Paper's peak. Through it all, Schimmel defended his sale of the paper in 1996. He was about to be proven correct.

THE STATE OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

“Don’t press your luck,” the mobster barks into the phone. “You print that story, you’re a dead man!”

At the other end of line, the reporter shrugs. He signals to the operator to fire up the press, holding up the receiver to the rising cacophony.

“That noise! What’s that racket?” the mobster says.

“That’s the press, baby,” the reporter replies, triumphant. “The press! And there’s nothing you can do about it!”

Humphrey Bogart’s “Deadline USA,” released in 1952, epitomized everything newspapers strive to be. A rough-around-the-edges reporter determined to run a mob expose before his New York publication is sold to a chain, Bogart delivers his final lines with the kind of finality every journalist dreams of.

It’s fitting, then, that the journalism blockbuster of 2009 was “State of Play,” a mystery thriller starring Russell Crowe as a Washington reporter investigating the murder of a senator’s mistress. In the opening scenes, the movie’s Washington Post stand-in hangs a new sign in its lobby, reflecting its recent purchase by a media conglomerate. Crowe’s grizzled crime reporter find his match in Rachel McAdams’ snazzy in-house blogger, sparring over sensationalism and ethics. Management is inept at best, baffled by the changes buffeting the newsroom and unsure how to preserve the paper’s editorial mission while competing against the blogosphere.

Spoiler alert: Crowe’s character realizes an old dog can learn new tricks, gains McAdams’ sardonic respect and tackles a sniper. Unfortunately, entering 2009 wasn’t as simple for the rest of the newspaper industry, according to an annual report by the Pew

Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.

For mainstream media, daily circulation fell 10.6 percent in 2009, adding up to a more than 30 percent slide from peak totals in the past 25 years. Only one of the top-15 circulation newspapers – The Wall Street Journal – saw circulation growth. And several, including The San Francisco Chronicle and USA Today – saw losses of more than 15 percent.

The advertising end didn't fare any better. Ad revenue sank to \$25.3 billion, 40 percent less than just two years earlier. Publically traded newspapers' stock value fell a whopping 83 percent in 2008, with little sign of recovery in 2009 – traders could buy a formerly mighty \$70 McClatchy share for just 80 cents. Internally, the industry lost nearly 6,000 jobs in 2008, double what it had shed the year before, and Pew experts forecasted the same fate for 2009.

But losses weren't uniform across the field. The mainstream journalistic landscape encompasses three strata – national papers, metro dailies and small-circulation publications. Smaller dailies flew under the radar, suffering only minor cuts and maintaining circulation. And the largest hung on too, with the New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal flying at a high enough altitude to stave off the worst of what the brewing storm can throw. It was the big-city dailies – the so-called “metros” – stuck in the middle that were floundering amidst turbulence, with some fielding reporting staffs half of what they were a decade ago.

In Philadelphia, much of this can be attributed to changing demographics, Penn State visiting professor Gene Foreman says. A top editor at The Philadelphia Inquirer for more than 25 years, Foreman says he inherited in 1973 a city that had cannibalized itself,

with white flight to the suburbs decimating local readership. The paper tried to compensate with increased suburban coverage, New Jersey bureaus, zoned editions – but it wasn't enough. Wealthy out-of-city readers just didn't pick up the Inquirer for their local news, he said, and suburban papers ate its lunch in advertising.

“There is the mindset that no matter what we did, they wouldn't expect us to cover it, because we're a Philadelphia paper,” he said. “The population is dispersed – they let their base get away from them.” Combine that with a recession, and you've got a 180-year-old publication facing bankruptcy.

Alternative media, of course, might as well be on a different planet. With a localized advertising model, free distribution and a separate set of editorial emphases, some say the alternative press is better equipped to weather the recession. Indeed, some publishers think the decline of metro dailies could be an opportunity for the alternative press to grab disillusioned advertisers – just listen to Alison Draper, the newly hired chief sales officer at alt chain Creative Loafing Inc.

“We're all aware of the decline in the influence of daily newspapers and in their circulation and advertising sales,” Draper said in a press release announcing her appointment. “I'm convinced that Creative Loafing's newspapers and Web sites can attract the readers and serve the advertisers who find daily newspapers irrelevant.” Then again, Creative Loafing just emerged from bankruptcy. While the alt industry may prove a scappier fighter in the street brawl for market share, statistics show that it has taken more than a few hits itself.

According to figures released by the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies, ad revenue nationwide declined about 5 percent to \$416 million in 2008. Circulation took

the same hit, down 400,000 readers to 7.1 million. In 2009, circulation sank by another 470,000 readers, to 6.3 million. Flagship publications like The Village Voice are cutting staff, and many weeklies are printing much smaller issues. The expected flood of advertisers fleeing burgeoning dailies has not arrived – as Village Voice Media Executive Associate Editor Andy Van De Voorde puts it, “The shit rolls downhill.”

“Our expectation is that we probably lost about 30 percent of our business in print,” he said. “Anyone can pick up our papers and see they’re not as big as they were before.”

Indeed, some say the Association's estimates are low. Mark Hanzlik, who runs a national advertising cooperative based out of Sacramento called the Alternative Weekly Network, said he’s seen an average revenue drop of 15 to 20 percent among his 95 alt weekly members. Page counts have been sliced in half, he said, with the average metro weekly running around 70 pages. He can remember when the Chicago Reader, once a paragon of alt journalism, ran at 300 pages per week.

Paralleling the fall of big city dailies, major metropolitan weeklies lost the most readers in 2009. New York Press in New York, N.Y., dropped a shocking 55 percent in circulation in 2009, falling to 22,000 in a three-year slide from a peak of 116,000. Boston’s Weekly Dig fell 21 percent in a single year; Miami New Times, 18 percent; SF Weekly, 15 percent. The list of cities that saw drops of more than 10 percent goes on and on: Chicago, Houston, Las Vegas, San Diego, Orlando, Dallas, Phoenix...

And while most publications reported appreciable growth in Internet traffic, they’re finding that the barbarians aren’t far behind. Unburdened by a city-wide editorial scope, niche bloggers are swooping in to grab a piece of the alt-weekly audience,

focusing on one topic and reporting the hell out of it. Others are raiding the weeklies' entertainment listings, seeking community submissions online and offering searchable calendars. Many bloggers offer advertisers the ability to quickly design their ads online and post them immediately. And nearly all already have the snark angle covered.

The news isn't all bad. While circulation has declined and readers have aged, alternative weeklies did see 3 percent growth in readers in the 18-24-year-old demographic, an age group that mainstream papers saw decline by 6 percent. Alt-weeklies also saw modest growth in readers aged 45 and older, from 41.5 percent to 42.6 percent. And their readers are wealthier than average, with an average household income of about \$70,000 that's above the national rate by more than 6 percent.

Despite competition online, audience is certainly growing. The Pew study showed that 77 percent of responding alt weeklies said they had increased Web revenue between 2007 and 2008, and 86 percent reported they had more Web visitors. Half saw an increase of between 11 percent and 20 percent in Web traffic. But in his papers, Van De Voorde said, Web revenue is still paltry compared to print – barely 10 percent of total income.

And in some limited cases, print circulation has increased, albeit among lower-circulation papers. The Reno News and Review in Nevada increased from 23,650 readers to 26,584, and the Missouri-based Missoula Independent jumped 1,000 or so to 21,818. The industry's biggest circulation success story in 2009 was Michigan's Lansing City Pulse, which jumped a whopping 27.4 percent – from 15,600 copies to 20,000. Of all the AAN's member papers, only 17 saw circulation increases.

Corporate ownership has not protected papers. Take Van De Voorde's Village

Voice Media, the symbol of what many see as the future of alternative publications – and what others curse as their downfall. Founded in a two-bedroom New York apartment in 1955 – although you’d hardly call it a corporation then – the Greenwich Village-based Village Voice essentially invented the concept of modern alternative newsweeklies, providing progressive coverage of the city with a heavy emphasis on the arts. It quickly gained respect and acclaim for its investigative reporting and lively commentary, serving as a model for other alt upstarts. When Paul Curci was pitching a young City Paper to prospective advertisers, he’d tell them, “Yeah, we’re like The Village Voice.”

He’d never say that now. In 2005, shortly after its 50th anniversary, the Voice was bought out by Phoenix-based New Times Media, creating a chain of 17 papers that accounted for a quarter of all alternative newsweekly circulation nationwide. The corporation has since revamped the former industry flagship, cutting staff and talented veterans. VVM has run into trouble elsewhere, too: The company's San Francisco property, SF Weekly, was recently found to have engaged in illegal price-cutting against competitor San Francisco Bay Guardian and must now pay more than \$20 million in reparations.

It’s a mixed bag, to say the least. And despite alt weeklies’ comparative success when put up next to mainstream dailies, it’s clear that they won’t be overtaking their larger brethren anytime soon. Indeed, the broad statistics paint a similar picture, be it at a 200-person city newsroom or a rented pharmacy on Germantown Avenue: Publications are doing more with less, and they’re wondering how much longer they can continue advancing their central mission.

How can editors fit 8-page investigative features into a 40-page issue? How can

they cover a city with a shrinking handful of staff reporters and a barebones freelance budget? How are they going to attract readers when even the comic strips are getting cut?

Those are questions City Paper editor-in-chief Brian Howard asks himself every day.

WHAT'S BROKEN AT CITY PAPER – AND HOW IT'S GETTING FIXED

It's a chilly November Wednesday, and Brian Howard knows he's not going to get his people to agree.

Wednesday is staff meeting day, where everyone comes together and talks about the next issue: what they're writing, what art they've got, which stories they'll need to cut because Pat already put someone on it. It's a day to recharge after the stress of Monday and Tuesday, the production rush when the week's issue flies through editing, designing, proofing, editing again, proofing, editing a third time, and so on. They try to keep things cordial, crowded around the table in the cluttered conference room.

Not today. Two weeks before, Philadelphia's public transit employees walked off the job at the order of Willie Brown, the president of Transport Workers Union Local 234. His timing was perfect: The Philadelphia Phillies had just beat the Yankees in Game 5 of the World Series at home, and if trains weren't running by the time they came back to Citizen's Bank Park to play Game 7, there would be hell to pay. Service later resumed, as it always does in Philadelphia's frequent union disputes – and the Phillies never made it to Game 7 – but the strike brought attention to this little-known man who held the power to stop a whole city.

And that's how the art department wanted to show him on the cover of the Nov. 18 issue: Willie Brown, a king on his throne. They'd snapped such a shot during the interview City Paper had set up with the union boss in his North Second Street offices, a full-length portrait of the defiant president slouched in his chair, surrounded by lush carpet and pinstriped walls.

No dice, said the news editors. It's a good shot, but it won't make an impact in the

boxes. They favored a plainer portrait of Brown glaring at the camera, blowing up his face to fill the entire cover. That's something that'll pop out on the street, they said. The art department – well, it begged to differ.

Howard doesn't like to lead by decree. But here, he put his foot down. We're using the tight shot, he said. The art department grumbled, but gave in. And with that, the race to the next week was on.

Howard loves the city. He bikes to work whenever he can, zipping from Passyunk Avenue to Bainbridge Street and up Third. When he moved from his hometown near Allentown to rural Central Pennsylvania for college, Philadelphia called to him, its siren song irresistible across the miles of dairy farms and mountain roads. He didn't want anything else. Eighteen years old, he cut out after his first year and moved from State College into the city. City Paper is the only workplace he's ever known. He interned there after graduating from LaSalle University, splitting his time between his full-time job at a neighborhood bookstore and the newspaper. The hours were long. But he didn't want anything else.

“I was into bands – I thought I was super cool and all that,” he says now. “City Paper was covering bands that weren't being covered in the dailies back then. It was still sort of the place to find out who's playing where ... it was, to my mind, there was no other question.”

Stocky but not fat, the soft-spoken editor in square-framed glasses and a light beard alternates between a quiet laid-back chic and just rumpled. Leaning back in an office cluttered with back issues and cover concepts, he's not afraid to re-edit his words, rephrasing mid-sentence and mid-thought. He's careful. Shy, almost.

But he didn't want anything else. The editors eventually gave in and made him an editorial assistant. Then a music writer. Then an editor. Aside from a brief detour in Cairo, it seemed he could only go up. Now he's the editor-in-chief. His dream came true.

Lucky him.

One year into his tenure, publisher Paul Curci took him aside and broke the news: The budget's getting cut. A lot. Brian lost half his freelance budget – the lifeblood of a paper with only one full-time staff writer. He had to cancel plans to hire another reporter. And he had to make the difficult decision to cut sections, to figure out what would stay and what would go.

When he was promoted in 2008, City Paper was still running at about 100 pages per issue. Later that year, it slipped to between 75 and 90. By 2009, it had fallen to about 60. In February 2010, one issue ran at 48 pages. That left Brian with about 16 pages for both news and arts reporting, half what he had in the glory days.

City Paper is not the same publication he joined in 1995.

“I remember in the mid-90s, people saying, ‘Someday, CDs won't exist,’ “ he said recently. “And others would say, ‘No, people like something to hold, album art, et cetera.’ Now there's this whole new generation of kids: ‘What's a CD? Why would you go to the store to buy a CD?’ “

They're saying the same thing about newspapers. For a former music writer, it's a parallel tough to miss.

“I can't say, ‘I guarantee you print will still exist any more,’ “ he said. “The CD still exists, but it exists so you can download it to your computer.”

What changed? Three things, editors say. America is in a recession, has been

since 2007. Newspapers, including alt weeklies, took on entirely too much debt and over-reported their internal wrangling, promoting the now-common image of media decay and handwringing. And the Web is changing the game, throwing open the floodgates to content and competition while driving down attention spans and advertising revenue. And traditional alt-weekly advertisers have suffered legal and cultural shifts. For a long time, City Paper had three advertising staples: Tobacco, alcohol and adult entertainment. The push within Congress to restrict tobacco marketing has largely killed off that market – although salesmen have made the most of what they have left, running ads for “Snus,” a chewing tobacco marketed to young adults. Alcohol advertising has decreased on its own, publishers say. And adult ads are moving to the Web, where it’s cheaper to post and easier for clients to find their fetish.

Hanzlik, the executive director of the Alternative Weekly Network, used to pull in \$30 million a year, with City Paper being one of his bigger clients. “That was mostly liquor and tobacco,” he said, laughing. “And that was mostly tobacco.”

The era of Joe Camel is gone. And while publishers at City Paper won't release specific numbers, they say they've fallen short of their quota goals nearly every month. For a time, 2009 was looking even worse than a dismal 2008, although sales have picked up. Where a decade ago the paper may have opened 100 national accounts, Hanzlik estimates the paper may now have only opened one.

Delinquencies – late or missed ad payments – have increased, too. City Paper salesmen now demand pre-payment for some ads, particularly those in the shrinking adult escort section.

Fewer ads mean fewer pages, leading to the collapse of once-expansive arts

sections into a few combined categories. Same for “The Naked City,” a features page that was combined with the news section in the crunch of 2008. Long-form investigative journalism, while still alive at the paper, has noticeably taken a back seat to themed centerpieces or art features. While the past year has seen hard-hitting stories on natural gas drilling in Pennsylvania forests and Philadelphia police brutality, features like November’s center spread on the 20 best moments in a soon-to-be-demolished Spectrum arena are far more common.

Nowadays, Curci is the bearer of bad news. The publisher hopes that won't always be the case.

“We have to live with the reality that we’re a much smaller company than we were three years ago. I don’t know when that’s going to change,” he said. “It’s good that we have a lot of smart people and no shortage of ideas on the drawing board. Hopefully, we’ll work through and get us on an upper trajectory when the smoke clears.”

THE PATH FORWARD: ADVERTISING AND SALES

Nancy Stuski means business.

When she came on board, City Paper's idea of a good promotion was to charge \$100 for a spot at a trunk show in Northern Liberties. Salesmen would circle the same clients, scrounging up the same rates (and maybe a few drinks, too, she ruminates darkly – at least in the '90s). Morale was as low as it gets. It got to the point that workers were afraid to talk to their bosses.

Stuski was hired in the midst of crisis to turn things around. An industry veteran who served as the publisher of City Paper’s main competitor for two years, she also brings a decade and half of experience selling for The Philadelphia Inquirer, about as

mainstream a publication as you can get. Then there were her stints at Metro, a Philadelphia commuter tabloid that overtook readership on the city's subways and trains virtually overnight, and The New York Sun, a conservative daily whose inroads into the Manhattan market were cut short by faltering finances.

She's blunt as can be, a middle-aged working mother with short-cropped black hair who candidly points out faults in her staff, her industry and herself. She keeps a whiteboard in her office updated with the month's goals and returns, comparing data to last year and projecting future trends. In her spare time, she heads the board of the non-profit Philadelphia Young Playwrights, which produces the work of area schoolchildren – and boy, she said, those kids sure can write.

Stuski knows the ins and outs of selling alt-weekly ads – and she think she knows what everyone's been doing wrong. Day One at City Paper, and she already saw things she wanted to change.

It began with an image switch.

“People who are alternative sales workers don't have to look like alternative readers,” she said. “I don't think someone like that can reach everyone.”

Now, for every phone call, salespeople had to be prepared with research data, company information and custom marketing ideas. She brought a new level of professionalism to the office, handing up a public display listing everyone's quota and instituting awards for workers who exceeded expectations. She cut down on the uncertainty and poorly framed goals that had marked the office before.

But more importantly, she sought out new customers. For too long, City Paper had been targeting advertisers that were like itself – small, independent, a little off-center.

It focused on grassroots efforts in its sponsorships, taking a bottom-up approach in finding new customers. Mom-and-pops made up much of the customer list. Her salesmen needed to be taught that City Paper wasn't a little monthly based out of a pharmacy on Germantown Avenue anymore. Heck, it wasn't even that alternative.

“What's alternative? Everyone has a tattoo,” she said. “I see us more as an urban lifestyle and entertainment publication.”

And with that, she says, comes a special demographic of affluent readers. According to a recent media audit, nearly two-thirds of the weekly's 379,918 readers are college-educated; most work in white-collar jobs and own a home. Shockingly, nearly a quarter of all readers make more than \$100,000 a year, with the median household income hanging in around \$50,000.

But her statistics get more detailed, pleasingly packaged into a flashy City Paper media guide. Under a page titled “Our Readers Work Hard, Play Hard, Spend Hard,” Stuski explains that 69 percent of her readers voted in an election within the past year, with 49 percent buying 12 or more books in the same period. Almost a third attended three or more collegiate or professional sports events in the past year, about the same amount as those who traveled by airplane. Indeed, she's got a statistic for every industry, from furniture (31 percent of readers plan to shop for furniture in the next year) to casinos (27 percent visited one in the past year) to the fine performing arts (42 percent dropped by an opera, symphony or theater in last 12 months).

It all comes down to disposable income, she said. Big dailies like the Inquirer can probably boast a higher average household income – but her readers are more likely to spend theirs.

So she's making the big push. Armed with her press packets, Stuski is moving to the large players in Philadelphia – national retailers, banks, health care providers, universities. Salesmen shied away from such mainstream clients before, arguing they were too big to advertise in a weekly or too traditional to share space with escort ads. But the associate publisher thinks she can sell her readers' youth, making the pitch that they haven't yet settled upon the brands they'll use for the rest of their lives. She's old enough to have kids in college, and you don't see her switching to a different type of mayonnaise, she said – or a different bank.

It can be an aggressive sell. In her office overlooking Chestnut Street, she pulls out a set of Beneficial Bank ad mockups riffing off their column insignia and trademark blue. These drafts weren't solicited, she said – she just had the art department mock them up so the bank could see what they could be getting. And her info sheet makes it clear which retailers she's targeting: In the past six months, 40 percent of her readers shopped at Macy's, 36 percent at Old Navy, 27 percent at Burlington Coat Factory, 21 percent at Forman Mills and 19 percent at Gap. All five stores have strong presences in the city.

Macy's, in particular, is Stuski's white whale. A regular advertiser in *The Inquirer*, the national chain recently moved into the former Wanamaker's Department Store in the heart of downtown Philadelphia. In March, after months of wooing, the retailer gave Nancy its answer: We'll tell you on Monday.

Stuski sighs. It's been hard. "We'd do wonders for their Center City store."

Hanzlik of the Alternative Weekly Network agrees. Alt weeklies have a readership coveted by many advertisers: educated with plenty of disposable income. And although mainstream buyers may have been put off by their print product in the past –

especially the topless women selling sex in the back of the book – they’re less squeamish now. Just poorer.

“When the dailies began to falter so much, now we can get in and make a presentation,” he said. “We couldn’t get in before. ‘Your paper’s smut.’ ”

Then again, Stuski isn’t the only alt outlet pulling for business. Philadelphia is a rarity in America – a two-weekly town. And believe her, Stuski knows how Philadelphia Weekly operates.

She was the competitor’s publisher for two years before heading up to New York, sitting on the other side of the aisle in the fight between the orange and yellow honor boxes. The two papers have grappled for years to differentiate themselves – indeed, a Philadelphia politician once held up a Philadelphia Weekly on television and said, “As I read in this week’s City Paper...” But they’ve always maintained a civility, keeping ad rates in line with their competitor’s, avoiding a costly rate-cutting war.

That’s out the window. Early in 2010, Stuski got a call from the Center City District, a big quasi-municipal client that promotes Philadelphia’s downtown. They’re sorry, but the Weekly gave them a better rate.

Stuski is sorry too. She’s still friends with the Weekly’s current publisher – they’re neighbors down at the Jersey Shore and all that – but she’s not going to let that insult go.

So as soon as she could, the associate publisher debuted a new section: real estate, eight pages, bargain-basement rates. It was a direct strike at a Philadelphia Weekly’s premier classified section, one it had nurtured since its early days as Welcomat. She’s not making loads on it, but the new section is paying for itself – and worse comes

to worst, maybe advertisers will show the Weekly her flyer and demand a lower rate. All's fair in love and war.

"Would you rather have some revenue or more profitable revenue?" she said. "You're trying to hold onto accounts. In this economy, everyone's being competitive. The pie isn't getting any bigger – you're trying to get a bigger piece."

THE PATH FORWARD: EDITORIAL

You know how it is, Jeffery Billman said – when you have a job interview, you cram on the airplane. So before stepping onto his flight at Orlando International Airport, the news editor of Orlando Weekly hurriedly downloaded everything he could about his potential employer in Philadelphia.

Billman had never considered leaving the Weekly before, had never moved outside the tightly drawn orbit that had been his home since college and the nine years after. A Floridian by birth, growing up in sunny West Palm Beach, he joined Orlando's only alternative weekly right out of college and climbed through the ranks from editorial assistant to one of the top newsroom positions.

He downloaded some content onto his laptop, looked at the Web site. Hmm. It was clear the paper put out a lot of special issues – book quarterlies, readers' choice awards, writers' showcases. How many did they really need? And the Web site – good blogs, sure – but it seemed static, slow, attracting huge traffic surges when the issue came out on Thursday and slumping along for the rest of the week.

But most of all, he wasn't sold on how they were writing their news briefs. The paper had recently debuted a new feature, "A Million Stories," a quarter-page series of short snippets on city life in the vein of the New Yorker's "Talk of the Town." It was a

way to squeeze more news content into the smaller news hole falling advertising was providing, a method tried-and-true among alt-weekly circles.

He didn't like it. The briefs were shooting in from every direction, with no unified theme or consistent editorial voice. He had tried this in Orlando, and he found that the section benefited from having a single editor who could pull disparate news together with one signature style.

So he had his talking points. But once he set down in Pennsylvania and made his way through the interview, he found that the city was a lot more than he had bargained for. Today, he calls it a schizophrenic city – two blocks in one direction puts you in the ghetto, two blocks in the other puts you on the porch of an 18th-century mansion. Poverty sits cheek and jowl with opulence, and between the politicians, the unions and the entrenched special interests, the city seems almost ungovernable.

After he flew back to Florida with his fiancée, he called Brian. "I don't think we'll be able to do it," he said.

He slept on it. They talked it over. And as he puts it now, calling in from Philadelphia, "I guess our fears were overcome."

He set to work. Moving into his new office, he soon found that things ran differently at City Paper than they did in Orlando. In Florida, he had three dedicated reporters. Here, he just had one, with a meager freelance budget to make up the difference. Indeed, there was a point a few years back when his staff at the much smaller Orlando Weekly was bigger than what he was working with now.

Part of that comes from the abundance of cheap freelance talent a bigger city provides, he said – you don't need to rely on in-house writers. But he missed the

consistency a regular reporter brings. So soon after arrival, he talked with Brian about promoting one of the junior editors into a writing position, giving everyone a small pay bump.

“It had always struck me as strange for a city this large that they only had one staff writer,” he said. “They were so intern- and freelance-dependent. I had mentioned that in my interview, and Paul told us that having the financial resources to hire someone were next to nothing.”

So staffer Holly Otterbean went from listings editor to full-time writer, her first cover story focusing on a contested island in the Delaware River. Two birds, one stone: Billman got his reporter, and Howard trimmed costs from the freelance budget.

Next up: A Million Stories. Billman again got his way, injecting the section with more wit, bolding phrases and names in gossip column style. He recruited another columnist and Shanghaied Isaiah Thompson into writing a weekly commentary, which now routinely tops the Web site in viewer traffic.

But he couldn't crack the special sections. There was an “absolute shitload,” he said – and for good reason. Compared to the average cover story, a themed issue had the potential to make a ton of money in specialized advertising. In 2009, City Paper published 20. That said, the paper didn't realize all that much extra revenue, eventually shedding the “home improvement” issue and a gift guide, among others.

Then there are the special advertising supplements, a collaboration between the business and editorial divisions. Predictably, this uncomfortable marriage can raise hackles on both sides. In a recent “How To” supplement, which paired editorial content on one side with a full page ad on the other, Stuski had to remove advice in the “How To

Throw a Bachelor Party” section that suggested leaving Philadelphia altogether. Some hard conversations there, she said.

Brian had his own ideas for cost savings. He cut restaurant reviews down, shrinking the food section. They rearranged the movies page, working with advertisers to free up some more space for editorial content. Then there were the smaller tweaks – cutting down the table of contents, moving the editor's column. Every little bit helps.

But as the paper shrinks, the Web site grows. With the assistance of food editor-turned-Web-editor Drew Lazor – a LaSalle grad as well, along with senior editor Pat Rapa – he’s made blogging the focus of the paper’s online efforts, launching the culinary-focused “Meal Ticket” and entertainment-driven “Critical Mass” to join “The Clog” in a digital triptych on the paper’s home page. Lazor has run with Twitter, growing its readership base from 11 followers to 5,600, just a thousand fewer than The Inquirer. He’s particularly jazzed about “Askadelphia,” a social networking service imported from the Seattle Stranger that allows readers to answer other readers’ questions.

And then there are the stories upon stories that couldn’t fit into the print edition. These days, it’s tough to print even the teasers promoting Web-exclusive content, he said – so on the airy, wide-open Web, why not print them all? Looking on the bright side, Lazor notes that tight page counts and the Web have allowed them to overcome the old weekly conundrum: what to do with good content that comes out Thursday night, a whole week before the next paper is printed.

“There is so much content that we put up, so much that never sees the print edition,” he said. “We have an interview with Isabella Rossellini that happened last night. If the event was last night and it went up for next week’s print issue, zero percent of our

readership would give a crap.”

Despite the investment in blogging, the paper still keeps its reporting largely clear of the commentary so common in its online competition. And in the print duopoly one former intern summed up as the battle between the “smart” paper (City Paper) and the “fun paper” (Philadelphia Weekly), Howard says he’s proud to be the more intellectual of the two.

At the same time, he acknowledges that Billman’s influence may have brought more snark to the paper. “A Million Stories” rarely goes two sentences without a sarcastic comment or pop-culture reference, and the opinionated Billman recently launched his own column, appropriately titled “Soapboxer.” But the editor-in-chief says he’s not making a conscious shift to blog-style commentary, maintaining that independently reported journalism remains the keystone of City Paper’s excellence.

“We do want to sound like we know what we’re talking about – it wasn’t like, ‘Let’s be more like a gossip blog,’ he said. “I definitely think that’s the tone of Philebrity, if that’s what snarkiness is ... I don’t think there’s ever a conscious decision to do that.”

THE PATH FORWARD: MANAGEMENT

They were flying by the seat of their pants. Paul Curci remembers the early days – 1983, just a year out of art school. He was the sole salesman in a staff of six, crazy enough to believe it would work, dedicated enough to make it happen, whizzing around the city in a mad dash run to raise interest, raise the profile.

“I would sell advertising in the day, and I’d go out at night trying to create promotions,” he said. “We’d have fashion shows, and I’d run around to all the stores and get their clothes, and I’d run around and hire models and put ‘em on a stage at night ... It

was a different time. I mean, the whole zeitgeist of Philadelphia was different then.”

In a way, it must feel the same way now. Almost 30 years later, City Paper is much more button-down – heck, it even has an HR department. Curci has changed too, favoring the suits and long coats befitting a major publisher. He’s not 50 – but he’s almost 50, he laughs.

But aside from the new owners, the downtown office, the 30-person staff, he and City Paper are right back where they started: on the ropes, fighting for readers and advertisers, digging like crazy to carve out a niche for themselves.

He’s gotten through this before. And barring a surprise sale or bankruptcy – both of which are exceedingly unlikely, Curci says – he’ll get through it again. There’s just one new question: What will the paper be at the end of it?

Depends who you ask. A shrunken print weekly with a daily Web site. An expanded print weekly with no Web site. A Web site. Curci hears them all.

Perhaps the loudest voice is that of his old friend and mentor, Bruce Schimmel. Now 15 years removed from day-to-day operations, the former owner still talks on the phone with his former salesman every day. And as of late, he’s taken to making an odd offer.

He wants to buy the paper back.

”I’d buy it back at a fraction of what I sold it for, of course,” he said, almost with a hint of glee. “The choices Paul is making are the choices that most other publications are making. I have always thought that everyone zigs, I have to zag.”

In Schimmel’s game plan, that means forgetting about the Web site, Twitter, the fun videos – and plowing all those resources back into print. As he argues, how can an

organization geared to good weekly journalism excel in the 24-hour news cycle?

He'd grab back investigative reporting and put it on the cover, pump up the issue size, make it more graphic. He'd head out into the streets, buckle down on distribution, making sure he's reaching every person in the neighborhoods he wants. And he'd sell that to advertisers.

In short, the former Web guru is going home.

"I would do everything to say, 'We have an artifact. And although it's not sexy at the moment, I think print has a place in the future,'" he said. "It's an exclusive and unique experience – writing on, scribbling on, cutting, folding paper."

He sees the signs of a movement – papers bulking up, Village Voice Media pledging to add glossy covers to all their publications. Everyone's paying lip service to the Web, but print is still where the money is made.

"Will it work?" he asked. "We're going to have to go up against Google. They're going to know much more about their readers than we do. We cannot – in an analog product – do that."

But – and it's here that his infectious sense of triumph swells and swells – he thinks newspapers will always trump digital in one very important regard.

"They don't disappear in a blink. They have a certain sense of permanence," he said. "And I think that has value to advertisers."

That point isn't lost on Curci. But Schimmel hasn't been in charge for a long time, he said. Things are different than they were in 1996 – print and Web advertising are tightly entwined, with one often building off the other. In Curci's experience, if a publication can't provide a Web buy, well, advertisers aren't going to bother with print

either.

His view of the future is somewhat more conservative – or optimistic.

“I think the paper’s going to settle into a relatively small distribution. If I had to guess, I’d say we’d probably be just in Center City,” he said. “And that might be it, total circulation of 50,000, as opposed to 80,000 we’re doing now. And that a higher percentage of our revenue would come from online. I’ve been predicting the percentages of online would go up for years, and I haven’t been right.”

That means considering City Paper as a daily Web product supplemented by a weekly print product, rather than the other way around. That means giving the blogs even more importance in the company – Curci doesn’t distinguish much between blogs and short articles online. And that means moving beyond Web display advertising, which accounts for 80 percent of the inventory currently.

In a way, City Paper has returned to the publication it was when Curci first signed on. It’s smaller, more opinionated, and makes less of a distinction between advertising and editorial. Billing’s “Soapbox” column and Thompson’s “Man Overboard” seem the spiritual successors to the ’80s-era “Downshouter” column, which railed against city politics. While the paper has outside owners now, they’re hands-off, willing to let the publication find its own solutions for now. Curci’s mandate to the business division still keeps it simple: “Find buckets of money” – and don’t be too discriminating.

Then again, Curci isn’t looking to sustain a business model from the ’80s. It’s online that the publisher expects growth, and that’s where he plans to focus his attentions. The print product has been a cash cow for years, he said. Now, it’s more like a cash calf.

Change is coming. But change isn't always good.

Philadelphians have plenty to read. The middle class has *The Philadelphia Inquirer*; the lower-middle, *Philadelphia Daily News*. The commuters have *Metro*. The gays and lesbians read *Philadelphia Gay News*. Down-home South Philadelphia has *South Philly Review*. Upper-crust Chestnut Hill dowagers have the *Chestnut Hill Local*. Young hipsters in Northern Liberties have their Web sites, *Philebrity*, *Phawker*, *Phoodie*. The movers and shakers downtown have *Philadelphia Business Journal* for work and *Philadelphia Magazine* and *Philadelphia Style* for home. Spanish-speakers read *Al Dia*; blacks have *The Philadelphia Tribune*. University students have *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, *The Temple Times*, *The Triangle*, not to mention the proliferation of student blogs. Even the anarchists have a paper – *The Defenestrator*.

City Paper can't afford to be formless. Competition is too tight. If you don't know your audience and your mission, you're dead.

The staff, then, is confronting one vital question: What makes an alternative weekly an alternative weekly? What will the creditors have to pull from their cold, dead hands before they let go, that spark of life that makes them special?

What is the soul of *City Paper*?

KEEPING THE VISION

A lot of different sorts read City Paper. White-collar, blue-collar, college graduates, college dropouts. Some are retired. Others are still in middle school.

Isaiah Thompson writes for everyone. He writes about real people and their stories, which are meant to be read by other real people. He's done the fiction thing, striving to become the Great American Novelist. Thank God he grew out of that, he says now.

One of his first stories in journalism documented the lives of convicted sex offenders living under a bridge near Miami – where the state of Florida had sent them. In Philadelphia, he's written about an ill-planned soccer stadium slated to be built in one of the city's poorest suburbs, Pennsylvania's gambling industry and the political push for environmentally hazardous natural gas drilling. He's the sort of journalist who will strike up a conversation with a man under a bridge, who feels a responsibility to the city he covers, who has a drive to root around and uncover. He's what alt media strives to be.

“Talking to real people about real things and their stories – that's great,” he said. “You can walk out into the street and talk to a stranger and ask ‘What's your story?’ and start taking notes. And you'll probably get something interesting.”

To him, making an alternative weekly is simple. You have to dig. Dig into the stories the Inquirer is doing, but more importantly, dig into the ones it isn't. When Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter announced a controversial plan to close a number of libraries citywide, Thompson wasn't at the forefront of the reporting race, jostling to get the scoop on the city's next move. He was in the back, looking through records, examining the criteria the city used to pick the 11 doomed libraries. He found some

inconsistencies, details the dailies had rushed over. Boom.

“We can take something and say, ‘Wait a minute,’ “ he said. “We can provide commentary, be a check on the dailies. When they fail to dig into something, we can do that. Sometimes, we can find the kind of story that they’ll never find.”

It all goes back to the name of the game. City Paper is an alternative weekly. It needs to provide an alternative. It isn’t about the humor, the “This Modern World” cartoon, the sex ads in the back. It’s about giving the city another way to look at itself, written in a style that neither condescends nor panders.

That’s an ageless formula, editors say. Curci used to define City Paper by the demographic he reached – and conventional wisdom told him that was the 18-to-34-year-old set. Twenty years later, he had to ask himself: How are we still the 18-to-34 paper when people who first picked us up are now 48 and still avid readers?

It’s something else, he says, something that transcends age. City Paper readers are influential – in fact, he calls them the Influentials, after John Berry and Ed Keller’s 2003 book. They’re the 10 percent of the population who tells the other 90 how to dress, what to buy, where to eat – and they consume culture at a voracious rate.

“We’re people who are politically and culturally engaged in the city,” he said. “They’re all ages, and they really are. They have a stake in the city. They care about the city, they care about culture in the city, and they care about the politics of the city. We have big mouths. They are the people who other people go to and ask, hey, what book are you reading? What movie have you been to? What do you think of the job Nutter’s doing?”

It's a niche market. But it's one with great potential. The stats don't lie, Curci says – advertisers want the kind of readers City Paper attracts. He thinks there's still money to be made there.

They have the audience. So what about the much ballyhooed decline of the dailies? Can City Paper capitalize on the Inquirer's bankruptcy? Is this really, paraphrasing Creative Loafing's Allison Draper, a chance for alternative weeklies to jump in and fill the void?

From the City Paper newsroom, a resounding no.

“Reporting takes money and expertise, and you know, it's one of those things where people don't realize what they're losing until they've lost it,” Howard said. “I have my complaints with the dailies in town. But I'm certainly glad they exist, as a civic-minded citizen. I don't want them to fold, for sure.”

Thompson is a bit blunter. “Newsmaking comes down to salaried reporters,” he said. “We have one salaried reporter. That's me. When the Inquirer lays someone off, I'm not going to replace him. I can't fill that void. To a large extent, we depend on the dailies. We can't cover all this stuff.”

And from the outside looking in, Penn State professor Gene Foreman agrees. He never saw City Paper as a serious competitor during his time at the Inquirer, and he doesn't think it could step in now. The staff was good at writing lifestyle features, keeping its finger on the pulse of Philadelphia culture and digging up inside dirt on the Inquirer, he said, but they never had the resources to rival the larger daily in newsgathering.

“If the Inquirer was to disappear, I don’t think we could rely on the City Paper or the Weekly,” he said. “It’s easy to put together a light and frothy weekly, farming those assignments out to freelancers ... but if they were going to try to cover the news in depth, day in and day out, they wouldn’t have the resources. If you’re going to do hard-hitting reporting, you’re not going to farm that out to freelancers.”

City Paper needs the Inquirer. It needs the first-day reporting so it can provide that second-day look. It needs a readership informed by a newsroom employing hundreds before it can print the in-depth work of a newsroom employing 20. It needs the mainstream. It can’t be alternative without it.

So a strategy emerges, a mission. Schimmel and Hill understood it 30 years ago, pushing progressive politics and growing a garden behind the office. Howard understood it, working from 4 p.m. to 1 a.m. in a bookstore so he could write about a burgeoning music scene. Thompson understood it, saying what needed to be said on the second floor of the Pub and Kitchen.

It’s not about being the cool paper. It’s not about beating the Inquirer over the head with breaking news. It’s not about commenting sarcastically on every scrap of information that comes over Twitter.

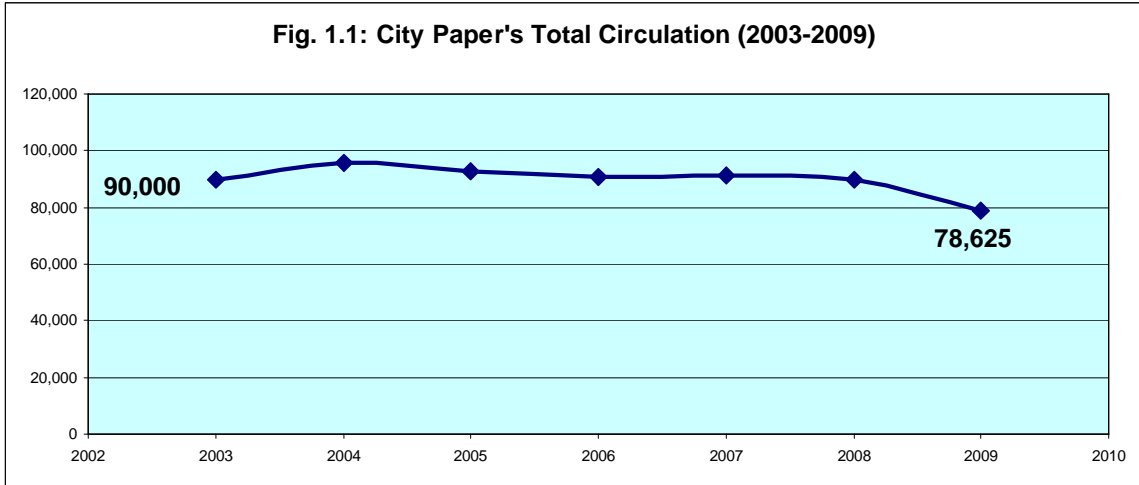
It’s not even about them.

It’s about Philadelphia. As long as the paper remembers that, be it 40 pages or 140 pages, it’ll still be City Paper.

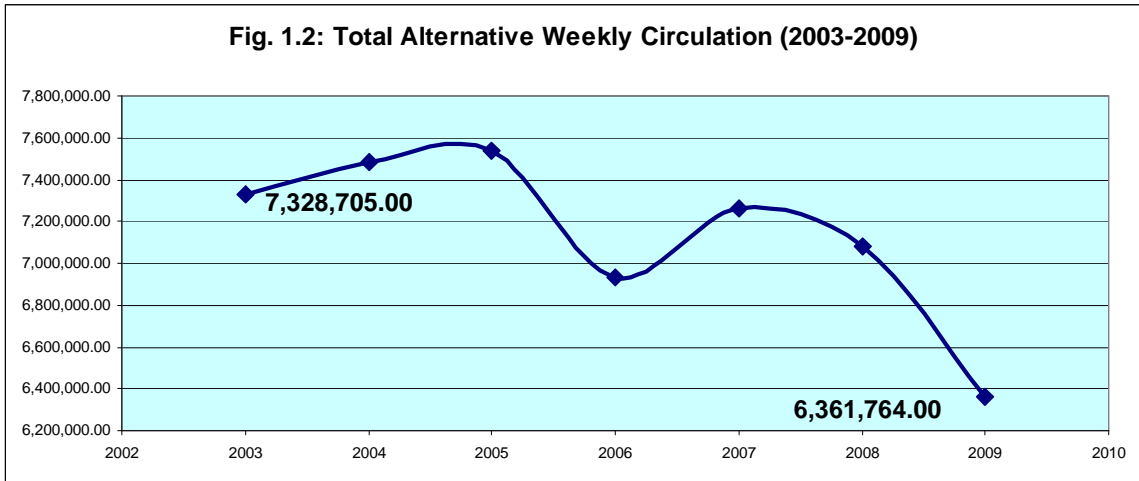
“Making Philadelphia interesting for Philadelphians,” Howard said. “Our mandate is to cover the city. Let’s focus on the really good news stories that sort of give

the reader the sense of what the urban experience is ... We try to capture what it's like to be in the city any given week.”

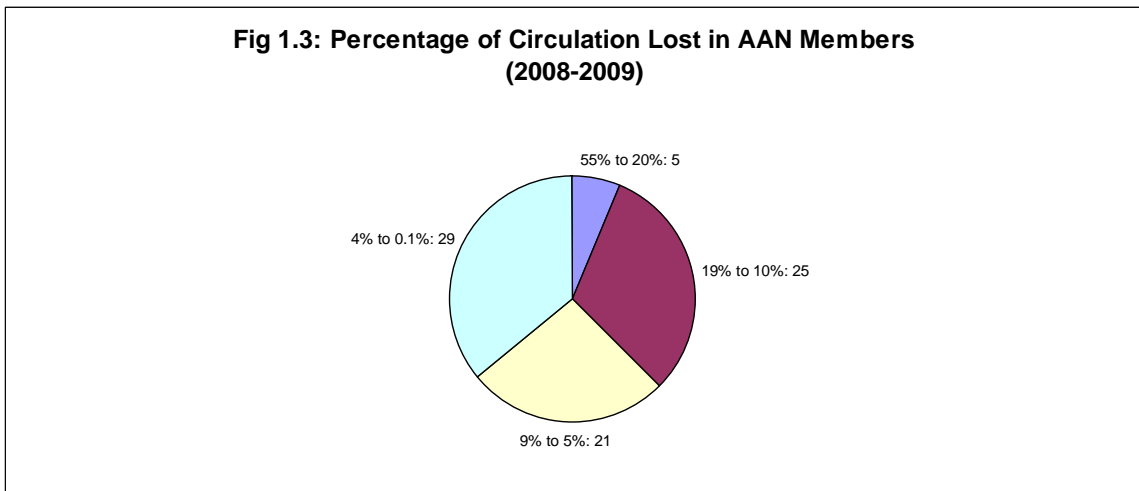
APPENDIX 1: CHARTS



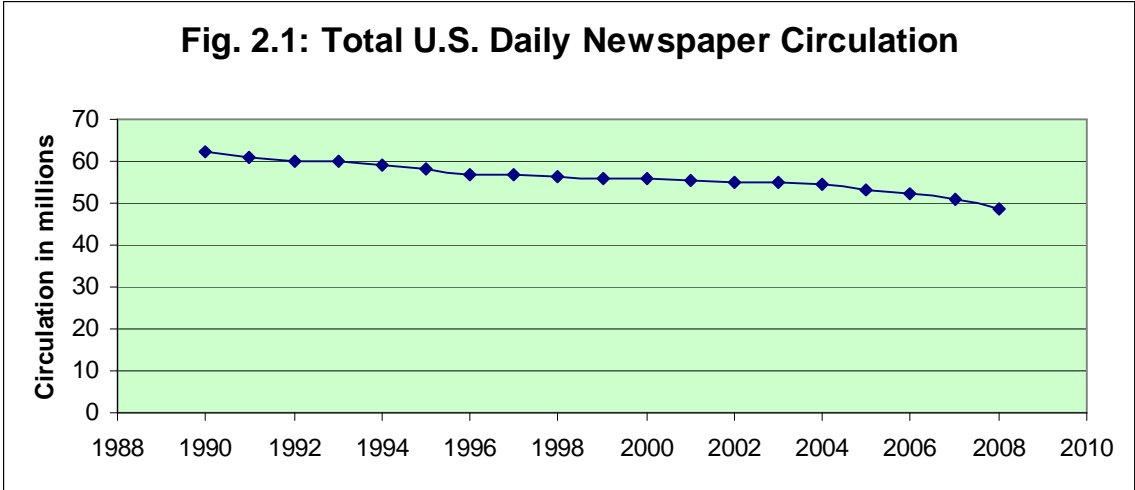
(Source: Association of Alternative Newsweeklies)



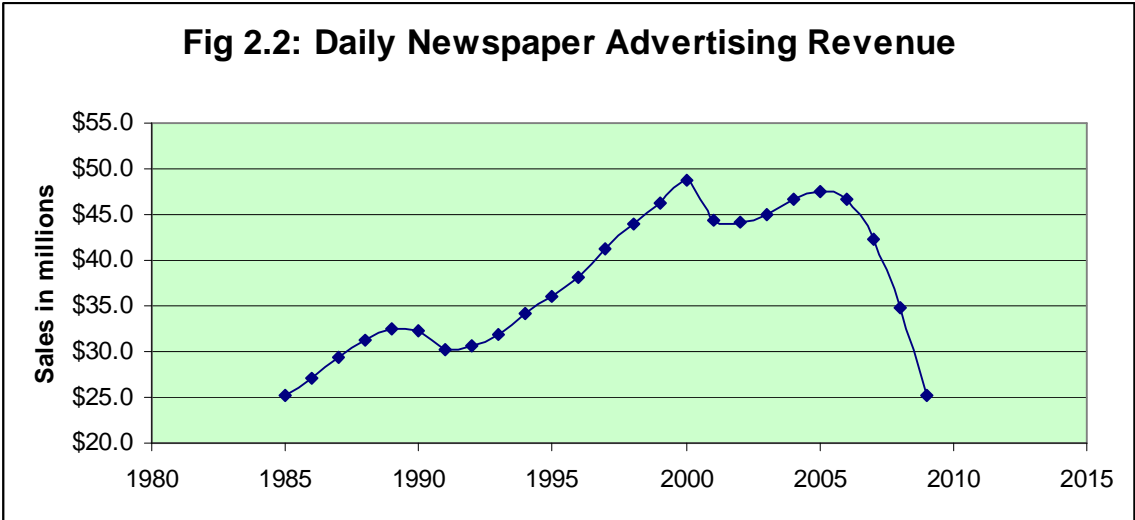
(Source: Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism)



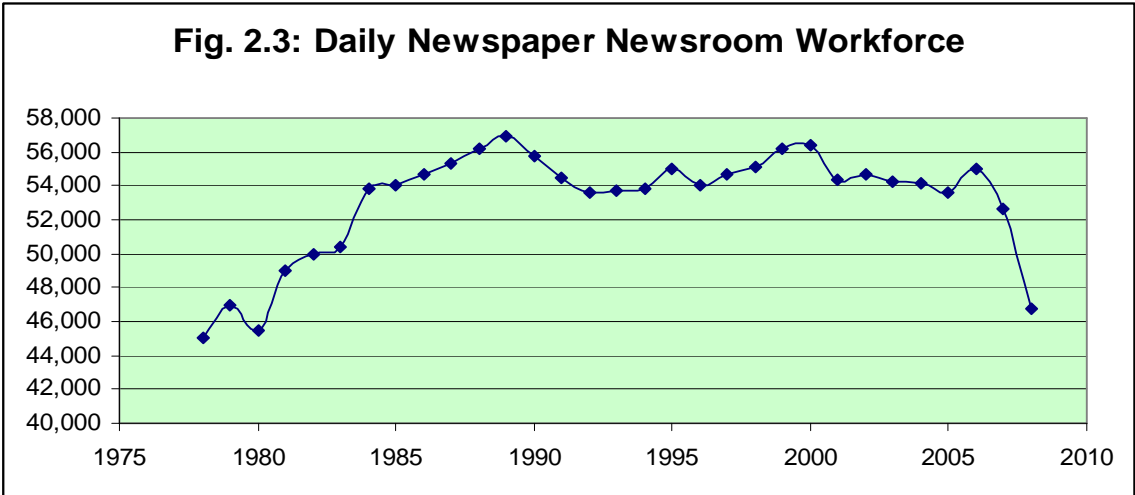
(Source: Association of Alternative Newsweeklies)



(Source: Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism)

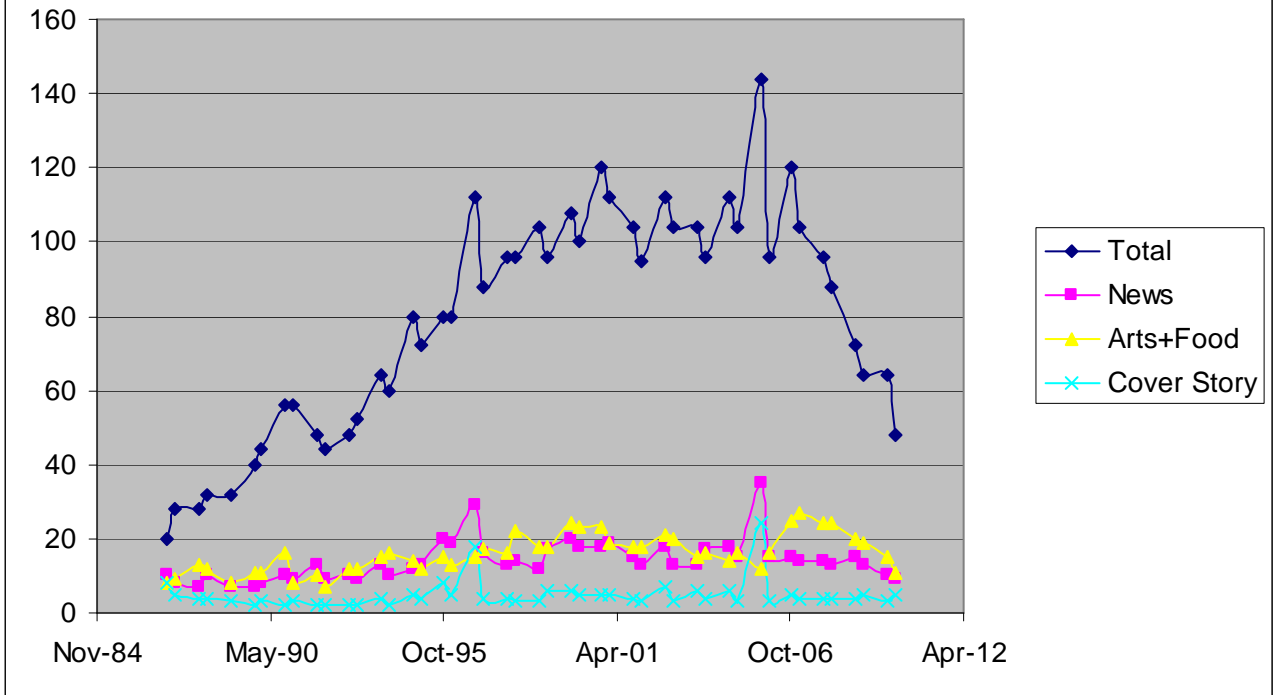


(Source: Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism)



(Source: Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism)

Fig. 3.1: City Paper Page Counts



(Source: City Paper archives)

APPENDIX 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The world suffers from no shortage of scholarship on the overall decline of print news media. It's a staple of media mainstays Columbia Journalism Review and American Journalism Review, which rarely go a single issue without some analysis on the issue. The most recent comprehensive piece, "The Reconstruction of American Journalism," detailed the economic burdens facing the industry and the fragmentation of the media outlets, suggesting a tax on broadcasters, Internet Service Providers and media users that would go to support local "accountability" journalism around the country. Former New York Times writer and Pulitzer Prize winner Alex Jones' "Losing the News," published in September 2009, provides good background on how media consolidation and shifts in advertising produced the debt-ridden publications we know today. While he provides little in the way of solutions, his book makes a strong case for the importance of strong and thoughtful newspapers.

Less has been written on the situation alternative newsweeklies face. The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism's annual "State of the News Media" report does include information on the alternative media and provided many of the national statistics presented in this paper. Kevin McAuliffe's 1999 CJR story "No longer just sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll" tracked the consolidation of the alternative media industry in the late '90s, giving early reports of the goliath that would become Village Voice Media. In retrospect, his language seems unreasonably sunny: "They've discovered they can thrive by going to free distribution, and they're one of the few branches of print media that is growing - and that can look forward to the twenty-first century with confidence." Soon after, Carly Berwick covered the Hartford Courant's purchase of the Hartford Advocate

in CJR's "The new harmonics in Hartford," capturing the community's unease on the sale of an alternative outlet to a mainstream corporation. At the time, it was only the second time a daily newspaper had bought out a competing alt weekly, and many feared it would become a national trend. On cue, James Keheller wrote "The Media Critics" a year later, delving into the long tradition of mainstream media criticism in alt papers.

Media histories of the alternative press are equally rare. McAuliffe's "The Great American Newspaper: The Rise and Fall of the Village Voice" is an exception, a highly detailed account of the birth of America's first alternative weekly. Tracking the burgeoning publication through its growing pains and personality conflicts – it was a writers' paper because no one knew how to edit, McAuliffe says – the account ends in the 1970s, pronouncing the Voice's death after a series of sales. Truly underground publications have received somewhat more scholarly attention, with former journalist Abe Peck's Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press describing how outsider papers like the Los Angeles Free Press grew from the Beat movement in the '50s, flowered amid discontent in the '60s and eventually flared out in the 1970s. That said, such papers bear little resemblance to today's alternative weeklies and were arguably more small-time from the start, more interested in pushing agendas than practicing journalism.

This paper brings these accounts up to speed in the modern media market, where print advertising is on the decline and ailing finances have sunk more than a few daily newspapers. The alt industry depicted in the cited literature is flush with the profits of the late '90s and regularly produces 150-page issues – which is simply not the case today. Analyzing how alt weeklies fit into metropolitan media markets as dailies decline could

shed light on possible solutions for print media – and probable pitfalls. If nothing else, it chronicles an important era in this young media’s history, a period of change that very well could render how city outlets report the news unrecognizable from what we know today.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

WORKS CITED

- “About AAN.” *AAN.org*. Association of Alternative Newsweeklies. Web. 20 Mar. 2010. <<http://aan.org/alternative/Aan/ViewPage?oid=2086>>.
- Berwick, Carly. “The New Harmonics in Hartford.” *Columbia Journalism Review* 38.2 (1999): 12-14. Print.
- Clifford, Stephanie. “Village Voice Lays Off Nat Hentoff and 2 Others.” *The New York Times* 31 Dec. 2008, New York ed.: B4. Print.
- Downie Jr., Leonard, and Michael Schudson. “The Reconstruction of American Journalism.” *Columbia Journalism Review* 48.4 (2009): 26. Print.
- Hill, Chris. ““Behind the Lines”” *Philadelphia City Paper*. 28 Sept. 2006. Web. 23 Feb. 2010. <<http://citypaper.net/articles/2006/09/28/Behind-The-Lines>>. (Reprint of article originally published Nov. 1981.)
- Kelleher, James B. “The Media Critics.” *Columbia Journalism Review* 38.6 (2000): 48. Print.
- Lewis, Frank, ed. “Nothing Will Ever Be the Same.” *Philadelphia City Paper* 28 Sept. 2006. 28 Sept. 2006. Web. 20 Feb. 2010. <<http://citypaper.net/articles/2006/09/28/Nothing-Will-Ever-Be-The-Same>>. (Reprint of Sept. 13 article.)
- McAuliffe, Kevin. “No Longer Just Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll: The Alternative Weeklies Go Mainstream—and Thrive.” *Columbia Journalism Review* 37.6 (1999): 40-45. Print.
- McAuliffe, Kevin. *The Great American Newspaper: The Rise and Fall of the Village Voice*. New York: Scribner, 1978. Print.
- Pazulski, Kristin. “City Paper Founders Remember Their Northwest Days.” *Chestnut Hill Local*. 9 Nov. 2006. Web. 12 Jan. 2010. <<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/issues/2006.11.09/news4.html>>.
- Peck, Abe. *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press*. New York: Pantheon, 1985. Print.
- Philadelphia City Paper. *2009 City Paper Editorial Calendar*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia City Paper, 2009. Print.
- Philadelphia City Paper. *Dining and Drinking*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia City Paper,

2009. Print.

Philadelphia City Paper. *Our Readers Work Hard, Play Hard, Spend Hard*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia City Paper, 2009. Print.

Philadelphia City Paper. *Reaching Fashion-Conscious Active Consumers*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia City Paper, 2006. Print.

Philadelphia City Paper. *Readership Economic Profile*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia City Paper, 2009. Print.

Schimmel, Bruce. "City Paper: The Creation Myth." *Philadelphia City Paper*. 28 Sept. 2006. Web. 20 Feb. 2010. <<http://citypaper.net/articles/2006/09/28/City-Paper-The-Creation-Myth>>.

Schimmel, Bruce. "My Baby." *Philadelphia City Paper*. 28 Sept. 2006. Web. 20 Feb. 2010. <<http://citypaper.net/articles/2006/09/28/My-Baby>>.

The State of the News Media 2009. Rep. Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism. Web. 20 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.stateofthemedias.org/2009/>>.

The State of the News Media 2010. Publication. Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 15 Mar. 2010. Web. 17 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.stateofthemedias.org/2010/>>.

INTERVIEWS

"Correspondence with Jeffrey Billman." E-mail interview. 29 Jan. 2009.

"Correspondence with Nancy Stuski." E-mail interview. 15 Mar. 2010.

"Interview with Andrew Van De Voorde." Telephone interview. 11 Feb. 2010.

"Interview with Brian Howard." Personal interview. 18 Sept. 2009.

"Interview with Brian Howard." Personal interview. 23 Dec. 2009.

"Interview with Brian Howard." Telephone interview. 13 Nov. 2009.

"Interview with Brian Howard." Telephone interview. 13 Oct. 2009.

"Interview with Brian Howard." Telephone interview. 3 Mar. 2010.

"Interview with Brian Howard." Telephone interview. 4 Sept. 2009.

"Interview with Bruce Schimmel." Telephone interview. 14 Dec. 2009.

"Interview with Bruce Schimmel." Telephone interview. 17 Dec. 2009.

"Interview with Drew Lazor." Telephone interview. 5 Feb. 2010.

- “Interview with Gene Foreman.” Telephone interview. 9 April 2010.
- “Interview with Isaiah Thompson.” Telephone interview. 2 Oct. 2009.
- “Interview with Jeffrey Billman.” Telephone interview. 29 Jan. 2010.
- “Interview with Mark Hanzlik.” Telephone interview. 10 Mar. 2010.
- “Interview with Nancy Stuski.” Personal interview. 16 Oct. 2009.
- “Interview with Nancy Stuski.” Telephone interview. 5 Mar. 2010.
- “Interview with Paul Curci.” Personal interview. 18 Dec. 2009.

ACADEMIC VITA OF ANDREW R. MCGILL

Andrew R. McGill
020 Atherton Hall
University Park, Pa. 16802
arm5077@gmail.com

Education: Bachelor of Arts Degree in Journalism, Penn State University; Spring
2010
Minor in History
Thesis Title: Alternative Newsweeklies and the Future of City Reporting
Thesis Supervisor: Russ Eshleman

Related Experience:

Four-year staff member at The Daily Collegian, serving as the managing editor in 2009-2010.

Metro Intern at The Allentown Morning Call (Summer 2009)

Editorial intern at Food Network Magazine (Summer 2008)

Intern at The Intelligencer (Summer 2007)

Awards:

2009 UWIRE 100 award recipient
Second Place, 2008 Hearst Journalism Awards National Writing
Championship
First Place, 2008 Hearst Journalism Awards National Spot News Writing
Competition
Sixth Place, 2010 Hearst Journalism Awards National Radio Competition
Ninth Place, 2009 Hearst Journalism Awards National In-depth Writing
Competition
17th Place, 2009 Hearst Journalism Awards National Radio Broadcast
Competition
Second Place, 2008 SPJ Region 1 Mark of Excellence