

ALUMNI BOOKS

Journalism Is Dead; Long Live Journalism

The Wired City explores the promise of online news BY SUSAN SELIGSON

In *The Wired City: Reimagining Journalism and Civic Life in the Post-Newspaper Age*, media critic Dan Kennedy offers an optimistic take on the future of journalism, largely reflected in the story of a New Haven, Conn., daily news website and its feisty founder and editor, Paul Bass. With seemingly unlimited access, Kennedy brings the reader into the New Haven *Independent's* "newsroom"—a café across from its hole-in-the-wall rented office—and out in the field with a handful of passionate, multitasking reporters. He travels to upstate New York and San Diego for contrasting looks at local online news operations that seek, with varying success, to give broader, profitable outlets like Yahoo! and AOL a run for their money.

Money, and the persistent need to raise it, casts an ominous shadow over these websites' success. Run as a nonprofit, the *Independent* is kept alive through ever-shrinking foundation grants and the generosity of community leaders and philanthropists. The pay is predictably on the low side, but the staff receives a generous health plan. A journalism professor at Northeastern University, Kennedy (MET'84), who earned a master's in American history at BU, sees sites like the *Independent* as daily cyberincarnations of the now largely defunct alternative weeklies (the site is named for such a paper, which Bass ran in the early '70s). Can quality online community journalism survive? Yes, with persistence and resourcefulness, concludes Kennedy in *The Wired City* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

A former media columnist for the *Boston Phoenix*, Kennedy received the National Press Club's Arthur Rowse Award for Press Criticism in 2001. His blog, *Media Nation*, tracks issues related to journalism, politics, and culture. *Bostonia* spoke with him about whether the death of journalism has been greatly exaggerated and the challenge of telling a story that is in perpetual flux.

Niche publications like the New Haven *Independent* have an advantage over a general service newspaper, says Dan Kennedy. "In this postindustrial age, there's no reason for any one publication to have international news, the funnies, sports. It doesn't make any sense."



BOSTONIA: With so many daily news websites, tell us about your decision to focus on the New Haven *Independent*.

KENNEDY: My original idea was to do a book on a wide range of online journalism projects. The *Independent* was on my radar, and I thought it might be a chapter or even part of a chapter. But after a month of doing research and reporting, I felt drawn back to New Haven as an anchor for the book. The *Independent* was doing ambitious journalism, it's an interesting place, Paul Bass was interesting, and by focusing on him and his paper, it could be more of a narrative work. I've always had a passion for local journalism. It's where I got my start, and it seemed to be a good example to focus on an innovative, nonprofit, online-only outlet.

What are the challenges of writing a book about a subject that changes by the day?

This provided a good and interesting challenge. How do I write something that's going to hold up for a few years? I knew the *Independent* would still be around in a few years. I was scrambling to incorporate some big changes, like the daily print New Haven *Register* going bankrupt, but I generally wasn't hugely concerned about how things were going to hold up.

To keep a website like the *Independent* alive, don't you need a rare, almost obsessed driving force like Paul Bass?

The *Independent* would be unimaginable without Bass. I do think that, yes, you need that special entrepreneurial journalist to make it happen. Smaller projects do depend on personal leadership, but some are more organizational. These websites are not that different from mom-and-pop weekly newspapers.

Do you believe there will always be a place for print?

In the foreseeable future, yes. But it will be a luxury item. Look at

what the *Boston Globe* has done. They've said, if you want print we'll give you print, but you're going to pay a lot for it.

It seems that destination news sites—those you would habitually visit, the way you would read a morning newspaper—are becoming outdated. Can you comment on the difference between the ways the generations consume news?

I do almost all my news reading online, and yet I still approach it as, now I'm going to read the *New York Times*, now the *Globe*. That isn't how young people are consuming news. They're coming at it from all different directions. That's where a niche publication like the New Haven *Independent* has an advantage over a general service newspaper. In this postindustrial age, there's no reason for any one publication to have international news, the funnies, sports. It doesn't make any sense. The *Independent* is focused on a fairly small city. If it happens over the border in Hamden, they're not going to cover it. The *Register* is stuck with still trying to appeal to a broader audience.

Do you think that relatively low-paying community journalism has any appeal for young people entering the field?

I teach journalism, and I don't get the impression that many of my students want to do local community journalism. They want to do fashion and sports, but there are certainly a few who are interested in local community journalism, and venues like the *Independent* are a good place for them. But the old career ladder, the idea of moving up and up and up, just doesn't exist anymore. I do wonder if we're returning to a more traditional vision of community journalism. There's always going to be a need for great national and international reporting, but there won't be places to do it.

Your book seems to lean toward the nonprofit model as the way to go.

When Bass started the website, he looked at the for-profit model and said that selling advertising is too much work. As a nonprofit you're getting huge chunks of funding. But the IRS has put the clamp down on nonprofit journalism, rejecting applications for nonprofit status. It's hard to know why. Some investigative news sites have received nonprofit status, but the IRS told them that they need to take the word "journalism" out to gain approval. But if local nonprofits are able to tap into local money, that's more sustainable. Donors can't make guarantees, but they seem to understand that strong local journalism deserves ongoing funding just as much as funds for poor mothers and the local orchestra. Certainly public radio has proven to be sustainable.

You spent so much time with Bass and clearly came to admire him. Did that ever create a conflict or threaten your objectivity?

It's very tough when you're covering somebody very closely like that. I never stayed at his house. I always stayed at a hotel, although I've accepted his dinner invitations on a number of occasions and I've taken Paul and his wife out to dinner as well. This is someone I admire. It was nevertheless an independent effort. He had no say in what I was going to write. At the very end, I gave him a chance to fact-check the galleys, but he understood, if you don't like the book, that's too bad.

What kind of feedback have you been getting?

People get passionate about this subject. The first talk I gave on the book was for retired Northeastern alumni, who were pretty elderly. What I loved about it was that this was the last generation that was addicted to reading newspapers. They were very skeptical about this online thing.

REVIEWS

Fiction and Poetry

sharp blue stream

David Lawton (CFA'82)

Three Rooms Press

WITH TITLES LIKE "SONNY ROLLINS," "When the Chelsea Was The Chelsea," and "The Other Stooges," Lawton's poems are soulful icons of his boomer vintage. His verse alights, for example, on Jackie Gleason, the Marx Brothers, Jim Morrison, and Schimmel's knishes. The poem "Satisfaction" reveals his Irish Catholic mother's infatuation with, of all people, Mick Jagger. Anyone steeped in the canon of Spencer Tracy will delight at Lawton's observation of the man who fights "Irish gentility" with a playful ease:



*But when the fleshy face crinkles
With his wry whiskey smile,
His eyes project the stations of the cross.*

The 95 poems in this collection, the playwright, actor, and musician's first, also brim with humor and heart. His riffs on life swoop from the sublime to the quotidian. In "P.S. from My Estranged Wife" a doleful rant is inspired by this woman's suggestion that "if there is old flour in the cupboard, throw it out." He gleefully milks the metaphor:

*I'm jealous of you, flour. I'm almost
mad at you.
But I cannot do you in, for I'm becoming
old too.
If I dump you in the trash, I'm no
better than her.*

Like the actor he is, Lawton the poet channels many voices. In "April Is Gone," he is frankly sentimental:

*How long, my dear, How long?
How long will you and I be part of
this song?
The spring will come as long as Time
will go on
But we are like the blossoms:
We are here, and then we're gone.*

Elsewhere Lawton's verse seems like a mischievous nod to the Beats, as in an ode