

Remembering Tactility: A Lament for Print Journalism

Getting off the train at Union Square station, in the place where there used to be a dilapidated newsstand, now exists a sleek white convenience store. A 2019 article in *The New Yorker* surveys these modern-day newsstand equivalents that have cropped-up all over the city. According to the article, the stores sell an array of products (soft drinks, electronic accessories, a small collection of fashion and business magazines) but, notably, very few newspapers. The news has changed monumentally over the last two decades. While the print newspaper used to be a grounding force in our lives — a primary source of information — now, even if we flip through the newspaper, it is as a supplementary source, supporting the information provided to us through a screen. The print newspaper has reached a point of near annihilation under the pressures of global expansion — a force that, while gesturing toward liberation by freeing droves of individual voices, actually overwhelms and obscures individuals themselves. Glancing at the shiny clean store that has replaced the old newsstand, one could almost forget that New York was once awash in newsprint. Though the newspaper has lost its purpose, its imprint remains: if not on the city, then, at least, on our minds.

But maybe I'm alone in looking back on the days of the paper newsstand with fondness. Maybe I'm alone in remembering the crinkle of the paper, the coffee table or countertop it would claim, spread out to a favored section. Maybe I'm alone in thinking of the utility of its pages: a makeshift comforter for the homeless, stuffing for a moving box. Our words, our thoughts cradled around glass ornaments and perfume bottles, or hung over a sleeping head, absorbing rain and snow. Sometimes the newspaper was treasured, idolized, cut out and pasted on refrigerators — a watchful eye over cooking and domestic gatherings. A reminder, like a cherished photo-

graph or spiritual object, that there is goodness, humility, integrity, humour, hope. Other times, the newspaper was pulverized by time and weather, until it was mere colourful pulp, mush underneath our shoes. Our once thoughtful articulations turned into grime. It's not a newspaper anymore.

One recalls the hold the newspaper had on our lives, when the news was greasy and multi-purpose. There was a private quality to reading the morning paper. The paper was the handmaiden of contemplation. Light and warm, it beckoned you toward the day oncoming. The paper awoke you to the fact that other people — the people who write the paper, the people who deliver the paper, the people who report the news, people who the news reports on, the person next to you on the subway, your roommate in shower — are out there in the world, and they are contemplating too.

A huge revenue source for newspapers was classified advertising. Going back to the 17th Century, so-called “Wanted” ads were sold in newspapers on a per line or per word basis. In the early aughts, websites like Craigslist encroached on the hegemony of the classifieds. With the proliferation of the internet, the need no longer existed to take out ads in the newspaper. Kijiji, Amazon, Facebook, Depop, Tinder, Hinge, and Instagram changed the way people communicate and replaced the need for classified advertising. The classifieds had a charm that is not recreated by their contemporary counterparts. The classifieds put on display life's diversity and offered an honest reflection of the local economy. The ads in the classifieds were found, opaque objects. One could find oddities — fascinating, random, strange. If you were looking for a job, you did not see only the jobs suited to you. Rather, you riffled through the listings, mining for relevant information and finding information that was both intriguing and decidedly irrelevant. You had

to do the work of picking out the parts that mattered to you, and you were aware that what mattered to you did not necessarily matter to the next person. Writer Ivan Bunin said it was a favorite pastime of Anton Chekhov's to read out peculiarities from the newspaper. "Babkin, a Samara merchant, left all his money for a memorial to Hegel." ("No, it's quite true, to Hegel!") Literary critic James Wood wrote that one must imagine that the appeal of these headlines for Chekhov was that the newspaper imagines it has explained a story, when all it has really done is told one.

It is a sad day when whole sections of America exist without access to local daily or weekly newspapers. According to an article in *Forbes*, about 1800 newspapers in the U.S. have been shut down since 2004. Of these, roughly 1700 were weeklies. There are now 3,143 counties across the U.S. that no longer have a daily or weekly newspaper. This impacts 3.2 million people. Residents in these areas tend to be older, poorer, and less educated compared to the national average. What does it mean for America that newspapers (the free press — penultimate in a democracy) are going extinct? The extinction of the newspaper is the byproduct of larger cultural shifts.

Democracy predates the assumption that the whole known world is capable of being represented in data. Everything is knowable in data. The surface of the world is scanned, and the actions of a subject are predictable. The idea of privacy itself is subverted by surveillance, because there is nothing in the world that cannot be known, cannot be compressed into data. As writer George Dennison pined, to past generations words like "eternal" and "infinity" still had meaning. The only part of the world data cannot infiltrate is subjectivity, and, thus, subjectivity is now the (only) territory of meaning for art, for expression. We float in meta-physical isolation —

apart from the world and within ourselves. As painter László Moholy-Nagy said: “tomorrow we shall be able to look into the heart of our fellow man, be everywhere and yet be alone.”

The death of newspaper signals an ideological shift. We consume images as we never have before. With fervent impulsivity, we hover over their glossy surface and revere in their way of seeing. Cultural critic Susan Sontag wrote of a change in our way of looking at the world; referencing a quoted from Stéphane Mallarme, who said everything in the world exists to end up in a book, Sontag emends that everything in the world exists to end up in a photograph. This was true in the 1970s, and it is truer now. Photographs, or more accurately in our digital world: images, have eclipsed stories to the point of eradication. The visual has been emphasized to the exclusion of touch. The haptic is shrunken.

This is all, of course, to speak of what we have lost. The digital, while stripping us of tactile experiences, augments our existence in other ways. The digital has freed us from the confines of our geographic coordinates and granted us the unprecedented freedom of rapid communication. It is futile to resist the digital. Print journalism cannot be redeemed in its original form. Our world no longer has need for it, and, if the newspaper were revived, it would be revived ironically, which is to say: in a bastardized form. There is no way to put back the newsstand at Union Square station.

The productive part of one’s mind, the part that wants to be good and active and accurate — the same part of the mind that one uses to read Claudia Rankine, is concerned with the issues of isolation, the free press, democracy. But nostalgia belongs to a different part of the mind: one that dwells in rawness, sweetness, and the kind of tenderness that belongs to heartbreak. It is

with the latter, lowlier, part of the mind that I miss the newspaper and the tactile world that deeply felt its presence.