

# Newspapers need a new (old) pitch

By Jim Killam

On ESPN Radio's "Mike and Mike" show recently, host Mike Greenberg compared newspapers to 8-track tapes and the phonograph and said that very soon, all newspapers will be gone. He was reacting to a TIME story (which later was disputed because it was a thinly sourced report from 24/7 Wall Street. It was picked up by TIME and published online only).

Co-host Mike Golic chimed in that when younger people want news, they just go to Google. I wanted to reach through my car radio, grab Golic's microphone and shout, "You really don't get it. Without newspapers, there IS no Google news!"

First: The Greenberg comment strikes me as ignorant of all newspapers except major metros. We as an industry used to promote the newspaper as the lifeblood of a community. I think that's still true in most small- to midsized communities, and I don't think it's practical yet to assume an online product would have the same impact or reach. A few newspapers will fail, and soon. Most will not.

Second: The Greenberg comment scares me -- not because I think it's true, but because of the pop-culture traction he helps give the idea that newspapers are going away soon. Think of that "Simpsons" episode where Nelson the bully mocks a print journalist: "Ha ha! Your medium is dying!" Newspapers' disappearance very well could become a self-fulfilling prophecy if we let stand the notion that only the old and terminally uncool read newspapers.

Remember the mid-1990s, when baseball was supposedly dying? It was too slow-paced, too old-school. Kids weren't playing it anymore. The sports magazines and talk shows did a lot of hand-wringing. Pro wrestling: Now that was what young people wanted to watch.

Then, a few things happened. First, Cal Ripken. Then a resurgence of the Yankees. Then a host of new, retro ballparks. Then, Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire (yeah, yeah, I know) and the tieback to Babe Ruth and

Roger Maris. Fantasy baseball. ESPN and DirecTV and the ability to watch any game, anywhere.

Underneath it all, baseball changed the way it marketed itself. It highlighted its new-era stars, but it also celebrated its rich history, its connection with the past.

From my little corner of the world -- a college newsroom -- I've seen the baseball resurgence. Eyes widen when we talk about baseball records, or lineups from 20-30-40 years ago. Students hang on every pitch of spring training games. That doesn't happen with other sports. Yeah, we all know about steroids and out-of-control salaries, but it hasn't ruined maybe the best game ever invented. There's something significant about watching the same game my father and grandfather watched, talking about the same records, wondering if the Cubs will ever win anything. Younger generations have figured out the connection.

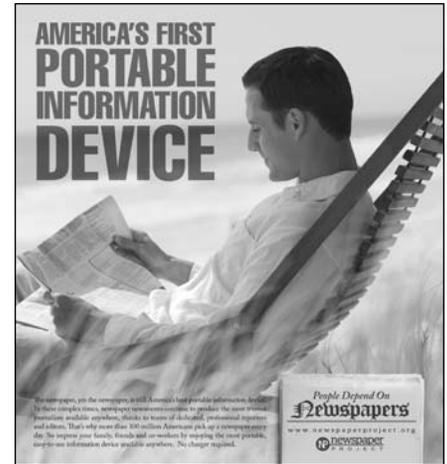
I wonder if newspapers could experience a similar renaissance. Could we as an industry sell ourselves as being old-school? On being a little slower-paced, and a lot more thorough? On connecting a community with its past? On the fact that we're not putting our heads in the sand when it comes to technology, but we're also not giving up on a product that's still vitally important to its readers? What if the newspaper industry collectively marketed itself, as baseball did? What if we created public-service ads that show what America would look like without newspapers?

(Shortly after I posted this column on our Digital Ink blog, I discovered The Newspaper Project, which aims to do precisely that. See the info at right.)

In short, this conversation is about us. Why don't we lead it, instead of reacting to often-uninformed opinions that are unfortunately shaping our future?



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