

Demise of New Orleans Daily Limits Access in the Information Age

Jun 9 2012

by [Lolis Eric Elie](#)

On September 25, 2005, mere weeks after the failure of the federal flood control system, Michael Ignatieff published an op-ed in the *New York Times*. Ignatieff's thesis was that the failures of the levees and the ensuing lack of effective government response represented a breaking of the contract between this country and its citizenry. It was an important essay in that it put our post-Katrina debacle into a larger, more philosophical context than most of the essays written at the time.

I have thought of this piece often in the days since *The Times-Picayune* announced its decision to unilaterally discontinue the implicit contract between the paper and its readers. We readers assumed we had a deal. If we bought the paper and supported the businesses of its advertisers, and if the revenues were sufficient to sustain the profitability of the enterprise, then the paper would continue publishing. Yet, in the fall, the paper will cease seven-day-a-week publication and replace it with a three-day-a-week printed paper and online news coverage on [nola.com](#).

Contrary to popular myth, *The Times-Picayune* remains a profitable enterprise although, as a private company, it is not obligated to share with the public exactly how profitable it is. This decision to focus on a web presence at the expense of the printed paper is an experiment, a gamble on the direction in which the future of journalism is headed. It also represents a clear lack of faith in the abiding devotion of regular newspaper readers.

Capitalism, we are too often reminded, is all about the capitalists. It is their choice when or whether or how to provide their products to us, the consuming classes. Our interest in supporting a daily, printed paper be damned.

If [nola.com](#) were a decent website, if it were possible to find a needle of news in the haystack of banner advertisements and "upload your photo" links, the loss of the printed paper might not be so bad. But the sacrifice of so good a paper in favor of so bad a website is a most cynical coupling of insult and injury. Even if the website contained all the information currently contained in the print edition, it's unlikely anyone would be able to find it. A few weeks ago, [nola.com](#) unveiled a new design. I assume that by that point, the higher ups at the company knew that the daily newspaper was doomed and thus this redesign was a step into the new world of online news. So why did they choose yellow as the banner color for a nominally journalistic enterprise? If the owners are unfamiliar with the term "yellow journalism" and its attendant implications then they are clearly ill-positioned to be the avant-garde of this new journalism.

If New Orleanians were a web savvy tribe, equipped with the skills and equipment to browse the web effectively, then this new gambit might well serve their needs. But, as reported in [thelensnola.org](#), "Subscribers to high-speed Internet services in New Orleans are generally white and in higher income brackets, according to a new nationwide study that also found Louisiana lags the rest of the country when it comes to accessing broadband technology." What is to become of those loyal *Times-Picayune* readers who happen not to be Internet-connected? Have the paper's owners given any thought to the racial implications of a web-based news service in a city where the majority of the citizens are black and a substantial portion of those black citizens do not have internet access?

Many people, several of my close friends among them, are unmoved by the demise of *The Times-Picayune*. Their moods have been ruined too often by stories they found biased, ill-informed, prejudiced or mean-spirited. I've been angered by the paper as well. But I've also been heartened on those occasions when the paper investigated or chronicled stories of importance to me and my community. It is a truism that local

people hate their local newspaper. This perverse hatred is often expressed in renewed subscriptions. I don't expect that the newspaper will ever be a better reflection of my own ideals. Still, I think our community will be greatly impoverished by its reduced presence.

Jim Amoss, the editor who guided the paper through its Pulitzer Prize awards, will remain in charge of news operations. He has said that the news organization will still be dedicated to quality, probing coverage of the community. But, even if we take him at his word, is it possible to maintain daily quality with thrice-weekly frequency? That is the experiment that the Newhouse family, the paper's owner, is engaging in. It is trying this news model of journalism at *The Times-Picayune*, *The Birmingham News*, *The Press-Register* of Mobile and *The Huntsville Times*.

Suddenly we will have more in common with these communities than ever we thought possible (or desirable). Here too, the owners of our daily paper seem to have misjudged us. Even though they brag to potential advertisers that *The Times-Picayune* is unique, enjoying as it does a higher percentage of readership in its coverage area than any other paper, it undermines this claim to the uniqueness of this community and the paper's relationship to it by foisting upon us a one-size-fits-all model that hasn't even been proven effective in other communities.

As the novelist John Biguenet told us shortly after the storm, the great enemy of New Orleans culture is American culture. *The Times-Picayune* used to understand this. Its coverage, even its very name, suggested a somewhat idiosyncratic perspective in keeping with our idiosyncratic community. It'll be hard to maintain such relevant coverage if decisions like these are made in New York.

Long before the internet, the daily newspaper was the virtual water cooler. Citizens from various walks of life and regions of the circulation area were brought together daily by a shared, though imperfect, vision of what was news, what was important, what was interesting. This thirst for community cannot be satisfied on a thrice-weekly basis.

I can't imagine what daily print newspapers will look like a generation from now. But I remain convinced that newspapers will continue to exist and to be relevant in some form. Seen in this light the demise of our daily paper is less a result of the murderous forces of the Internet than it is a result of the suicidal inclinations of a company that has lost faith in its product.

Godspeed be unto all of us who have, despite all, kept the faith.

[Read more](#) about recent changes at *The Times-Picayune*.

Lolis Eric Elie is a New Orleans based writer and filmmaker. Most recently, he joined the staff of the HBO series Treme. Working with the award-winning director Dawn Logsdon, he co-produced and wrote the PBS documentary, Faubourg Treme: the Untold Story of Black New Orleans.

From 1995 to 2009, he wrote a thrice-weekly column for the New Orleans' Times-Picayune.

A contributing writer to The Oxford American, his work has appeared in Gourmet, The Washington Post, The New York Times, Bon Appetit, Downbeat and The San Francisco Chronicle among other publications.

Follow Lolis on Twitter @LolisElie, and on Facebook.