



IN THE PRESS

Is the Afternoon Newspaper a Dinosaur in North Carolina?

by Paul T. O'Connor

This regular feature of Insight examines how the news media—newspapers, television, and radio—cover public affairs in North Carolina. In this issue, Insight focuses on afternoon newspapers in the state, where three urban dailies have closed in recent years while rural afternoon papers seem to be flourishing.

For loyal readers of *The Raleigh Times*, the message behind the afternoon daily's advertising campaign last spring was hardly encouraging. *The Times*, little sister of *The News and Observer*, has been unable to maintain its circulation even in the midst of tremendous population growth in Wake County—a fact which has encouraged rumors that the Capital City's afternoon paper eventually would be closed.¹ And now *The Times*, which stresses local news coverage, was running a multi-media advertising campaign that pointed up the weaknesses of its own sister publication. It looked like a desperate last effort to keep the paper alive.

In one televised ad, viewers saw a man, visible only from the chest down, with an armful of footballs, basketballs, and baseballs. "When it comes to covering local sports," an announcer intones, "the other paper [meaning *The N&O*] drops the ball." Down onto the floor came all the balls, bouncing hither and yon. The theme of *The Times* campaign was that "Every issue hits closer to home," an obvious comparison of *The Times'* local orientation to *The News and Observer's* heavy diet of state news.

What was startling to viewers was not just that one division of a company was in effect advertising the faults of another division (The News and Observer Publishing Co. owns both papers), but that *The Times* apparently was in some difficulty. Would management ultimately seek to close down the

paper, as cost-conscious businessmen have done in three other major North Carolina cities in the 1980s? The list of casualties includes *The Charlotte News*, *The Greensboro Record*, and *The Sentinel* of Winston-Salem—all respected newspapers that gave their readers a strong editorial viewpoint and which had concentrated on local news coverage, often beating the bigger morning papers to a story. While the larger papers in those areas—*The Charlotte Observer*, the *Greensboro Daily News*,² and the *Winston-Salem Journal*—each had committed substantial resources to local coverage, they also focused on regional and statewide news.

The afternoon newspapers often were able to do a better job of local public affairs coverage, particularly in such policy areas as local schools, taxation, coverage of county commissioners, and other local government agencies, while the big morning papers concentrated on more of a statewide perspective. But declining circulation of those three papers and stiff competition for afternoon paper readers from improved television news staffs spelled the end of the three PMs, as they are known in the trade. Now, with strong television newscasts in the Triangle area, would *The Raleigh Times*—known for its excellent local coverage of hard news and sports—also bite the dust? On July 22, the company announced it would combine the news staffs of both papers to serve both *The N & O* and *The Times*, and in October said it would stop printing the *Saturday Times* later in the year.

If *N&O* management does shut down *The*

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Table 1. Number of Daily Newspapers in States of Comparable Size to North Carolina

State	Population	Number of Newspapers
Indiana	5,499,000	74 (62 PMs, 12 AMs)
North Carolina	6,255,000	54 (43 PMs, 11 AMs)
Massachusetts	5,822,000	46 (39 PMs, 7 AMs)
Virginia	5,706,000	38 (23 PMs, 15 AMs)
Georgia	5,976,000	36 (25 PMs, 11 AMs)

Note: Two states with populations larger than North Carolina have fewer daily newspapers — Florida, with a population of 11,366,000, has 49 papers, and New Jersey, with a population of 7,562,000, has 26 daily newspapers.

Source: 1987 *Editor & Publisher International Yearbook*, and 1987 Statistical Abstract of the United States, Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce.

Times, it won't do so before a lot of corporate and editorial teeth are gnashed down to fine dust. As Davis Jones, vice-president and general manager of the company, says, "From the corporate point of view, we feel that everyone is best served by Raleigh having two strong newspapers." Inside the *N&O*, there is considerable feeling that the capital needs *The Times* to do the local reporting which *The N&O* misses. Mike Yopp, *Times* managing editor, says, "*The Times* is a local newspaper, with a local orientation. . . . From local news on the front page to the Public Record on the back, we have a local emphasis, and that is our mission." Yopp concedes that if *The N&O* closed *The Times*, it could redirect its resources into more local coverage. "That would be a corporate decision," Yopp says, and Yopp won't speculate on corporate decisions.

Philip Meyer, a veteran newsman now teaching at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Journalism, says newspaper history gives us a framework within which to speculate on such an *N&O* decision, however. "When afternoon newspapers close, there are two models the surviving morning papers usually follow," he says. "The first is to provide a larger range of service to their readers." The afternoon paper's staff is reassigned to the morning paper and suddenly the remaining paper has the ability to do much more reporting than the two previous papers had individually. This occurs because duplication of coverage is eliminated.

"The second model," Meyer says, "is to take the money saved by the closing of the afternoon paper

and send it right down to the bottom line."

When one company operates two newspapers in the same city, and maintains independent news staffs for each, it is operating inefficiently. For a routine meeting story, for example, each paper will usually send a reporter, so the parent company is paying for two people to cover a story when one could suffice. When the papers merge, only one reporter must attend that meeting, and that frees up a reporter to pursue another story. The decision the company must make is whether to reassign that freed-up reporter to another reporting position, perhaps on a newly formed beat in a policy area such as education, health, business, or finance. Or the company can fire that reporter and pocket the savings.

Editors in the other North Carolina cities where PMs closed said they were quick to improve their morning newspapers with the personnel transferred from the afternoon papers. Jim Laughrun, state editor of the *Winston-Salem Journal* and former city editor of the now-defunct *Sentinel*, says, "The biggest gain [from the merger] has been that when a big story breaks, we now have the resources to turn loose on it." But even with expanded staffs, editors at the surviving morning papers in Greensboro, Charlotte, and Winston-Salem say they also see negatives from the closing of their afternoon papers.

Ned Cline, managing editor of the *Greensboro News & Record*, says the merger of the two papers has "eliminated the competitive spirit. It's almost as though we take the position that if we don't get it today, we'll get it tomorrow. The competition is now

among ourselves for excellence." Mark Ethridge, managing editor of *The Charlotte Observer*, says the biggest drawback of the merged Charlotte papers "is the loss of a second distinct editorial viewpoint. We're clearly missing something there." Adds Laughrun, "The city loses because it is 24 hours before a newspaper can tell them what's happened." If a story breaks in early morning, for example, Winston-Salem readers won't get a written news report until the next morning; radio and television newscasts can have the story to themselves for 24 hours — if they can get it.

The loss of competition is the negative expressed most often when newspapermen discuss afternoon papers closing. Yopp contends that "any competitive situation where you have newspeople working against each other would heighten the competition and increase both the quality and scope of the news, and of the watchdog element of the press." But others aren't sold on the need for inter-paper competition. As Meyer of UNC says, "I'm not sure competition is always useful. Sometimes papers go off half-cocked" trying to beat the competition on a story. "Reporters try to impress each other rather than their readers and that can lead to distortion" of a story's news value.

Meyer says he knows of no definitive study of North Carolina papers both before and after closings. But he says a good indication might be comparing the size of the total editorial staff of a combined

paper versus the total of the two papers before the PM closed.

The Charlotte Observer editorial staff has grown beyond the size of the two staffs before merger, Ethridge says. Cline says that Greensboro eliminated eight positions through retirement and attrition, a number not really significant when one considers the reduced news editing and layout demands of producing only one paper. But the paper also added new products, including a new business section, that created nine new positions, for a net gain of one staff member. Laughrun reports that *The Journal* increased its staff size, mostly in sports, business and features, but "we certainly did not come anywhere near matching the two papers" for total staff. There were some layoffs and early retirement.

The story of local newspaper coverage in North Carolina goes far beyond just the large city dailies. North Carolina, because so much of its population (52 percent) lives outside of metropolitan areas, enjoys an unusually large number of daily newspapers for a state its size (see Table 1). The economics of this rural daily newspaper industry are quite different from those of the metro papers. For example, while the number of *metro* afternoon papers has fallen by three in the 1980s, from seven to four, the number of *rural* afternoon dailies has grown by three. The community papers in Mt. Airy, Marion, and Aberdeen have expanded into dailies, giving the state a total of 54 daily newspapers, 43 of them

**Table 2. Circulation of State's Urban Daily Newspapers
(In Cities Where AM & PM Newspapers Exist or Once Existed)**

	Daily Circulation	Rank Among These 11 Dailies	Rank Among All State Dailies
<i>The Asheville Citizen</i> (AM)	62,682	5	5
<i>The Asheville Times</i> (PM)	13,356	11	29
<i>The Charlotte Observer</i> (AM)	214,700	1	1
<i>Durham Morning Herald</i> (AM)	45,001	7	8
<i>The Durham Sun</i> (PM)	20,126	10	18
<i>The Fayetteville Times</i> (AM)	25,678	9	14
<i>The Fayetteville Observer</i> (PM)	46,242	6	6
<i>Greensboro News & Record</i> (AM)	112,424	3	3
<i>The News and Observer of Raleigh</i> (AM)	137,746	2	2
<i>The Raleigh Times</i> (PM)	34,234	8	10
<i>Winston-Salem Journal</i> (AM)	91,536	4	4

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation as reported for 1986 in the 1987 "Directory of Members," North Carolina Press Association. These circulation figures are for weekday circulation only. If weekend circulation figures were used, rankings would be slightly different.

afternoon daily newspapers, all but four of them in non-metro areas. Most of these papers are economic successes.

Notes Cline, "The *News & Record* goes into 12 counties and competes with 17 daily papers. All 17 of them are healthy." Chester A. Middlesworth Jr., North Carolina and Kentucky regional manager for Park Communications, a national media company, adds, "We feel the afternoon field certainly is very healthy." Park owns 25 newspapers, including eight dailies, in North Carolina.

Nationally, the number of afternoon newspapers is declining, but in North Carolina, those numbers are growing—in rural areas, but not urban areas. For instance, in 1977, there were 1,762 newspapers, and 1,435 of them were PM papers. By 1987, there were 1,657 daily newspapers, and 1,188 were PMs. That's a national decline of 6 percent of all newspaper in 10 years, but a decline of 17 percent in the number of PM papers. In North Carolina, however, the number of daily papers grew in the same period from 51 dailies, with 41 PMs in 1977, to 54 dailies, 43 of them PMs, by 1987. That's a 6 percent increase in all papers, and a 4.6 percent increase in PMs.³

That brings us back to the issue of competition. Ethridge of Charlotte says he misses the competition between the two Queen City papers but says *The Observer* has plenty of competition with the papers which surround it. *The Observer* does what Ethridge calls "an enormous amount of zoning." That is, *The Observer* uses section inserts and different editions of the paper to pump local news into the papers it sends to surrounding counties. Six tabloid sections (five in North Carolina, one in South Carolina) are delivered to over 11 counties — three of them published thrice a week, and three of them published twice a week. All of those tabloids are dedicated to local news. Ethridge says *The Observer* watches its competing papers closely. "We really pay attention to what the other folks are doing and who got beat on what. We like to think . . . that with the weddings, births, and property transactions (reported in the tabloids) that we give them everything they get in their local papers."

Hogwash, says the competition. Ethridge's assertion compelled Nancy Stephen, executive editor of the *Monroe Enquirer-Journal*, to say, "Oh my goodness, that's ridiculous. We average at least five times the number of stories *The Observer* has. It's even higher than that. *The Observer* comes in for the big stories and leaves out much of the routine news that the public wants. Middlesworth, whose family once owned the *Statesville Record & Landmark*, also

scoffs at claims that *The Observer* covers Iredell County as well as his paper. "There's not much they can do in a 12-page tabloid," he says. *The Observer's* tabloid pages would total 36 in a week; the *Record & Landmark* would probably run 100 or more pages in a week.⁴

Cline says that his paper can offer readers in surrounding towns things which their local papers cannot. But he says he doesn't think the *News & Record* can replace those papers. "We're never going to give readers in those towns their local news. I read *USA Today*, today, but not instead of the *Greensboro News & Record*." Metro papers still will be read in small towns, Cline said, for the international, national, and state news, and for a higher quality of writing. But these local papers will survive, he says, because of their supremacy on the bulk of local reporting.

There is a widespread public perception that afternoon newspapers are a dying breed. The number may be declining in urban areas, but it is an obvious misconception when one considers the growing number of afternoon dailies in rural North Carolina. Morning papers may dominate in seven of the state's eight largest metropolitan areas (Fayetteville is the exception; see Table 2, page 70), but they do so at the expense of their own little sisters, not the bulk of the afternoon dailies in North Carolina. Still, the coming years may bring owners of morning and afternoon papers in the same city — Raleigh, Durham, Asheville, and Fayetteville — a hard choice: deciding whether producing two papers is a drain on a company's profitability, or whether the community is better served by competing editorial and reporting voices. □□

FOOTNOTES

¹There is obvious reason for concern. During the first week of April 1986, *The Raleigh Times* circulation was 35,164; by the same week in 1987, it had dropped by more than 1,400 to 33,747, according to *The N&O's* in-house publication, *Family Ties*. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation, *The Times* average circulation dropped from 34,843 in 1985 to 34,234 in 1986.

²*The Charlotte News* and *The Sentinel* in Winston-Salem were closed outright, but the morning *Greensboro Daily News* and afternoon *The Greensboro Record* were first merged into the *Greensboro News & Record*, with both morning and afternoon editions, until the afternoon edition was dropped entirely in 1985.

³1977 and 1987 editions, *Editor & Publisher International Yearbook*, section 1, "Ready Reckoner of Advertising Rates and Circulation."

⁴Mark Ethridge of *The Charlotte Observer* has suggested a better measure would be "some actual calculations of local news content in places where the larger papers and smaller ones cross paths. Such an analysis, for instance, would not merely compare stories in *The Observer* tabloids with stories in other papers, but would include local stories in the mainframe *Observer* which the subscriber receives in addition to the tab."