

# CLUES TO CRITICAL THINKING

## **“The Strange, Sad Death of Journalism”**

**By Michael Gerson, *Washington Post*, November 27, 2009**

*In this article a conservative laments changes in the profession of journalism. Is this a partisan or a bipartisan issue?*

Like the nearby Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, the Newseum—Washington’s museum dedicated to journalism—displays dinosaurs. On a long wall near the entrance, the front pages of newspapers from around the country are electronically posted each morning—the artifacts of a declining industry. Inside, the high-tech exhibits are nostalgic for a lower-tech time when banner headlines and network news summarized the emotions and exposed the scandals of the nation. Lindbergh Lands Safely. One Small Step. Nixon Resigns. Cronkite removes his glasses to announce President Kennedy’s death at 1 p.m. Central Standard Time.

Behind a long rack of preserved, historic front pages, there is a kind of journalistic mausoleum, displaying the departed. The Ann Arbor News, closed July 23 after 174 years in print. The Rocky Mountain News, taken at age 150. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, which passed quietly into the Internet.

What difference does this make? For many conservatives, the “mainstream media” is an epithet. Didn’t the Internet expose the lies of Dan Rather? Many on the left also shed few tears, preferring to consume their partisanship raw in the new media.

But a visit to the Newseum is a reminder that what is passing is not only a business but also a profession—the journalistic tradition of nonpartisan objectivity. Journalists, God knows, didn’t always live up to that tradition. But they generally accepted it, and they felt shamed when their biases or inaccuracies were exposed. The profession had rules about facts and sources and editors who enforced standards. At its best, the profession of journalism has involved a spirit of public service and adventure—reporting from a bomber during a raid in World War II, or exposing the suffering of Sudan or Appalachia, or rushing to the site of the World Trade Center moments after the buildings fell.

By these standards, the changes we see in the media are also a decline. Most

cable news networks have forsaken objectivity entirely and produce little actual news, since makeup for guests is cheaper than reporting. Most Internet sites display an endless hunger to comment and little appetite for verification. Free markets, it turns out, often make poor fact-checkers, instead feeding the fantasies of conspiracy theorists from “birthers” to Sept. 11, 2001, “truthers.” Bloggers in repressive countries often show great courage, but few American bloggers have the resources or inclination to report from war zones, famines and genocides.

The democratization of the media—really its fragmentation—has encouraged ideological polarization. Princeton University professor Paul Starr traced this process recently in the Columbia Journalism Review. After the captive audience for network news was released by cable, many Americans did not turn to other sources of news. They turned to entertainment. The viewers who remained were more political and more partisan. “As Walter Cronkite prospered in the old environment,” says Starr, “Bill O’Reilly and Keith Olbermann thrive in the new one. As the diminished public for journalism becomes more partisan, journalism itself is likely to shift further in that direction.”

Cable and the Internet now allow Americans, if they choose, to get their information entirely from sources