

Los Angeles Times

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-op-cooper-frey8-2008jul08,0,7314902.story>

From the Los Angeles Times

DUST-UP

L.A. without the LAT

Patrick Frey says Southern California would get along fine without the Los Angeles Times. Marc Cooper predicts a future in which The Times' brand of journalism will appeal to a niche market.

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Today's question: Should Southern California prepare for a future without the L.A. Times? What might that future look like? Previously, Frey and Cooper [diagnosed](#) the paper's most pressing problems.

Adapt or die — it's up to the L.A. Times

Point: Patrick Frey

Marc,

A future without the L.A. Times would be unthinkable. Bird cages across the Southland would go unlined. Dogs would have nothing on which to train. Fish would go unwrapped in countless Southern California households.

I kid! I kid because I love.

Seriously, though, I have no doubt that the editors of The Times think that their paper is the glue that holds the Southland together. I hate to break it to you, editors, but we could get along just fine without you.

On Monday, we learned that reporters Charles Ornstein and Tracy Weber are [leaving the newspaper](#). Ironically, just yesterday in this space, I was praising their series on the Martin Luther King Jr-Harbor Hospital. The loss of these talented reporters is indeed a hard blow to The Times. But we'll still be able to read Ornstein and Weber in a Web-based journalism start-up. They're becoming part of the Internet-driven revolution in news gathering that is challenging dinosaur media like The Times.

Southern California can live without The Times. In fact, in many cases, local journalism already runs rings around this newspaper.

Take the L.A. Weekly, for example, which helped [reveal](#) the true facts of the Tennie Pierce case while The Times slept.

The Weekly [exposed](#) the laughable naivete of a 2005 Times article lionizing an alleged "former gang member" supposedly turned "man of peace." The Weekly's secret trick? Talking to law

enforcement!

The Weekly printed an [excellent piece](#) about gang warfare in housing projects. Meanwhile, The Times couldn't be bothered to run one line on the [shooting death](#) of a teenager in Compton. Yet somehow, the paper found room for a dozen stories about Paris Hilton's jail sentence.

The Weekly covered the criminal trial of local civil rights attorney Stephen Yagman, while [The Times was nearly AWOL](#).

Just last month, the Weekly published an [excellent piece](#) about the U.S.-Mexico border and the border fence. The piece was alive with detail, better than any immigration piece I've seen in The Times. If this sounds familiar, it should. The Weekly reporter is a fellow named Marc Cooper.

The Weekly is hardly the only competing outlet. The Daily News broke the story about Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's affair. L.A.'s top newspaper got scooped on that one too.

Marc, there's no shortage of talented local journalists ready to deliver the news. The competition stands ready to appropriate available talent and fill any void that might be caused by the demise of The Times.

A larger newspaper has advantages such as institutional expertise and massive resources. But for The Times, those advantages are coupled with a hidebound arrogance, born of years of existence as a monopoly.

To adapt, it's critical to shake off that insolence. Times editors, be honest with your readers. Listen to your readers. Stop assuming you're the smartest people around. You're smart. So is the competition. But you can beat the competition if you recognize that your readers are smarter than you and the competition combined. Recognize that and turn it to your advantage.

It's your choice, L.A. Times. Adapt or die.

With you or without you, Southern California will survive.

Patrick Frey blogs at patterico.com.

A niche readership

Counterpoint: Marc Cooper

Patrick,

The real question isn't whether or not we should prepare for a future without The Times, but rather, is The Times prepared for the future of Los Angeles?

And here we're going to agree and disagree. While Times management has so far failed to demonstrate any coherent strategy of making a felicitous transition into the immediate digital future, this hardly heralds the extinction of the paper.

History shows us that after a new technology becomes dominant, its clunkier precedents don't simply disappear. Instead, they become scarcer, rarer, more boutique commodities. Disposable shavers made straight razors retro, cool and pricey. Bic ballpoints created an inflated market for Mont Blanc and Pelikan fountain pens. The widespread distribution of synthetic clothing made

once-common natural fibers a snooty status symbol.

If there's no course correction, such will be the future of The Times and other great and fading newspapers. The Times will become the Balducci's to the 7-Elevens and Burger Kings of the Web. The core product The Times offers — generally reliable, mostly accurate, voluminous, professionally gathered and reported local and global news — will continue to find a market, albeit a greatly reduced and ever more elite niche.

Those who most need and desire the sort of information provided by a corps of professionally trained journalists will have no choice but to pay whatever exorbitant fee or subscription that will be required. I don't know what the delivery system will be, nor precisely how the revenue to pay for the reporting will be generated, but a core market will definitely linger.

You're absolutely right, Patrick, that Southern California not only muddled along but grew and prospered and even boomed before Otis Chandler began in 1960 to convert his family's shrill, biased and provincial rag into a respected and eventually world-class provider of news and information. But as Los Angeles matured, so did its flagship paper. Only the willfully ignorant would deny some level of symbiosis.

I'm hardly an uncritical fan of The Times. Indeed, long before the Internet spawned a crew of dilettante verbal snipers, I spent several years getting paid to write a press criticism column for L.A. Weekly, and just about every entry was fueled by my delight in trashing one or another aspect of The Times. But what a worthy target. I think there has been something sort of wonderful, even magical, about expecting that — at a peak moment in history — a million or so Angeleno households would want to read a paper that demanded not only a 12th-grade education level but a comprehensive, sophisticated curiosity about the world around us.

That's a luxury that everyone should enjoy. It should be, as it once was, an unremarkable, everyday experience to have all that delivered to your door. When we finally lose it, as you note, no buildings or freeways will collapse, the Earth won't tremble, and the skies will be neither murkier nor bluer. Los Angeles will merely be that much smaller. Ask anyone who remembers the old L.A. Times before Otis Chandler, and they'll tell you how it was.

And thanks, also, for the bouquets you toss the L.A. Weekly. But the Weekly can only function properly in direct relationship to — not instead of — The Times. No one I know at the Weekly thinks it can or should substitute for The Times. We are there to supplement it, fill in the holes, scoop it when we can, and occasionally torture it. Everything you note about the Weekly's work has been accomplished by a hardworking staff of about a dozen or so reporters and editors. Just imagine, though, what we could do if we had 1,000. With that sort of muscle we could publish something like ... The Times.

Marc Cooper is associate director of the Institute for Justice and Journalism at the USC Annenberg School for Communication. He writes a politics column for L.A. Weekly and serves as editorial coordinator of the Huffington Post's Off the Bus. He blogs daily at marccooper.com.

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