

The Chronicle In Ruins

SAN FRANCISCO, MONDAY JANUARY 16, 1865 - ????

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

I do not remember the first time I heard someone refer to The San Francisco Chronicle as the Titanic. But I do remember the first time I understood the powerful truth of that metaphor.

It was while watching a documentary on the iconic sunken ship when I learned that the full name of the doomed vessel was the Royal Mail Ship Titanic. As the tragedy of the RMS Titanic began to unfold, most of those on board did everything they could to save their lives. However, some did everything they could to save the mail. As I watched these reenacted images of postal workers struggling to save one sack of registered mail only to see two other sacks become lost to the sea, I couldn't help but wonder aloud: "Who in the hell cares about saving the mail?"

The answer is obvious: Mailmen. So then, "Who in the hell cares about saving The San Francisco Chronicle – or any other newspaper for that matter?" The answer is equally as obvious: Newspapermen and newspaperwomen.

On February 24, Frank Vega, the chairman and publisher of The Chronicle released a memo stating that due to the rapidly declining economy, declining advertising revenues, staggering weekly losses and "the bleak economic forecast for the foreseeable future" that major changes are headed our way. "Business as usual is not an option. If we are unable to accomplish these reductions in the immediate future, Hearst Corporation, which owns The Chronicle, has informed us that it will offer the newspaper for sale **or close it altogether**," wrote Vega (bold and underline emphasis, mine).

That the Hearst Corporation has considered the altogether closing of an institution like The Chronicle as being even a remote possibility is, in this reporter's mind, unacceptable, unforgivable and even un-American. But perhaps it should come as no surprise. It underscores just how far apart Hearst, the corporation, is from Hearst, the man. It reminds us that Hearst Communications, Inc. is not led by a living and breathing newspaperman like Mr. William Randolph Hearst – but by a corporate entity.

I would like to publicly request that the Hearst Corporation replace The Chronicle's "close it altogether" ultimatum with another option: give the newspaper's name to us. If the Hearst Corporation indeed cannot sell The Chronicle and is seriously considering "closing it altogether" because it believes the newspaper carries an infinite negative business value, why not then give control and ownership of The San Francisco Chronicle name to a group that still sees value in it?

Whether this group could be defined specifically as the Chronicle Unit of the California Media Workers Guild, which could take over by right of first refusal, or whether the Voice of the West could be kept alive by a newly formed group of past and present Chronicle employees and others in the community who still believe in its value, let the conversations and suggestions begin – without fear.

It may only be a symbolic move at first, but it could be the first step forward into a new era of American newspaper journalism.

In the past year, many of my colleagues and supervisors have told me that we are all lucky just to have a job. But what's luck got to do with it? If this country heads into another Great Depression, does anyone truly believe that it will be because of bad luck? No. It will be because of people who did bad things and made bad decisions. And when this country bounces back to prosperity, it won't be because of good luck. It will be because of good people who did good things and made good decisions. I believe that in my lifetime we will once again see newspaper journalism rise and thrive in our everyday lives. While nervous newspaper executives continue to do what they do best and wait for someone else to solve the problem for them, I believe that it is time now for newspaper people to begin saving our institution's soul.

I would feel better knowing that the legacies and identities of The San Francisco Chronicle (and the Rocky Mountain News and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer and the...???) are in the hands of the people who believe that waiting for someone else to figure things out or otherwise giving up is absolutely not an option. I do not pretend to have all of the answers. But I do have a lot of questions, which once upon a time was the most important part about being a newspaper reporter.



Chronicle Co-Founder
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William Randolph Hearst



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PAID FOR BY

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Dedicated San Francisco Chronicle Newspaperman (2000 - ????)