

SECTION

Why I'm Leaving The L.A. Times

After 10 years, hundreds of bylines and some of the best experiences of my professional life, I'm leaving the Los Angeles Times at the end of this month, along with 56 newsroom colleagues. We each have our reasons for taking the latest buyout offer from Chicago-based Tribune Company. In my case, the decision grew out of frustration with the paper's coverage of working people and organized labor, and a sad realization that the situation won't change anytime soon.

It's awkward to criticize an old friend, which I still consider the Times to be, but I think the question of how mainstream journalists deal with the working class is important and deserves debate. There may be no better setting in which to examine the issue: The Los Angeles region is defined by gaping income disparities and an enormous pool of low-wage immigrant workers, many of whom are pulled north by lousy, unstable jobs. It's also home to one of the most active and creative labor federations in the country. But you wouldn't know any of that from reading a typical issue of the L.A. Times, in print or online. Increasingly anti-union in its editorial policy, and celebrity -- and crime-focused in its news coverage, it ignores the economic discontent that is clearly reflected in ethnic publications such as *La Opinion*.

Of course, I realize that revenues are plummeting and newsroom staffs are being cut across the country. But even in these tough financial times, it's possible to shift priorities to make Southern California's largest newspaper more relevant to the bulk of people who live here. Here's one idea: Instead of hiring a "celebrity justice reporter," now being sought for the Times website, why not develop a beat on economic justice? It might interest some of the millions of workers who draw hourly wages and are being squeezed by soaring rents, health care costs and debt loads.

In Los Angeles, the underground economy is growing faster than the legitimate one, which means more exploited workers, greater economic polarization, and a diminishing quality of life for everyone who lives here. True, it's harder to capture those kinds of stories than to scan divorce files and lawsuits. But over time, solid reporting on the economic life of Los Angeles could bring distinction and credibility to the Times. It also holds tremendous potential for interacting with readers. And, above all, it's important.

In a way, the Times created my obsession for economic and class issues by sending me into low-wage Los Angeles as part of a 1998 initiative to increase coverage of Latinos. I was a seasoned journalist with lots of experience in Third World countries. Still, the level of exploitation I saw shocked me. Illegal immigrants, in particular, had no rights. In a range of industries, including manufacturing and retail, they were routinely underpaid and fired after any attempt to assert rights or ask for higher wages.

That disregard for workers spread up the chain of regional jobs, just as a crash in subprime home loans eventually lowers the entire real estate market. The same is happen-

ing to various degrees across the country.

Rather than reverse those troubling trends, recent political leaders have done just the opposite. Enabled by a Milton Friedman-inspired belief in free markets and the idea that poverty is proof of personal failure, not systemic failure, federal trade and regulatory policies have consistently undermined workers. The inequities worsened under President George W. Bush, who wears his antipathy toward labor on his sleeve. But few alarms were sounded by the mainstream press, including the Los Angeles Times.

In the easy vernacular of modern journalism, the Times and other newspapers routinely cast business and labor as powerful competitors whose rivalries occasionally flare up in strikes and organizing campaigns. What I saw was that workers almost always lose. Eventually I left the labor beat and wrote about education and housing. Even there, however, I noted a lack of enthusiasm for anything having to do with the region's working poor.

Why? The senior editors are not bad people. Like most journalists, they are in the business for the noblest of reasons. But in a region of increasing polarization, where six figure incomes put them in the top tier of the economy, they may not see the inequities in their own backyard.

I couldn't stop seeing them. I remembered the workers who killed chickens, made bagged salads, packed frozen seafood, installed closet organizers, picked through recycled garbage, and manufactured foam cups and containers. They were injured from working too fast, fired for speaking up, powerless, invisible. I saw that their impact on all of us who live in the region is huge.

Now, like hundreds of other mid-career journalists who are walking away from media institutions across the country, I'm looking for other ways to tell the stories I care about. At the same time, the world of online news is maturing, looking for depth and context. I think the timing couldn't be better.

With the Los Angeles Economic Roundtable, a source of economic research for 15 years, I'm exploring the development of a nonprofit online site to chronicle the regional economy from a full range of perspectives. We want to tap into the wealth of economic research being generated by academic institutions, business groups, labor unions and others, as well as the vast experience of ordinary Angelenos. After all, the economy is nothing more than how we live, work and consume, all drawn together.

Leaving a newspaper that was once my journalistic ideal is harder than I'd expected. It feels, I suppose, like walking out of a long marriage that was once filled with love and hope, but grew stale. There is nostalgia and regret, along with relief and new energy. I know it's time to let go of the old dreams and move on to new ones. Already, the Los Angeles Times is becoming part of my past.

by Nancy Cleeland, reprinted from *The Huffington Post*, May 28, 2007



Times Editors Speak Out

William F. Thomas
August 1971 to January 1989
Editorial staff in 1989:
About 1,200
Peak circulation: 1.1 million daily; 1.4 million Sunday

MY TIME AS EDITOR WAS DELIGHTFUL. When I was there, we had a publisher who was totally supportive, both in financial and in general terms, all the way around. His name was Otis Chandler. I was editor for 18 years, and I think in my first year he told me he wanted me to run my job as I saw fit; he didn't intend to interfere unless something was cataclysmic. We could put out the paper we wanted to put out with few restraints and lots of encouragement.

As for saying "bleep you" to an employee, which Mr. Zell has apparently done: Heavens, Otis would never have done that. I can imagine him saying it to me afterward, but in private. Otis, although no prude, was propriety personified. He was a hell of a good guy.

I've heard my motto is supposed to have been "do it once, do it right," but I never told anybody that. Everybody who worked for us had the idea that they didn't ever want to get it wrong. Not anything. The errors page was a very galling place for anybody who ever showed up on it, and it should be that way. People are going to make mistakes, you can't fault people—you just have to be aware of their limitations and strengths and work with them. That's really an important thing. People have distinct strengths, and you have to put them in the right job that they can do and keep them away from the things they can't do. We had reporters who were wonderful biographers and personality profilers—and they could explain people but were just no damn good at expository writing. So you assigned them to their strengths. We had a few people who could do anything, too.

"Mission statement." I have always hated that expression, and the idea of "the vision thing." But to boil it right down, you had to make the paper as good—as complete, thorough, and accurate—as you possibly could. And interesting, too. That meant you never really had enough of anything.

Back then there was a feeling of almost endless limits, which is a bit different from where the industry is today. The budget had to be sensible. You had to submit it and defend it going in. But I never experienced any real restraints on anything we wanted to do for budget reasons. Maybe my ambitions were too small! We put in a flock of new bureaus all over the place, the travel budget was going up. The only limit I recall was when they started enforcing a "no-first class" rule. You used to be able to fly first class if your trip was more than 1,000 miles, and they changed that. Pretty tough, huh?

Shelby Coffey III
January 1989 to October 1997
Editorial staff in 1989:
About 1,200
Peak circulation: 1.2 million daily; 1.5 million Sunday

IT WAS FOR ME A TREMENDOUSLY stimulating time. The paper was so big and had big plans. We were able to add the Ventura County edition, build up the Orange County edition, add foreign bureaus, add to the Washington bureau, set up investigative teams—in Los Angeles, Orange County, and Washington. We were able to add over 100 staffers. We did a redesign of the paper, went to color—all these things that we now take for granted, but it was a pretty big change at the time. There were always new things to do, new challenges to meet.

Then after a couple of years, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet Union, the federal government decided it was going to get a peace dividend. The aerospace industry really tightened up. We entered a regional recession as well as a nationwide one. Southern California lost 200,000 to 250,000 relatively high-paying jobs, and that had a big ripple effect. We did our first [staff] buyouts then. That was a difficult period.

Meanwhile, another media world was dawning, much of it in Northern California. Will Hearst, publisher of the San Francisco Examiner and a good friend of mine, invited me to come up for the cross-bay World Series in 1989. Will was one of the first print guys to go really techie, and

he gathered friends from Silicon Valley, including Scott McNealy from Sun Microsystems and this guy from Seattle by the name of Bill Gates. We all sat in Will's box, and afterward they were very nice over dinner about keeping me in the conversation. As they talked about their digital world and dreams of the future, it was like scales falling from my eyes. I remember coming back and talking to Times Mirror people and telling them that this Internet is not a fad, it is not going away, and you guys need to get going on this thing. To its credit, Times Mirror made a major investment in Netscape, but so many of its Web efforts didn't work.

Now the major issue confronting the whole industry is, How do you build into a digital future? How does a business model work if you're getting 10¢ per eyeball on the digital side when you're used to getting a dollar per eyeball on the print side?

I spent a lot of time with Otis Chandler. That's how I got there—I went weight lifting with him in Washington, and we hit it off. He was such an interesting guy, and he was great for giving the long—and I mean long—historical view, as well as a guy who liked the new. I had taken up boxing, as Otis had. There's an expression Otis used: "You have to keep punching, because you've always got that puncher's chance." I'm sure he'd be saying it about the digital world today—you have to keep punching.

Another thing Otis said: He thought that Los Angeles was held together by three elements—sunshine, the freeway system, and the Los Angeles Times. There are generations of politicians and government leaders who have stopped and said to themselves, "Hmm, what I'm about to do—how's that going to look on the front page of the Times tomorrow?" That gives pause. And though giving pause is rarely what a newspaper is given credit for, it's an important role, vital even. It's a role that changes history.

Michael Parks
October 1997 to April 2000
Editorial staff in 1997:
About 1,200
Peak circulation: 1.1 million daily; 1.4 million Sunday

WHEN I BECAME EDITOR, I WON from the publishers, first Mark Willes and then Kathryn Downing, a no-layoffs pledge. I did have one buyout. I think 22, maybe 25, people took it. At the same time, though, we found resources for our Latino Initiative. It designated about 15 people, mostly reporters, to cover areas of particular interest to Latinos and where Latinos were active. We also found the resources for some special sections, including three on education that shaped the gubernatorial election, because education became a leading issue.

I was at the point of a decision in late 1999, early 2000, that all breaking news needed to go on the Web. By the time the newspaper comes out, people will have seen and heard it already on TV, radio, and the Internet. The year I left, in the 2000 budget we added 22 positions for a continuous news desk for latimes.com. They were built into a newsroom remodel. Then the paper was sold, and they were taken out—deleted—because Tribune Interactive took over with its Chicago-based, top-down approach.

If I were the editor today—I'm not applying for the job—and if I had 400 fewer journalists than I had in the year 2000, along with the pressure for instant coverage on the Web, where would I find the people for all of this? You have to get more imaginative in your coverage choices. The Los Angeles Times should not run and hunt with The New York Times and The Washington Post. It's sui generis. It needs to be reported, written, and edited for the people of Southern California. They're not provincials, though. They live in the city that has the potential to be the world capital of the 21st century. If I were the editor, I would have a passion for understanding the people of Los Angeles, of Southern California. How do they see the future? What are their interests? What will their interests be?

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Reckless Disregard

Dean Baquet could not have foreseen his ascension to journalistic martyrdom when he left his job as national editor of the New York Times to become the second in command at the Los Angeles Times in 2000. Lured by the paper's well-regarded new editor, John Carroll, Baquet also admired what seemed a true commitment by the paper's new parent corporation, the Chicago-based Tribune Co., to oomphing the Times' national profile. But six years later, Baquet, like Carroll before him, resigned rather than cut mission-critical staff to boost shareholder return.

At first it seemed Carroll and Baquet would preside over a real renaissance. The Los Angeles Times was already the fourth-biggest paper in the United States, and they upped their wattage considerably, adding big-name bylines like Kevin Sack and Sam Howe Verhovek. During their tenure, the Times won 13 Pulitzers, more than any other paper but the New York Times. Operating profits were exceptional (for any sort of business) at 20 percent.

So why is Baquet or, for that matter, Carroll or publisher Jeff Johnson no longer overseeing the paper? When Tribune Co.'s strategy of cross-media ownership failed to deliver the returns promised investors, it demanded ever deepening rounds of cuts from its various properties. "Wall Street is incredibly short-sighted," says veteran newspaper analyst John Morton. "It doesn't care what happens to a company 10 years out. It only cares what happens next quarter, which is unfortunate for papers like the Los Angeles Times."

Instead of recognizing that the Times eclipsed the Chicago Tribune as the company's marquee franchise, Tribune executives flogged it in a fashion that even Joan Crawford would have found excessive. Though Carroll eliminated more than 200 jobs during his five-year reign, the company that Joseph Medill built wanted more. By 2005, Carroll had had enough, and left for Harvard.

With Baquet's ascension to top editor—the first African American to hold such a job at a top-tier daily—things only got worse. Baquet and Johnson, a Tribune lifer, slashed another \$10 million in 2005. Unsatisfied with their returns, investors demanded that Tribune put itself up for sale, and more layoffs were demanded. By now the Times had cut 25 percent of its 2000 staff level, and the strain was beginning to show, particularly, says Baquet, in suburban coverage, especially the "O.C.," where the Times faces stiff competition from the Orange County Register.

Last September, a group of Los Angeles power brokers that included the head of the Urban League and former secretary of state Warren Christopher wrote a letter to the Tribune Co. beseeching it to either reinvest in the Times or sell it to a company that would. Soon after, Baquet took the issue public when the Times broke the story that he and Johnson would no longer bend to Chicago's will.

Baquet says he was not opposed to sensible cuts nor, as some have said, to prioritizing resources to the paper's website. The problem, he says, is "newspapers are in a panic—the cutting is not part of anything. It's not moving toward anything. It's not part of a plan. It's to prop up margins that maybe cannot be propped up."

"It's popular now to say, and some people at Tribune have said, it's easy to confuse resources and quality," Baquet adds. "That's bullshit. It just is. If you made a list of the finest papers in the country, I promise you there would be a relationship between resour-

es and quality. It's illogical to assume otherwise, and newspapers that try to convince themselves otherwise are kidding themselves."

But the Tribune Co. did not want to listen to a voice of reason, and by mid-November it had jettisoned both Baquet and Johnson, sending a bleak message to newsrooms across the country. If this could happen to a high-profile paper with such exceptional profit margins, what in God's name will become of the Richmond Times-Dispatch?

And what of the true role of the Los Angeles Times, or any other paper—its central mission of public service? "We are not a regular business," notes Baquet. "We insist that the mayor and governor meet us when we want to meet with them. We insist that the military let us travel with them; we insist that the president has press conferences. There aren't a lot of companies that can make those kinds of demands of the government or even private business. In return we're going to act a little bit like a public-service institution. We can't pretend we're like just another private business, because we're not. We get too many benefits from government and have too much responsibility to act like Microsoft."

By Sridhar Pappu, reprinted from The Mother Jones, March/April 2007 Issue

International reporting is stuck in the wrong paradigm. First, if you are Korean, you can get news about Korea online from Seoul in far greater depth than the L.A. Times could ever provide. Second, how many stories do you read, even now, about why the United States needs to fear Russia? About China and how we have to be afraid of China? I'm not speaking about the L.A. Times; I'm speaking generally. We need a new paradigm. Why are children in Singapore so much better at math than our children? How is Japan dealing with an aging population that is increasingly on an inverted pyramid, resting on a smaller and smaller active workforce? This is a question we have to face. How does Australia, which is immigrant hungry, settle its immigrants? How do they find jobs?

It won't do to say people don't want to read about these things. That's an excuse. Our job is to make interesting what's important. We can't be chasing after Britney Spears all the time. Maybe people are interested in Britney Spears, so there's TMZ. I'd give them the Web site address. How do you make interesting what's important? Better writing, better writing, better writing. Usually shorter writing. Better editing, smarter editing. The first question I used to ask before I wrote a story was "What do I want it to say?" Today the first question needs to be "Whom do I want to reach? Who is going to be reading it?"

Then I'd find that I still didn't have enough people. I don't think my friends in the newsroom will like to hear this, but they have to do more work. There are stonecutters in the Times newsroom, people who take a very long time to write a very good story, but they are known in the trade as stonecutters. I wouldn't want to lose the power of storytelling or the ability to bind facts together in ways that help people understand them better. Sure, it takes time. But some of those stories get overreported. I'd want to work with a growth-minded publisher. If there are 700 reporters and editors left, though, that's a fantastic number. Good work is absolutely doable on a smaller scale.

John S. Carroll
April 2000 to August 2005
Editorial staff in 2000:
About 1,200
Peak circulation: 1.1 million daily; 1.4 million Sunday

IT WAS MY FIRST WEEK, AND SOMEBODY said, "Can you say a few words at the [Times] book festival?" I thought it would be in a church basement with a few people, but it was a production, like the Oscars. I had a drink in the glorious L.A. evening, and I thought how wonderful this was. Would it be like this all the time?

I was in L.A. again recently. The paper was better than I expected. In spite of all its travails, it's still a better paper than most Americans have—few Americans have a paper that's even close. It's a hell of a paper. But the problem for somebody heading up the Times today is much more difficult, more intractable, than the one I faced.

Just before I became editor, there had been a breach of journalism ethics, the Staples affair, when the paper went into a business partnership with an advertiser it was writing about. There was a built-in solution—the entire newsroom rose up and said, "This will not be tolerated." From then on, it wasn't. Today the newsroom can't rise up and say, "The shattering of our business model by the Internet is intolerable." We have to live with it. Staples might have been a problem on a higher plane, namely ethics, and this is a mere business problem—but it's the kind of problem that can do you in.

If I knew the answer, believe me, I wouldn't be sitting here in Lexington,

Kentucky, writing a book. The future is on the Web, but nobody has figured out how to make enough money on the Web to sustain journalism at the level that L.A. Times readers have come to expect. When you're the editor of a paper and you're engaged in news, you're probably not the best person to make sweeping changes, because you're going after stories, spending all your hours on specific things. But if I had it to do over again, I might have taken some time off and tried to figure out where the Web was going and tried to do something about it.

At the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, I did some of that after I left the Times. I read the blogs and interviewed 50 people involved with the future of newspapers as a business. There wasn't any point in interviewing news people, because they were so floored by the change, they didn't know any more than I did. Then I interviewed people in high finance and technology, and I started to get a clearer, but quite bleak, picture. A farseeing editor in 2000 might have set out to create Web sites that would dominate fields important in Southern California—for example, movies. Why not build the complete database for movies? Go there if you want to know who a gaffer was in a 1932 production, or if you want to learn about current releases. It could be the place for movie junkies. You'd draw movie advertising. There were things that could have been done at the time to help the paper flourish in the digital world and to bring in some money. Today that world feels more crowded.

Is that a solution? I don't know. Newspapers are losing one revenue stream: circulation. The other revenue stream, advertising, is so competitive and cheap on the Web that it's hard to make big money on it. So how do you sustain large-scale, expensive journalism? As an advertising vehicle, you're competing with Web sites that assemble a staggeringly large audience and spend almost nothing on content. And the L.A. Times is spending well in excess of \$100 million a year on content. How do you price your ads competitively with someone who is spending nothing?

I love newspapers. When I stand back, though, I know it's not important that the world have large print papers around, but it is necessary that there be large teams of paid reporters covering town halls, cops, courts, governments, wars, and so forth, and the businesses to sustain that kind of coverage are ceasing to exist. That is a profound question of public policy. Who is going to pay the bills? Alternatively, how poorly informed can the American public become and still succeed at democratic self-government?

Zell? He has taken on a big one. He probably didn't fully realize how devastating the loss of the business model is—and will be. But I would say, from reading about him and reading his memos, that he's clearly intellectually more acute than the people he replaced. Maybe he'll figure out how to preserve journalism as well as his capital.

I wouldn't bet on it, though.

Dean Baquet
August 2005 to November 2006
Editorial staff in 2005:
About 950
Peak circulation: 870,000 daily; 1.2 million Sunday

YOU COULD MAKE A CASE THAT I HAD THE misfortune to land when the paper was debating its ambitions. That wasn't fun, but it was still a great newspaper. A big part of my day was running coverage of a city that had a remarkable new mayor, probably the most colorful in a generation; the coverage of a state with probably the most compelling governor in the country; and coverage of a na-

tion riven by the war in Iraq, where we had a Baghdad bureau as good as any.

The 20 percent of my time that I spent dealing with a bad publisher—and I mean David Hiller, not Jeffrey Johnson—was not the dominant part of my day. I spent most of my time with a newsroom that really wanted to change and do great stuff. I brainstormed ideas with a staff that wanted leadership, and for a brief moment it seemed as if we could be the best paper in the country.

I almost didn't become the editor. When John Carroll left, I was worried about being the editor who would have to take the paper down. I didn't know Jeffrey Johnson, my first publisher, all that well, and I didn't know he was going to be the fine publisher he turned out to be. I took the job, to be frank, because people started coming into my office with rumors that John was leaving, and they asked me to stay. I got notes from people I had persuaded to stay, saying it was my obligation to stay, too.

When people think John and I didn't understand financial realities, they are wrong. We had already cut the hell out of the place. It got to be bad for business and journalism. That's one reason they're struggling with revenue now. They've cut too much—from the business side and the newsroom. They did it without any plan. It was mindless cutting to meet a number.

The cutters never understood or cared about journalism. When I left, I walked away from any kind of cash severance, because I refused to sign a pledge never to criticize the Tribune Company. They were baffled. They never understood that, as a journalist, I would never forfeit my right to speak out.

Tribune was not a good steward, but Zell seems to be worse. Tribune didn't like the L.A. Times, but Zell seems to be flailing and making it up as he goes along. At least with Tribune, you could have a rational fight—they never shouted obscenities at me. I wish somebody could tell this guy that he's presiding over important newspapers and that sounding like a knucklehead won't work in the newspaper business. Doesn't he understand that the best people at the Times are floating résumés across the country because of his bullying?

Shredding the Washington bureau, foreign bureaus—I think it's unpatriotic. I thought businessmen were supposed to believe in bedrock Americanism. It's stunning that I need to read only two or three newspapers to know what's going on in the nation's capital. The L.A. Times is one. Is it really getting to where the only ones covering what is going on in Iraq are The New York Times and The Washington Post? Is that really good for the country?

People who complain about what they see as media bias criticize coverage of the war. Is the answer reducing to two the papers covering a war in which hundreds of Americans are being killed? It's stunning that these people won't stop to realize what that really means. I think Sam should study the readership surveys. They show that Southern Californians care about local news but also about national and foreign coverage. Whoever is telling him otherwise is just saying what they think he wants to hear.

James O'Shea
November 2006 to January 2008
Editorial staff in 2006:
About 850
Peak circulation: 877,000 daily; 1.2 million Sunday

WHEN I FIRST GOT THE JOB, I WALKED INTO the newsroom, and everywhere I looked I saw a picture of Dean Baquet or Otis Chandler. "Oh, great," I thought. "I'm up against a saint and a dead man! This isn't going to be easy."

It wasn't. That first day, I ad-



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