Chicago Sun-Times fires all staff photographers

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3 June 2013

On Thursday, May 30 the *Chicago Sun-Times* newspaper announced that it was laying off its entire 28-person staff of photographers.

The *Sun-Times* photographers were informed of their layoffs in a profoundly hostile manner despite years, in some cases decades, of work for the newspaper. On Wednesday night, they were all told to come to the office the next day at 9:30 a.m. for what would be just the second meeting with the new owners since the paper was purchased by Wrapports LLC.

Rob Hart, one of the laid-off photographers, reported that his boss also called and asked for the serial numbers of all his equipment. While the photographers were being informed of their layoffs and receiving information about their layoff packages, their magnetic building access badges were deactivated.

While the *Sun-Times* attempted to portray the firings as part of a reorientation to video and multimedia content driven by consumer demand, the reality is that the newspaper is attempting to shed the more costly aspects of newsgathering and return the newspaper to profitability for the benefit of its owners.

The layoffs are the latest in a series of cost-cutting measures since the newspaper filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2009. At the time, the threat of outright closure of the paper was utilized by its prospective buyer, financier James C. Tyree—previously chairman and CEO of Mesirow Financial—to extract concessions from the workforce. These included 15 percent pay cuts, conversion of the pension fund to a 401(k), and the elimination of seniority rights in regard to layoffs.

More recently, in March, the *Sun-Times* fired several editors and staff members at suburban newspapers in the Sun-Times Media Group and consolidated their newsrooms to the downtown Chicago headquarters. Around the same time, the newspaper fell behind on its monthly payments to the *Chicago Tribune* for printing and distribution. The Sun-Times Media Group shut down its own printing presses in 2011 to save money and now pays the *Tribune* around $70 million per year on a 10-year contract.

Wrapports was formed in late 2011 by local investors to take over the *Sun-Times* after the death of Tyree, which created problems for his planned restricting of the newspaper. The chairman of Wrapports, Michael W. Ferro, Jr., is the chairman and CEO of Merrick Ventures, a private equity firm, and Merge Healthcare, a health records and imaging company.

Wrapports' CEO is Timothy Knight, who is the former president and CEO of Newsday, and before that the mergers and acquisitions counsel for the Tribune Company. Other board members include John A. Canning, Jr., of Madison Dearborn Partners, a private equity firm; Michael J. Sacks, CEO of Grosvenor Capital Management, a leading hedge fund; and Rodney O' Neal, CEO and president of Delphi.

The Wrapports ownership group is joined by other wealthy investors, such as Warren Buffett and Douglas Manchester, who have made recent purchases of struggling newspapers, often to the detriment of employees and to the readership. Billionaire Sam Zell's purchase of the Tribune Company led to a deterioration in the quality of news reporting and an emphasis on entertainment holdings.

The strategy of the Wrapports' ownership is to abandon the intensive work of reporting with more entertaining multimedia and video content. The aim is, in part, to capture the higher advertising rates available for online video in comparison to the "banner" ads that appear next to text and photos on newspaper websites. Knight also oversaw the firing of the entire photography staff at Newsday in 2008, allowing those

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laid-off to reapply for “multimedia” positions.

Aside from the use of freelancers, who receive no benefits or regular salary, the *Sun-Times* also plans to train all editorial staff, including reporters, in the use of iPhones to make up for the lost content. This underscores that the firings have little to do with the need for video and multimedia as against traditional photography, but are rather about the de-professionalization of workers in order to lower costs.

Among the photographers laid off by the newspaper was John H. White, a long-time *Sun-Times* photojournalist who won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography in 1982 while working for the newspaper. Speaking about what the newspapers’ readers would lose without the insights and skills of professional photojournalists, White said that “humanity is being robbed by people with money on their minds.”

The elimination of the photography department by the *Sun-Times* occurs in the context of an overall degradation of American society, including its democratic culture, led by the financial aristocracy, for whom an effective and free press it not only a drain on profits but a barrier to their political agenda.

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