

Last P-I printed, Seattle becomes a journalism lab

March 18 2009, By GENE JOHNSON , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Patrick Sheldon has been a loyal reader of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer since 1965, when his dad started buying it because he preferred its sports coverage to that of rival Seattle Times.

Will he continue being a loyal reader, now that the P-I exists only as a Web site? Like many of the paper's customers, he says it depends on who writes and what they cover.

"If it's just bloggers, I probably won't," he said, sitting on a ferry from Bainbridge Island to Seattle.

After 146 years, the P-I's final edition rolled off the presses Tuesday, but a skeleton crew remained in the cavernous newsroom to take part in a journalistic experiment: whether a major newspaper can make money, and consistently produce good stories, as an Internet-only operation. It's the first major U.S. daily paper to switch from print to digital, a step that the P-I's parent company, Hearst Corp., took after it failed to find a buyer for the newspaper.

Seattlepi.com on Tuesday featured many of the same articles that appeared in the final edition, including somber remembrances of days gone by. But it also offered a glimpse of what the site will look like once the content produced by the full staff vanishes, including breaking news updates from crime and political reporters, columns by Seattle luminaries such as U.S. Rep. Jim McDermott and about 150 blogs by readers. Some marquee names, including columnist Joel Connelly and

cartoonist David Horsey, will remain on staff, while sports columnists Art Thiel and Jim Moore will freelance for the Web site.

The final edition sold quickly; The Seattle Times, which handled nonnews functions for the P-I under a joint operating agreement that dated to 1983, printed three times as many P-Is as usual. At First and Pike News, in Pike Place Market, the final P-I sold out by 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, even though the newsstand had 600 copies delivered instead of the usual 50. Liberal [radio talk show](#) host Ron Reagan, the son of the late president, showed up to buy one for his producer, who lives in New York.

"It's a sad day, but I guess that's the way things go," he said.

Sen. Patty Murray eulogized the paper on the Senate floor, crediting its investigative reporting as the reason she introduced legislation to ban asbestos and to boost the number of FBI agents in the region.

"At the end of the day, newspapers aren't just another business," she said. "For generations, newspaper reporters have been the ones who have done the digging, sat through the meetings and broken the hard stories."

At the P-I, laid-off reporters continued clearing out their desks. Some were still suffering after a night of hard drinking when they showed up Tuesday for their exit interviews.

Among those most skeptical about whether [seattlepi.com](#) can thrive with an editorial staff of 20 - about 130 fewer than the print edition had - are those who lost their jobs.

"You cannot kill a newsroom and still cover news; we didn't have enough people to cover everything that deserved coverage as it was!" reporter Debera Harrell wrote in a forum for P-I employees at the Columbia

Journalism Review's Web site. "In an era where Paris Hilton and Angelina Jolie's breastfeeding earn the most hits off our [website](#), maybe real journalists are not needed."

"A staff of 20 can't cover what over 150 reporters and editors covered for the print product," former assistant managing editor Janet Grimley agreed.

Several of the laid-off workers are exploring the idea of creating their own news Web site, possibly in partnership with Seattle public television station KCTS.

The remaining P-I employees say they know what they're up against.

"Seattlepi.com will continue to cover city hall, crime, courts, real estate, development, education, transportation and more," executive producer Michelle Nicolosi wrote in a letter to readers. "I hope you'll pardon our dust for the next few weeks as we launch our new digital news and information Web site."

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