
2008 in Review

Out of wreckage, let the real 21st century begin

By Cheryl Devall

A widely quoted aphorism suggests that the 1950s ended on Nov. 22, 1963. After eight difficult years for the world, there's a sense as this year turns that the new century may finally begin on Jan. 20.



Of course, much of the passing era's detritus lingers for the administration of President-elect Barack Obama to clean up. The job is big, and fewer journalists than monitored the last regime change will be around to record this one.

[Image, hugemagazine.com]

Ever-larger numbers of mainstream journalists shifted from observing to participating in one of the biggest stories in a year full of them – the downward spiral of the economy. During a single day in early December, Gannett eliminated more than 800 jobs at its media properties across the country. The numerical and emotional tally surfaced in [blog posts](#) from Phoenix to Nashville to Westchester, N.Y.



Tribune Company, [whose owner, [Sam Zell](#), infamously said he hasn't figured out a way to cash in on a Pulitzer Prize] filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in December. Like the corporate owners of the San Jose Mercury News, Zell had hoped to find buyers for newspaper headquarters buildings – notably Tribune Tower in Chicago and the Los Angeles Times. [Image, rbr.com]



The New York Times has borrowed against the value of its new building for operating cash. And the owners of the Rocky Mountain News of Denver and the Miami Herald are shopping those papers around. This followed multiple rounds of staff reductions at all the aforementioned, and dozens of others. The dismal state of the newspaper business prompted the Fitch credit rating firm to predict in Editor & Publisher that several cities may claim no local [daily paper](#) in another couple of years. [Photo, guardian.co.uk]

Yet there was so much for journalists in every medium to cover – indeed, in a manner unusual for even the chronically self-critical news industry, managers sounded off about “news fatigue” as shrinking staffs scrambled to cover a succession of major breaking events - including gubernatorial follies in New York and Illinois that transformed the names Elliot Spitzer, David Paterson and Rod Blagojevich into punchlines for political satirists.

TV-Radio took a pounding too

Other media platforms also lost content producers and other key personnel from their print and multimedia departments. Television stations in several markets decided not to renew the contracts of high-profile veteran news anchors. [In a sign of the times, an NBC correspondent announced his departure last month on his Facebook.com page]

Commercial radio, in the midst of a slump in advertising sales, further scaled back its generally perfunctory emphasis on news; in Los Angeles, two of the leading all-news AM stations announced late in the year that they’d turn much of their weekend programming over to infomercials.



Public radio – long insulated by strong listener, foundation and corporate support – saw major donations and endowment income drop in the turbulent stock market. Some of its largest producers and distributors cut programs, personnel or both, including 65 staffers and two daily shows – “Day to Day” and “News and Notes” at National Public Radio, as did public radio stations in several cities. [Image, podbean.com]

Journalism educators continue to argue that degrees in the field are [still valuable](#) amid the changing media landscape, and students like the 92 who covered the Unity ’08 Chicago convention in multiple platforms continue to gravitate toward the craft.

The forms in which present and future journalists will cover the news are still evolving. In its first full year of operation, ProPublica, the foundation-supported nonprofit that fosters investigative work, scored some collaborations with the New York Times and

CBS' "60 Minutes." Politico became a go-to source for news and analysis during the campaign season, and the [Web site](#) expanded its reach in the newspaper realm.

The gatekeepers of the Pulitzer Prizes conceded that Web sites independent of established news organizations can break significant stories; the Columbia-administered awards will acknowledge that content from now on.

As many major papers decided to sever longstanding ties with the Associated Press – another organization in the process of reinventing itself – CNN offered newspapers an alternative that its executives insisted is not a rival to AP.

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Rubble on Wall Street, Main Street

The recession that we now know began a year ago cost at least 2 million jobs this calendar year. That doesn't count the “discouraged workers” who gave up looking for employment, the millions of people pulling part-time shifts who'd rather work full-time or the immigrants who've decided to pack it in and return to their home countries. The human and corporate collateral damage ranges from Circuit City to Citibank. Gasoline prices that averaged \$4 per gallon at midyear stretched household budgets beyond thin and helped to boost the demand for food pantries and for free and reduced-price lunches in public school districts across the country.

On one day a few weeks before the election, the Dow Jones Industrial Average zoomed up 900 points, then lost 700, then regained 400 points. The shrinkage of retirement savings and the failure of banks including Wachovia and Washington Mutual that had relied heavily on the subprime mortgage market hurt Americans from Wall Street to Main Street – as politicians and pundits grimly reiterated through the fall. Small wonder that economic concerns displaced the grinding wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as the major issue in the U.S. presidential campaign.

Victory, and resentment

The emphasis of the Republican presidential ticket – U.S. Sen. John McCain of Arizona and the oft-lampooned Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin – on McCain's past wartime service and imprisonment and the prospect of victory in the present conflicts failed to resonate with many Americans who'd voted Republican in previous elections.

That doesn't mean the Democrats' return to the White House and gains in the Senate haven't engendered considerable bitterness, even resentment. Just scan the reader comments that repeat campaign rhetoric about the dangers of imminent “socialism,” “hero-worship” and worse after almost any article about the president-elect and the

transition. And don't forget the runoff victory of Republican Sen. Saxby Chambliss of Georgia, a victory some political observers have dubbed the first salvo in the 2010 midterm elections.

Large numbers of African Americans, young people, college-educated and urban voters swelled the tide for Obama in all four corners of the continental United States. But with the notable exceptions of Virginia, North Carolina and Florida, most of the old Confederacy remained firmly in the Republican camp as it had for the previous 40 years.

Healing will take time

Most of the world applauded the Obama election – and not merely because it signaled a decisive end to two long years of campaigning and eight years of policies that had increasingly isolated the United States on issues from torture to immigration to family planning to climate change.

Well before an inauguration that promises to fill the nation's capital beyond capacity, the outgoing administration has seemed to fade into obscurity alongside the emergence of an intellectually curious, multicultural young leader eager to engage with the entire country – cities included [take heart, New Orleans!] – and with the wider world.



This world took quite a beating from deadly natural phenomena – hurricanes that pounded Cuba [Photo, somosprimos.com], Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the cyclone that wiped out untold numbers of Burmese lives in early May and, later that month, the catastrophic earthquake in China's Sichuan Province – and from human malfeasance – continued systematic displacement and rape in Somalia's

Darfur region, a criminally negligent regime in Zimbabwe that's contributing at this writing to a cholera epidemic, orchestrated terror attacks in India's commercial capital, Mumbai, stunning levels of carnage and corruption in the Mexican drug wars.

Healing will take time – more than one or even two presidential terms. There's no guarantee we'll have the necessary time or mutual trust within and beyond our borders to promote life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as broadly as possible on this planet. Yet there is, palpably during the coldest season of the year, the flickering promise of a quality that's become more than a ubiquitous political slogan: hope.



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for Southern California
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Gone, but not forgotten: Notable deaths



In the final days of 2007, **Thomas Morgan, 56**, NABJ president from 1989-91 and before that longtime treasurer during the association's high-growth years [Second from the right in photo, wd archive]. Also in those closing days, **Oscar Peterson, 82**, elegant Canadian [jazz pianist](#), and **Frank Morgan, 73**, virtuoso [bebop saxophonist](#), and **Deborah Tang, 60**, creator of [news, public affairs](#), sports and gospel programming at Black Entertainment Television.

Ivan Dixon, 76, who played Duff Anderson in the landmark [1964 film](#) "Nothing But a Man," and Sgt. Kinchlow in World War II farce "Hogan's Heroes." March



Luther P. Jackson Jr., 83, Columbia J-school's first black professor [Dawkins photo, right]. He served from 1969-1992. April. **Will Robinson, 96**, first African-American Division I basketball coach at Illinois State University in 1970, April.

Thomas A. Johnson, 79, [newsman](#) who desegregated Newsday, and later became a national and foreign correspondent with the New York Times, June; **Kenneth Maurice Jones, '81, age 50**, [freelance writer](#) who lived with HIV-AIDS for two decades, June. **Barbara Ann Teer, 71**, founder of the [National Black Theater](#) of Harlem. July

Bernie Mac [born Bernard J. McCullough], **50**, the bug-eyed, menacing [comic](#) who really was a teddy bear. He was introduced to larger audiences as one of the four "Kings of Comedy," then became the star of a Fox-TV sitcom. Famous words: "America ... Bernie Mac don't play that." August ... within 24 hours of Mac's death, **Isaac Hayes, 65**,

one of the stars of Memphis-based Stax Records, died. Hayes made shaved heads sexy during his heyday in the 1970s. His ballads were [hot buttered soul](#) and Hayes warned us that brotha “Shaft is a baaaad mother ... shut your mouth!” Hayes won an Oscar in 1971.

U.S. Rep. **Stephanie Tubbs-Jones, 58**, D-Ohio, a [loyal supporter](#) of presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, and a standout inside the Congressional Black Caucus, August; **Julius Carry III, 56**, [sitcom actor](#) who referenced the NABJ Salute to Excellence Award on an episode of “Murphy Brown,” August; NFL Players Association [representative](#) and Hall of Fame lineman **Gene Upshaw, 63**, August;

Nancy Hicks Maynard, 61, New York Times [reporter](#) in the late 1960s who covered a wide variety of beats and in the 1970s with husband [Robert C. Maynard](#) established the Institute for Journalism Education in California, September. **Levi Stubbs, 72**, [lead singer](#) of the Four Tops, and the [distinctive baritone](#) on hits “Reach Out” [I’ll Be There], “It’s the Same Old Song,” and “I Can’t Help Myself” [Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch]. Stubbs was also voice of flesh-eating plant [“Feed me baybee!”], in the movie version of “Little Shop of Horrors,” October.

Miriam Makeba, 76, South African [singer](#) and voice of the black liberation struggle. She was married to Black Power activist Stokely Carmichael, November.

Odetta, 77, blues and folk singer who provided a [soundtrack](#) to the civil rights movement [“I’m on my way”] and inspired Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Janis Joplin, early December.

-- *Compiled by Wayne Dawkins*

The **Black Alumni Network** of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism was founded in May 1980 and since July the group has published a monthly newsletter. The BA Newsletter’s mission is to keep people connected. We publish job changes and moves, news about books and films published or produced by alumni, and family milestones. And of course we keep alumni connected to news from the Columbia GSJ. Log on to our Web site at www.jrn.columbia.edu/alumni/services/ban/ or see our link on the home page of www.blackjournalist.com Wayne J. Dawkins – **editor**, Betty Winston Baye, Kip Branch, Kissette Bundy, Angela Chatman, Cheryl Devall, Dan Holly, Keith Rushing, **contributing editors** E-mail tips, comments, suggestions to wdawk69643@aol.com

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