



The *Voice* Lives!

Nat Hentoff | September 05, 2012

There has been a recent media rush proclaiming that the *Voice* is dying as evidenced by a diminishing staff. In some of these death notices, my having been fired (the euphemism is “laid off”) after 50 years is meant to be hard proof of the imminent departure of the newspaper: “When Nat Hentoff Left . . . The Writing Was on the Wall: How Management Killed *The Village Voice*” (instapundit.com, August 18) and “*The Village Voice* Is Dead, Long Live Nat Hentoff” (legalinsurrection.com, August 18).

So how come I’ve been back here for more than a year? These morticians must not be reading the paper.

I’m not on staff. My base is the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., where I’m a senior fellow. But *Voice* editor Tony Ortega asked me back for a monthly column because he knows that two of my main passions in investigative columning are education and the Constitution—and I felt I still had work to do in this city.

Every month, I’m entirely free to dig into the continuing “racial achievement gap” in this largely segregated Bloomberg school system and, with regard to the Constitution, Ray Kelly’s smug dismissal of black and Latino students’ equal protection under the 14th Amendment. (He has also discarded their Fourth and Fifth Amendment rights.)

With regard to Ortega’s immersion in the history and spirit of the *Voice*, he is the only editor—once the *Voice* had been here long enough to have an identifiable past—to feature the newspaper’s history in regular fashion, in his Clip Job project, which, until May of last year, resulted in daily blog posts of significant and often still startling *Voice* breakthrough stories and commentary from its early years. These could make an illuminating book of the zeitgeist of this historically influential city for historians. The guy cares about this paper.

But, I’m still sometimes asked, how could I have come back to a paper that had fired me so summarily after it had become an inherent part of my identity? Sure, I was shocked and angry, but I did enjoy an unexpected dividend not permitted to

people who are still alive: I was able to read what could have been my obituaries up to that point. I had no idea that so many people across the country cared. So among those obits after I type my last chorus, there will now be more from the living *Voice*.

Getting back to the so-called evidence that the *Voice*'s life is hanging by a thread, the most quoted dirge is by former *Voice* writer Rosie Gray at BuzzFeed: "But the news Friday that four editorial staffers were laid off or had their hours cut to part-time at *The Village Voice*—two features writers, a news blogger, and a listings editor—makes the sad fact of that paper's eventual demise, evident for years, more immediate."

Hold your tears, said the Poynter Institute on August 20 in "*The Village Voice Is Not Dead Yet, Contrary to Reports*."

For years, Poynter's News University in Florida has been a widely respected newsroom training ground through its links to other journalism programs. It's on my computer list of research favorites.

Poynter's Andrew Beaujon checked into Gray's story and reported that the *Voice* actually "has 15 full-time edit staffers, two part-time staffers, and four 'Bargaining Unit Freelancers,' a union-contract term for 'people who freelance enough to qualify for benefits.'"

Included in that tally is full-time *Voice* theater critic Michael Feingold. I've been in New York since 1953, and Feingold has exceeded all other theater critics in the city (and those I've read in other cities) in the creative and challenging depth of his reviews. He's still swinging here with zest and surprises.

As for *Voice* layoffs, they have become a common blight at what used to be called alternative weeklies, as well as at metropolitan dailies across the country. Journalists have become like ObamaCare doctors trying to hold on to Medicare payments for their services.

Now, let's look at how far from the grave the *Voice* actually is. If I were still teaching graduate-school journalism at New York University, I'd spend a long time with students discussing what makes Graham Rayman's 2010 series "The NYPD Tapes" so probing an investigation and deep illumination of how Ray Kelly runs his police department. Note that it was a continuing in-depth series, unlike so much of what gets swiftly printed on paper and in pixels these days.

In one of his poems, T.S. Eliot foretold the ever-growing shallowness of so much current journalism: "Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

By further contrast, this year, Rayman has shown similar depth and immediacy with the violent dangers on Rikers Island, beyond any court sentence.

Once again, this is a continuing *Voice* investigation. Back in 2008, Rayman brought us news of guards turning into matchmakers—pitting inmates to assault and abuse one another—and leading to the indictment of several Rikers guards. And this August, again with details appearing only in the *Voice*—he reported how a phony Correction Department task force to block the violence only made things worse.

Another *Voice* reporter who explores the inside story, Nick Pinto has not joined the many reporters across the country who felt the Occupy Wall Street story had had its time. He's now into the plans of Occupy foot soldiers who are looking for more radical and visual ways to bring attention to the insatiable 1 percenters—as well as those who have the gall to upset the way bail works in this city.

At the same time, Pinto brought a harsh light to the injustices experienced by airport-security workers mired in grim working conditions at meager wages, while airport security is supposed to be an urgent government concern.

Who cares? You sure might in your travels.

There are still some skittish journalists jiving that the *Voice* will soon disappear. I've been in this news business across the country for a long time. I was also writing elsewhere than at the *Voice* during the half-century I was on staff here. (I used to tell my kids not to depend on any single source for a living.)

I knew what I was doing when I came back as a sideman and not a staffer. I wanted to show Michael Bloomberg and Ray Kelly, among others, that I'm annoyingly still around.

And I sure didn't come to say Kaddish for the *Voice*.