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If It Ain't Broke, Break It: How Corporate Journalism Killed the Arkansas Gazette

Donna Lampkin Stephens

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The *Arkansas Gazette*, under the independent local ownership of the Heiskell/Patterson family, was one of the most honored newspapers of twentieth-century American journalism, winning two Pulitzer Prizes for its coverage of the Little Rock Central Crisis. But wounds from a fierce newspaper war against another local owner—Walter Hussman and his *Arkansas Democrat*—combined with changing economic realities, led to the family's decision to sell to the Gannett Corporation in 1986.

Whereas the Heiskell/Patterson family had been committed to quality journalism, Gannett was focused on the bottom line. The corporation shifted the *Gazette's* editorial focus from giving readers what they needed to be engaged citizens to informing them about what they should do in their leisure time. While in many ways the chain trivialized the *Gazette's* mission, the paper managed to retain its superior quality. But financial concerns made the difference in Arkansas's ongoing newspaper war. As the head of a privately held company, Hussman had only himself to answer to, and he never flinched while spending $42 million in his battle with the Pattersons and millions more against Gannett. Gannett ultimately lost $108 million during its five years in Little Rock; Hussman said his losses were far less but still in the tens of millions.

Gannett had to answer to nervous stockholders, most of whom had no tie to, or knowledge of, Arkansas or the *Gazette*. For Hussman, the Arkansan, the battle had been personal since at least 1978. It is no surprise that the corporation blinked first, and the Arkansas Gazette died on October 18, 1991, the victim of corporate journalism.

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