



September 2011

Ink in His Veins: Editor in Chief Kevin Convey is bullish on the rough and tumble--and haiku--of tabloid newspapers

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, David McKay (2011) "Ink in His Veins: Editor in Chief Kevin Convey is bullish on the rough and tumble--and haiku--of tabloid newspapers," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 100 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol100/iss3/8>

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CONVEY: PRINT INDUSTRY NOT DEAD YET P. 26

KEVIN
CONVEY '77

DAILY



NEWS


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INK IN HIS VEINS



Editor in Chief Kevin Convey is bullish on the rough and tumble—and haiku—of tabloid newspapers



Great tabloid headlines, says *New York Daily News* Editor in Chief Kevin Convey '77, need action, attitude, and crisp language. When Convey arrived in the newsroom the night of May 1 to trumpet the killing of Osama bin Laden, his team began brainstorming. Convey's first suggestion—the single word, “Dead”—alluded to the headline accompanying the iconic 1928 *Daily News* photograph of a murderess being electrocuted at Sing Sing, but most people wouldn't have understood the reference.

Another Convey suggestion, “We Got Him,” lacked the wallop he wanted. A copyeditor then proposed a provocative headline that Convey predicted would resonate with his core readership: “Rot in Hell!”

“It was perfect,” said Convey, noting that copies of that cover now sell for \$23.99 on eBay. “This guy was the biggest villain in modern times. The headline embodied the principle that headlines ought to wear their hearts on their sleeve.” >>

And that's precisely where Convey wears his love of the newspaper business, an industry that has kept him on the forefront of breaking news and popular music since he graduated from Colby 34 years ago. He now oversees a \$40-million news operation—both online and in print—that appeals to New York's working and middle classes.

Convey, a trim 56-year-old with a full head of hair and a gray, stubbled Vandyke beard, came to work one recent afternoon in a green glen plaid suit, Brooks Brothers shirt, and a black silk Armani tie with matching breast-pocket handkerchief. He wore no socks with his black tasseled loafers. Convey walks to work at the paper's downtown waterfront offices from his Tribeca loft several blocks away, where he lives with his wife, Kathy, a kindergarten teacher.

"I haven't worn socks in the summer for years," said Convey, whose son, Eamon,

is a junior at the University of Pittsburgh, and daughter, Mairead, matriculated this fall at Fordham. "I like cool beachy feet."

In his office, reminders of his Brockton, Mass., heritage are mixed with me-



mentos of his life in journalism and his love for the sport of boxing. On one shelf there's a signed portrait of middleweight legend Marvin Hagler, the Brockton resident who worked building the patio of Convey's parents' home, just below a pair of boxing gloves signed by Ukrainian heavyweights Vitali and Wladimir Klitschko. On one wall hangs a cartoon lampoon of his days at the *Boston Herald*, with Convey bidding farewell to his fellow editors.

Convey's ascension to one of daily journalism's top jobs caps a career that began at the *Times-Record* in Brunswick, Maine, after his graduation from Colby in 1977. By 1979 he'd moved to the *Standard Times* in New Bedford, Mass., before arriving at the *Boston Herald* as a business reporter in 1981. He rose through the ranks, becoming city





"[Kevin] had a knack for figuring out where to drive the coverage and where to set the edge. He could see where the story would be in the morning, not where it was today."

— Andrew Gully, formerly at the *Boston Herald*

Brockton boy with journo instincts

Convey says he's had "ink in his blood" since growing up in the working-class city of Brockton, 25 miles south of Boston. At age 8 he published one-page missives on a child's printing press to distribute to his neighbors. By his early teens he had a thriving paper route, delivering morning papers by a bike equipped with double rear baskets and a transistor radio in the handlebars. He wrote for his high school paper and learned the power of the daily newspaper when stories in the *Boston Globe* and *Boston Herald* staved off an attempt by the high school administration to stop publication of an especially racy issue on sex and drugs.

During two Jan Plans at Colby, Convey wrote for *Maine Times* and the *Bangor Daily News*. He reported for the *Colby Echo* as well, banging out a biting review of a student production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* at the Waterville Opera House.

Convey spent his junior year abroad at Trinity College in Dublin, where he deepened his study of Joyce and Yeats in their homeland. It was in Dublin, Convey says, that he became an adult—having to find an apartment and making do in a flat shared with Jeff Sherwood '75, which was heated by peat and had a drafty bathroom with a broken window. "We would sit around, wrapped in blankets," recalled Sherwood. "It was too much trouble to haul the fuel up to the flat. It was damp and cold."

Sherwood was among Convey's circle of friends on third-floor Dana Hall, a group that also included Alan Taylor '77, now a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian at the



At left, New York Daily News Editor in Chief Kevin Convey '77 in the newspaper's newsroom. Top, Convey confers with editors in the afternoon news meeting, with photo spreads from the next day's newspaper displayed for discussion. Above, Convey considers options for the next day's "cover" with a graphic designer.

editor in 1983. He was editor in chief there from 2007 to 2010.

Andrew Gully, who worked at the *Herald* for more than 20 years, says Convey had an uncanny ability to come up with the next day's "wood," the name for the tabloid's cover page, derived from the fact that, in the days of lead type, the type for front-page headlines was so large that the letters

were carved from blocks of wood. "Kevin was always looking for tomorrow's wood," recalled Gully, senior vice president for communications and external affairs at Brandeis University. "He had a knack for figuring out where to drive the coverage and where to set the edge. He could see where the story would be in the morning, not where it was today."

NOT DEAD YET

NY Daily News editor Convey points to online growth, increased revenues as positives in tabloid's future

The "Rot in Hell" edition of the *Daily News* was the biggest daily seller of Kevin Convey's first 12 months heading up the nation's seventh-largest daily. It's one of two big-city tabloid newspapers still operating in New York City's ultra-competitive daily newspaper market that includes Rupert Murdoch's tabloid, the *New York Post*, as well as the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, which now reports on metropolitan news.

The telephone-hacking scandal at Murdoch's British tabloids this summer was front-page news around the world, and the *Daily News* did its part to keep the story alive. In July a *Daily News* cover featured an unflattering close-up of Murdoch. It carried the headline "Humble Pie," which played off Murdoch's apologetic appearance before Parliament that concluded when a prankster tried to cram a cream-pie in the *News of the World* owner's face.

Convey's predecessor encouraged the competition between the *Daily News* and the *Post* to spill over into its news columns. But while Convey's paper did cover Murdoch getting pied in Parliament, Convey doesn't think readers care much about squabbles within the newspaper industry. "I feel it's a distraction," said Convey, who worked for Murdoch from 1982 to 1987 when the global media baron owned the *Boston Herald*. "I think journalists are more interested than people are. Our sales the day we put Murdoch on the front weren't particularly great."

The competition, though, is real, as the *News* and *Post* duke it out each morning, with the city's fickle readers often making their morning newsstand-buy depending on what mix of crime, celebrity, sports, and breaking news is splashed across the covers. In the most recent audited circulation report, the *Daily News* narrowly led, with an average of 531,000 *News* copies sold each weekday, compared to 523,000 *Posts*.

Convey arrived in New York as the industry continued to struggle through its wrenching transformation from newsprint to an uncertain digital fu-



Kevin Convey '77 with a souvenir cover of the brash tabloid he manages.

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—Kevin Convey '77

ture. The *Daily News* print edition still sells more than 500,000 copies a day, providing up to 90 percent of the company's income. But circulation continues to drop—down 24 percent from 708,000 each weekday in 2005. And though revenue continues to rise at www.nydailynews.com, which draws 20 million-plus unique visitors a month, Convey says he has to appeal to both audiences to keep his publications on the cutting edge of today's journalism. "The great bargain has been that ad-

vertisers were willing to pay enormous amounts to have access to the audience that newspapers were able to aggregate," said Convey. "The air fell out of that paradigm as circulation has dropped and advertisers discovered other ways to reach those audiences. Those ways may not be as convenient, but they are far less expensive."

He sees the print newspaper of the future as a niche product, with readers paying substantially more for the daily edition. "The mass medium will be on the Web and available through a host of personal electronic devices, some of which have yet to be invented," he said. "So we're trying to figure out how to negotiate the transition to being digital first, in a business sense, while still preserving the franchise. It's like trying to change the wheels on an Indy 500 car while the race is underway and without making a pit stop."

Convey has embraced the digital world. A survey of top newspaper editors by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies found that Convey was the only one to regularly use the social media site Twitter to keep in touch with readers. Convey—@NYDNKevinConvey—tweets to alert his followers of the best his paper offers that day. He also follows top commentators in the field of social media and digital news. "I'm surprised more editors aren't doing it," said Convey, a gourmet cook and music aficionado. "That's testament to how many

hard-core, ink-stained wretches at the top in the newspaper industry still aren't plugged into what's happening underneath them in this amazing, and somewhat terrifying, digital revolution."

Twitter is not the only way Convey keeps in touch with the paying customers. He periodically interacts with readers at breakfast meetings in New York's outer boroughs. He also convenes on-line chats with readers for discussions on such topics as the *Daily News's* coverage of celebrities, his march down Fifth Avenue in the Puerto Rican Day parade, and the newspaper's fascination with former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin. "Sarah Palin is a hit machine for us and our website," Convey said. "I don't know why she fascinates people so, but the fact that she does is incontrovertible."

Driving Web traffic, however, comes at a cost. The *Daily News*, like many newspaper websites, allows anonymous comments at the bottom of stories, attracting the kind of vitriol and name-calling that's disallowed in the news columns or in a traditional letter to the editor. But there's an audience for such exchanges, and a story's comments section can attract a bigger audience than the story itself. "I'm really, really torn on this," Convey said. "The newspaper is about free speech, and that also involves readers having the right to talk back to the newspaper. But allowing anonymous comments drives the civility of the comments into the ground. It's a real problem. I'm struck by the racism, sexism, and the coarseness of it all."

In August, as Convey prepared for the afternoon news meeting with his top editors, he lamented the doldrums of late summer. The biggest news that day focused on Washington, D.C., where legislators wrangled over the federal debt ceiling. Other stories up for page one concerned an elderly schoolteacher who was dismissed because she took too long taking her students to the bathroom, a Britney Spears concert, and a school principal's firing over his anti-Semitic rantings, which had been uncovered by a diligent *Daily News* reporter.

There was also that night's New York Yankees game, which could make the cover if the Bronx Bombers were victorious. Convey, a lifelong Red Sox fan, says he puts aside his fondness for the Bo-Sox when it comes to the next day's news. "When I'm wearing the *Daily News* eyeshade, I'm also wearing pin-striped underwear," said Convey, referring to the Yankees' classic pin-striped uniforms. "If the Yanks lose, newsstand sales are down. But a dramatic Yankees win can boost sales. There's no one thing more important to the *Daily News* than the New York Yankees."

The Yanks triumphed that night, and slugger Mark Teixeira shared the cover the next day with news of the debt deal. The stock market may have plunged, but for the *Daily News*, newsstand sales were up. **C**

KEVIN CONVEY '77: INK IN HIS VEINS

"I learned how to learn, and then teach it. Assimilating knowledge and reassembling it in an intelligible way for readers is at the crux of what we do."



Kevin Convey '77 in his office at the New York Daily News. Convey sees online traffic for the newspaper's website growing while declining print circulation presents difficult challenges.

University of California, Davis. Convey majored in classics and English while sampling a broad range of courses, including one in jazz taught by the Arnold Bernhard Professor of Arts and Humanities Paul Machlin. Convey credits that class with laying the foundation for his career in music criticism, which has featured thousands of album reviews and hundreds of features about music. "Without that course, I might have been an enthusiast, but I wouldn't have become an authority," he said.

In one of his online chats, he called himself "a proud liberal arts grad." And he says a liberal arts education fits the needs of any aspiring journalist.

"The process of being a journalist is the process of educating yourself in something new, all the time," he said. "It's all

about learning and teaching yourself, and that's what a liberal arts education did for me. I learned how to learn, and then teach it. Assimilating knowledge and reassembling it in an intelligible way for readers is at the crux of what we do."

Convey says that process serves him well when he's hunkered down in the daily news meeting, working with his editorial staff, conjuring up the perfect headline to grab the attention of his loyal New York audience—either by their throats or by their hearts.

"It's quite rewarding," said Convey. "Tabloid headlines are a very demanding form. You are putting big words on a page that five hundred and thirty thousand people will buy and two million will read. It's like journalistic haiku." **C**