

A laid off photojournalist reflects on what might have been

Maybe it was naive to think it would never happen or wouldn't happen so soon. But on May 6, two months after I moved to start a new job as a staff photojournalist, I was laid off from the *Journal Gazette & Times-Courier* in Mattoon. I had been the only photojournalist at that Lee Enterprises paper.



Jason Howell (Photo courtesy of Jason Howell)

I didn't know how to feel. I was angry and in complete disbelief. It hardly helped to think I wasn't alone.

Photojournalists have been some of the first to be shown the door as newspapers have downsized. In 2013, the Pew Research Center [highlighted](#) the annual newsroom census from the American Society of News Editors, which showed that visual journalists were among the hardest hit by layoffs. From 2000 to 2012, the number of visual artists was trimmed from 6,171 to 3,493.

And that's a decision our readers notice.

Rob Hart was one of 28 photographers at the *Chicago Sun-Times* laid off in 2013 as part of a much-maligned decision to bolster multimedia at the paper by relying on reporters.

“It's not the same without you guys,” Hart recalled a principal saying while dropping his daughter off at school. “We both cried a little, and it was the first time my daughter saw me cry.”

The day of that decision, Chicago-based freelance photographer Taylor Glascock started the [SunTimes/DarkTimes](#) Tumblr, a year-long effort to chronicle the front pages and the websites of the *Sun-Times* and *Tribune* looking at all the photo-related differences: resolution, selection and whether a photo was even attached to a story.

“When visual journalism is the afterthought it shows,” Hart said.

But alas, I now spend my days navigating through things like unemployment, finding a job again and figuring out how best to use the rest of the 12-month lease on my apartment.

Thankfully, I received an outpouring of support that day, after making what felt like 20 phone calls to anyone I could think of. Their sentiments matched mine exactly: shock, disbelief and anger. They've pointed me in directions of potential openings and offered me financial and food assistance.

I became a photojournalist after wanting to mesh my love of photography, travel and staying informed on the world around me. I graduated in 2017 from Eastern Illinois University with a degree in journalism, with a concentration in photojournalism. In the two years before I landed my first full-time job at the *JG-TC*, I spent most of my time working for Dream Center Peoria, a nonprofit in Peoria, Illinois

focusing on poverty alleviation and life change.

I contacted Michael Zajakowski, a beloved picture editor who was laid off from the *Chicago Tribune* in 2018. He advised me to immediately freelance, work on my resume and portfolio and do research on how to break through the noise and get my work seen by everyone.

Maybe this was all a blessing. Just recently, Gatehouse Media, another national chain with Midwestern papers, axed positions around the country. Being a Peoria native, I knew some of the ones let go, through their work and personally.

I miss the people I worked with. I was just building a rapport with Mattoon, Charleston and the rest of Coles County. I had lots of ideas too, some I was just starting to implement.

“We mourn because we love it,” Hart said. “Journalism is important to people, but right now it’s not getting the financial support it needs to continue the way it used to.”

For as long as this has been going, it doesn’t seem like the bloodletting will cease anytime soon.

“Journalism can exist differently without being better or worse, but it’s important it exists,” he said. “And that’s what I’m hoping for.”

That’s what I’m hoping for, too.

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