

# The Newseum closing casts eerie shadow on the journalism industry as a whole

By RILEY UTLEY



Photo cutesy of The Washington Post

The Newseum is located in Washington D.C. and is set to close on Dec. 31, 2019.

Museums are made to tell the story of or mirror history, industry and people so the general public can learn about them. They stand as a form of public memory and as this memory ebbs and flows a museum flows with it.

In Washington D.C. there is a perfect example of this idea of museums: The Newseum. A museum dedicated to the preservation and advocacy of the First Amendment and more specifically freedom of the press.

This museum is closing at the end of 2019. With this closure we can see the direct parallel to the current state of journalism and this museum: dwindling, untrusted and unpredictable.

This begs the question: How does the Newseum closing in America reinforce socially agreed upon definitions of meaning in the journalism industry?

The reason The Newseum closing matters is that it is a major statement about the state of journalism in America and is a blatant sign that it is at risk. The First Amendment was put in place for a reason and the closure of this museum is an eerie example of what's at stake in terms of the First Amendment and the state of journalism.

While this is a daunting problem it can be fixed. With a few options to consider I firmly believe there is an answer to this problem and there is a way to teach people about the importance of the press and the First Amendment through this phenomenal resource of The Newseum.

### **Who's involved and Where it's happening**

To better understand why this site of memory is important let's flash back to 2000 when the Newseum decided to make it's move to Washington D.C.

“In 2000, the Freedom Forum began plans to move its popular museum, the Newseum, from its location in Arlington, Virginia, across the Potomac River to downtown Washington D.C.,” The Newseum website said. “One of the primary tools used by the Freedom Forum to champion the First Amendment, the original Newseum was closed on March 3, 2002, to allow the organization to concentrate on building a state-of-the-art, dazzling museum.”

The museum opened on April 11, 2008 and has received rave reviews from all types of people: media professionals, travel reviewers, educators and visitors.

The museum is funded by news companies and major news corporations and their owners. This includes: Freedom Forum, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Annenberg Foundation, The New York Times-Ochs-Sulzberger Family, Bloomberg, News Corporation, Comcast Corporation, The Greenspun Family, Cox Enterprises, Hearst Corporation, Hubbard Broadcasting, ABC News, NBC News, The Pulliam Family, Robert H. and Clarice Smith, The Bancroft Family and Time Warner.

As a 501 © (3) public charity this museum has to be funded by individuals, corporations and foundations.

The board of trustees is also made up of industry experts and includes journalists, editors, deans and presidents of universities as well as chairs of large media corporations.

It is through the people who fund this museum that we can see why the mission is what it is. They want to teach the public about the industry through the medium in a museum that is factual, helpful and engaging; just like how they would approach putting together a paper every day.

“The mission of the Newseum, located in Washington, D.C., is to increase public understanding of the importance of a free press and the First Amendment. Visitors experience the story of news, the role of a free press in major events in history, and how the core freedoms of the First Amendment – religion, speech, press, assembly and petition – apply to their lives,” The Newseum website said.

### **What makes up The Newseum**

Constructed out of marble and standing 75 feet tall every person who walks in or past The Newseum will read: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

Throughout a visitors' time in The Newseum they are constantly reminded what The First Amendment is and what it stands for and why they should care about it.

Built with gargantuan windows made for people to look into and standing seven stories tall this museum holds 15 galleries and 15 theaters to provide visitors with an in-depth and well reported experience.

It also takes into account the fact that journalism is evolving into an online platform rather than print. To respond to this they have online exhibits and databases to correspond with the physical exhibits for "Today's Front Pages" as well as "The Journalists Memorial" which documents the 2,344 journalists who have lost their lives doing their jobs.

As you can see this site of memory is detailed and intentional and provides an experience for the general public that cannot be received anywhere else. With it closing people may begin to forget the importance of journalism and their First Amendment rights.

Due to this fact it shows that the public and people of power are forgetting the importance of journalism.

### **Why all this matters**

The repercussion of this is that people will not have this loud and proud site that teaches them about the importance of media literacy and their rights.

This museum closing also adds to the ongoing layoffs and closures. The Pew Research Center reported newsroom employment has dropped by 25% in the last nine years and 36% of newspapers have experience layoffs and 23% of digital newspapers have experiences layoffs.

By closing this museum, it shines a light on a greater issue facing journalism as a whole: underfunding.

It also shows that the ideology surrounding things like "fake news" and media being propaganda is truer than ever before...and on the surface it seems like there is nothing to do about it.

But there is.

### **How we can fix it**

Obviously, the ideal situation would be to keep the museum open and running in its current location because people will forget that it exists if it doesn't.

This could be done by inducting the museum into the Smithsonian and making it government funded.

They could also increase funding by finding more media companies and individuals to donate to the cause.

While I'd love to believe that this could happen the state of journalism as a whole is not great so I understand why they are having to close their doors and why realistically they won't be able to find the funding they need to stay open.

This brings me to the second solution: move everything online.

Media literacy is more important now than every before. The Newseum currently is and has the potential to be a leading source in teaching media literacy.

By expanding on what they already do online (Today's Front Pages, Journalists Memorial and free media literacy curriculum) they will be able to provide the general public with a source that is dependable and educational.

While this may not be the ideal solution, I do believe it is an effective one and has the potential to educate the public just as effectively, if not more than it already is with its current museum.

It is vital that this museum stay alive in some way because people need to understand how to get their news and the importance of it.

The Washington Post puts it best "Democracy will die in darkness" and this museum closing is helping create that darkness that we are trying to avoid.

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