
Neuharth, Al

(3 Mar. 1924–19 Apr. 2013)

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Neuharth, Al (3 Mar. 1924–19 Apr. 2013), journalist and publishing executive, was born Allen Harold Neuharth in Eureka, South Dakota, the younger of two sons of Daniel and Christina Neuharth. Neuharth's father, a creamery operator, died when he was twenty-two months old. Raised by a single mother, Neuharth worked in a butcher shop and as a newspaper carrier. He graduated from Alpena High School in 1942 while working odd jobs at the weekly newspaper. During college he reported for South Dakota newspapers. Neuharth earned a bronze star in the U.S. Army in World War II as a staff sergeant in the 86th Infantry Division under the command of General George Patton, whose abrasive management style he later emulated. Neuharth earned a bachelor's degree in journalism in 1950 from the University of South Dakota. He worked at the Associated Press in South Dakota as a staff writer from 1950 to 1952.

Neuharth quit the AP in 1952 to launch the ill-fated *SoDak Sports*, a weekly devoted to South Dakota sports. The publication failed after two years, but it proved to be a pivotal moment, as lessons from its demise helped inform Neuharth's later successes. "Everyone should fail in a big way at least once before they're forty," Neuharth wrote later (Neuharth, 1989, p. 25).

Following the *SoDak* failure, Neuharth in his words, "ran away from home" and landed a reporter position at the *Miami Herald* (Neuharth, p. 32). He quickly rose through the newspaper's ranks, becoming assistant managing editor, and then assistant executive editor of the *Detroit Free Press*, another top Knight Ridder newspaper. In 1963 he jumped to Gannett, becoming general manager of the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* and *Times-Union*, and then executive vice president of Gannett three years later. Neuharth wanted to run a major media company, but to do so, he had to engage in a multiyear effort to push Paul Miller, his boss and mentor, out of power. Neuharth prevailed in 1973. "One of the ruthless realities of life is that nobody gets to the top by standing quietly or patiently in line," Neuharth later wrote (Neuharth, p. 4).

Neuharth's managerial priorities epitomized the corporate consolidation of major news media during the 1970s and 1980s. At Gannett, Neuharth focused on cost-cutting at the newspapers while raising advertising rates, a combination that yielded significant profits for shareholders. Neuharth's successful business model was copied by other media companies. Yet his strategy attracted widespread criticism as Gannett newspapers cut staff and in-depth coverage of local news. During Neuharth's fifteen-year tenure, Gannett's revenues grew to \$3.3 billion, from \$390 million. At the same time he spent lavishly, riding in limousines and private jets and staying in luxury hotel suites.

Aside from squeezing cash from local Gannett newspapers, Neuharth changed the newspaper industry in other profound ways. In 1982 he created *USA Today*, the only major national daily newspaper since World War II, a highly influential publication that emphasized brief stories, graphics, and color photos. Other newspapers followed *USA Today's* innovations. The initial years for *USA Today* were tough: the newspaper lost at least \$233 million in the first five years of operation, and Neuharth faced skepticism from Gannett directors and the chain's newspaper publishers.

USA Today faced an avalanche of criticism for its brief stories that initially emphasized positive news developments and for its contrived headlines (“USA Is Eating Its Vegetables”). It was derided as a “McPaper” for its superficial approach to news. Neuharth didn’t back down: “I saw it as a shorthand way to communicate to the public what we were trying to do: Lots of news, in interesting bits and pieces. Tastes good and makes you feel good” (Ritchie).

Neuharth was an important champion of newsroom diversity with the hiring and promotion of women and minorities; Gannett executives’ pay was linked to hiring goals. Gannett could boast that by 1988 its minority staffing was 47 percent higher than the rest of the industry. Neuharth embraced technological innovations such as satellite delivery of newspaper content, which enabled him to distribute *USA Today* to small printing plants across the country.

After stepping down as Gannett’s leader in 1989, he turned his energies to the Gannett Foundation, which he later renamed the Freedom Forum. The foundation opened a journalism museum, the Newseum, in Arlington, Virginia in 1997 and later opened a \$435 million facility in downtown Washington, D.C. within view of the U.S. Capitol.

Neuharth’s corporate successes took a toll on his personal life. He was divorced twice. His marriage to Loretta Helgeland ended in 1972 after twenty-six years; the couple had a son and a daughter. His 1973 marriage to Lori Wilson, a Florida state senator, ended in 1982. At age sixty-eight Neuharth married Dr. Rachel Fornes, a chiropractor, in 1993, and together they adopted six children.

Neuharth penned a candid autobiography in 1989, *Confessions of an S.O.B.*, that reflected the Reagan era’s obsession with wealth and power. In the book Neuharth embraces the term S.O.B., describing himself as a “mix of monkeyshines and Machiavellianism” who used “whatever tactics it takes to get the job done—to rise to the top.” Neuharth was infamous for his abrasive memos to staff, which were called “love letters,” criticizing editors for failings at the newspaper. He made no apologies. To survive in the top echelons of the media business, Neuharth wrote “you really should have a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality, or at least pretend you do. Sometimes that means being pleasant and playful ... Sometimes irritating and intimidating ... Sometimes a little bullshit helps, too.”

Al Neuharth died in Cocoa Beach, Florida. At his death, the McLean, Virginia-based Gannett had ninety-nine daily newspapers in the U.S., United Kingdom, and Guam and claimed to be “the nation’s largest publishing group in terms of circulation” (Gannett). It also owned ten television and sixteen radio stations and was the nation’s largest outdoor advertising company.

Bibliography

The Library of Congress holds a collection of Neuharth’s correspondence, speeches, memoranda, unpublished and published writings. See <https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-05-252/library-of-congress-acquires-papers-of-al-neuharth-founder-of-usa-today/2005-12-02/> <<https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-05-252/library-of-congress-acquires-papers-of-al-neuharth-founder-of-usa-today/2005-12-02/>>.

Neuharth’s autobiography, *Confessions of an S.O.B.* (1989), offers a lively anecdotal review of his life, while Peter Prichard’s *The Making of McPaper: The Inside Story of USA Today* (1987) and John K. Hartman’s *The USA Today Way: A Candid Look at the National Newspaper’s First Decade, 1982–1992* offer a more critical view. Donald A. Ritchie’s *American Journalists: Getting the Story* (1997) offers a solid overview of Neuharth’s career and significance. Insights in Neuharth’s career are found in Gannett

annual reports. See https://investors.gannett.com/sites/gannett.investorhq.businesswire.com/files/doc_library/file/2013GannettAnnualReport.pdf <https://investors.gannett.com/sites/gannett.investorhq.businesswire.com/files/doc_library/file/2013GannettAnnualReport.pdf>. A useful chronology of “About USA Today” (2013) can be found at <https://static.usatoday.com/about/timeline/> <<https://static.usatoday.com/about/timeline/>>. Obituaries appeared in *USA Today* and *The New York Times* on 19 Apr. 2013.

See also

Patton, George Smith (1885-1945), military officer