

TIMES INSIDER

When Death Comes, and the Obituary Quickly Follows

By DAVID W. DUNLAP OCT. 8, 2015

The Times recently passed one million digital-only subscribers. To highlight this milestone, Times Insider this week is checking in with the reporters and editors behind some of our biggest stories and core coverage areas of the past four years.

“I have some very sad news to share with all of you,” Timothy D. Cook, the chief executive of Apple, wrote to his employees on Oct. 5, 2011. “Steve passed away earlier today.”

No last name was needed in Cupertino, Calif., nor in many other places around the world where Steven P. Jobs, a co-founder of Apple, was regarded with awe, admiration, reverence, fear and contempt.

His death was tremendously important news. Within an hour of Mr. Cook’s announcement, The Times had a 3,500-word obituary on its website, by John Markoff, with Steve Lohr. Both were on the team that later won a Pulitzer Prize for its “penetrating look into business practices by Apple and other technology companies that illustrates the darker side of a changing global economy.”

What appeared to readers as if it happened in minutes was a product of work that began Aug. 1, 2007, when Mr. Markoff sketched out the first words of his obit:

Steven P. Jobs, a child of Silicon Valley and a college dropout who reshaped the world’s culture around personal computing and digital media, died X and the age of X. The cause of death was X according to X.

The next four years involved constant monitoring and updating. “A year before Steve died, I saw that a Bloomberg obituary had accidentally leaked onto the Internet,” Mr. Markoff recalled. “The lead quote on Steve Jobs’s death was from Bill Gates. I thought about that and decided that that was canonically wrong. Steve would not have wanted Bill to have the last word.”

Mr. Markoff approached Andrew S. Grove, a former Intel chairman, for an overarching summation of a career that had not yet ended. Conscious of his own mortality, Mr. Grove demurred. So Mr. Markoff turned to Regis McKenna, who had helped shape the Apple brand. He obliged with a great quotation.

Editors had the last word, however, and gave Mr. Gates the first words in the obit. Otherwise, the journey to screens and into print was smooth. “I was at a business dinner downtown, got an alert and went straight back into the Times office,” Mr. Lohr said. “Not much to do. John’s long-simmering obit was ready to go.”

The next morning, the obit occupied the lead position in the legacy version of our website.

“It was, as far as I know, the first obit to lead the paper,” said Bill McDonald, who has been the obituaries editor since 2006. He arrived in 1988 from Newsday and has worked on the metro desk, the national desk and the culture desk, including time as deputy culture editor. He’s also done stints on the styles and investigations desks.

Such a well-rounded résumé fits the job, as obituaries are stock in trade at The New York Times.

“People are always dying in The Times who don’t seem to die in other papers, and they die at greater length and maybe even with a little more grace,” the columnist James Reston wrote in 1962.

To achieve this pre-eminence, The Times has long made a practice of keeping a deep reservoir of advance obits ready, so that no matter how prominent the subject — nor how close to deadline she might slip the bonds of the earth — we will be ready

with a sweeping biography. The practice was gently lampooned in a Paul Noth cartoon in *The New Yorker* that depicts a woman introducing a wizened gentleman at a party. “Mr. Stephenson is the subject of a widely anticipated obituary,” she says.

There are 1,600 to 1,700 advance obits in the system, Mr. McDonald said. They are added at a rate of about three a week. The reservoir is drained at roughly the same rate.

Ideally, Mr. McDonald would like to have many more in hand. “I go to sleep sometimes thinking about who might surprise us overnight,” he said. Pioneering generations in rock music and computer technology are much on his mind. “For rock musicians, 65 is the new 85,” Mr. McDonald said.

“When people die now, the website says, ‘Where’s the obit?’ ” Mr. McDonald said. “The pressure on us to be ready has increased exponentially. You whet the appetite of readers with a news alert and now they want more. But how do you reconstruct a life, in pieces, on deadline?”

Of course, it can be done. James Gandolfini’s death at 51 compelled Dave Itzkoff, a culture reporter, and Peter Keepnews, the assistant obits editor, to write a 1,000-word obit on briefest notice. On the entertainment side of his ledger, Mr. Keepnews performs as a standup comedian.

Typically, obituaries are written by five of the most experienced reporters at *The Times*: Margalit Fox; William Grimes; Robert D. McFadden, winner of a 1996 Pulitzer; Sam Roberts; and Bruce Weber.

Jack Kadden is the deputy editor. Daniel E. Slotnik, the news assistant, also contributes obits. Dolores Morrison and Earl Wilson are in charge of pictures. They work with Jeff Roth, who is the director of the morgue (photos and clippings, not bodies) and contributes artifacts from his own collection, like album covers to illustrate Ornette Coleman’s obituary.

Web and mobile audiences want news of transient celebrities, but readers also expect *The Times* to cover substantive cultural, academic, intellectual, scientific and business leaders. And they relish such exceptional — if obscure — figures as

Huguette Clark, whom Ms. Fox dispatched in great style, with a lead paragraph that didn't even mention her name:

She was almost certainly the last link to New York's Gilded Age, reared in Beaux-Arts splendor in a 121-room Fifth Avenue mansion awash in Rembrandt, Donatello, Rubens and Degas. Her father, a copper baron who once bought himself a United States Senate seat as casually as another man might buy a pair of shoes, had been born before the Mexican War. Her six siblings died long before her, one in the 19th century.

Mr. McDonald has encouraged writers to cast formulas aside when warranted. That doesn't necessarily mean abandoning conventions like the "who" clause — "Allen Smithee, who directed the 1969 Western 'Death of a Gunfighter,' died Monday in Cottonwood Springs, Tex." But it *can* mean employing the "who" clause to breathless effect, as Mr. Weber did last month:

Yogi Berra, one of baseball's greatest catchers and characters, who as a player was a mainstay of 10 Yankees championship teams and as a manager led both the Yankees and the Mets to the World Series — but who may be more widely known as an ungainly but lovable cultural figure, inspiring a cartoon character and issuing a seemingly limitless supply of unwittingly witty epigrams known as Yogi-isms — died on Tuesday. He was 90.

Besides making a case for Mr. Berra as a great catcher, Mr. Weber's 3,200-word obituary showed there is still an appetite for long-form journalism. Or journalism, as we used to call it.

"It got more than 900,000 page views," Mr. McDonald said, "for those keeping score."

Times Insider delivers behind-the-scenes insights into how daily news, features and opinion pieces come together at The New York Times. Email us at: timesinsider@nytimes.com
