THE NJ TRANSIT TRAIN was crowded for the morning commute into Manhattan. Standing in the aisle, I could survey my fellow passengers. A few were connected to iPods. A handful were reading books. Some were working their phones or laptops. One was knitting.

About half the passengers were reading newspapers.

After this totally unscientific survey, I couldn’t help wondering how many people would have been reading newspapers on the train 10 or 20 years ago -- and how many would be reading a newspaper five years from now.

Earlier this year, Arthur O. Sulzberger Jr., the publisher of The New York Times, sent a minor shock wave through the chattering classes when, asked about the future of his newspaper in the digital era, he responded, “I really don’t know whether we’ll be printing the Times in five years, and you know what? I don’t care, either.”

Amid the kerfuffle that followed -- did he really say that? -- Sulzberger scrambled to explain what he meant, sort of, to his indignant staff. (Nobody does indignation quite like a Times staffer.) He said it was his “heartfelt view that newspapers will be around -- in print -- for a long time,” but he also made it clear that the New York Times Co. will continue to move resources and business away from paper and print and onto the Web.

Sulzberger’s comments raised a lot of eyebrows, and one overriding question: Are newspapers truly becoming an endangered species? As someone who has worked in print for just over four decades and teaches journalism at New York University, I’ve been hearing about the imminent demise of newspapers for decades. But that doesn’t mean there’s nothing to the story.

Mario Garcia, the newspaper consultant who oversaw the redesign of The Wall Street Journal, says newspapers will survive, at least for the foreseeable future, though they may get smaller and lighter -- easier to handle.

Newspapers will survive for the same reason that books have: People are comfortable with them. “I believe that as we add new media, we don’t abandon the traditional ones,” he says. However, Garcia admits, “In five years we will have the first group of adults who won’t remember life without the Internet, but we still have many readers who do like to read newspapers and magazines as printed objects. Thirty years from now, that may be a different story.”

Stephen Shepard, the former BusinessWeek editor who is now dean at the new Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York, suggests that good news reporting and analysis is what we should really think about -- function rather than form. “Print isn’t just about ink on paper,” Shepard has said. “It emphasizes in-depth reporting, analytical writing and critical thinking. It is journalism that seeks to provide understanding, context, insight and, on our best days, something approaching wisdom. This kind of journalism, which people associate with newspapers and magazines, can and should be done in all media formats.”

But what about The New York Times? Could the Times, with all its tradition and power and influence, really reinvent itself online? Within five years?

In terms of technology, the answer is easy: Yes, the Times could move online and stop publishing on paper within five years, probably within five months. Indeed, it’s already happening. About 1.5 million people read the Times on the Web each day. By contrast, about a million subscribers pick up the actual paper on a daily basis. The average age of readers of the Times print edition is 42; the average age of online readers is 37.

Make no mistake, newspapers are still a going concern. They make up the world’s second-largest medium, after television, and continue to deliver big cash-flow numbers through $45 billion worth of advertising.

But nationally, the numbers are glum: By one account, two of every three American adults read a newspaper every day in 1972, compared with only one in three today. Classified advertising, long the financial backbone of the newspaper business, is leading the exodus from print to the Web. Why go to the hassle of paying for a newspaper ad when posting a notice on Craigslist is easier and cheaper and likely to get results more quickly? Media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, who has probably made more money from newspapers than anyone in history, once called classified advertising “rivers of gold.” However, he later noted, “Sometimes rivers dry up.”

The Times is one of many newspaper companies under increasing pressure from investors to deliver better returns and bolster their sagging share prices. Bombastic Wall Street commentator James Cramer recently wrote a magazine column urging the Times to shut down its print edition as soon as possible. He opined, “The idea that cutting down huge Canadian trees and shipping giant wheels of newprint south so it can be made into
antediluvian broadsheets delivered door-to-door by expensive carriers is, alas, positively uneconomical, if not totally insane, in an era when anyone younger than 30 doesn’t want the thing in that package.”

Through the combination of advertising and subscriptions, the Times Web site has quietly but consistently been making a profit since 2003. Online advertising is going to continue to grow quickly, in large part because the interactive aspects of the Web allow advertisers to identify and target customers -- the Holy Grail of marketing.

Granted, we’ve been conditioned by the early days of the Internet not to pay for news, but people who want to be well-informed will pay annual subscriptions to online sources of news -- especially if they’re not paying several hundred dollars a year for that newspaper they have to go outside and retrieve every morning. It’s entirely possible that if newspaper companies moved to an all-digital format, they’d become brand names that sell the news without the paper.

One of the biggest selling points of online news is personalization. We can now tailor the news that’s fed to us, and create our own “news package.” That’s good for convenience, but it’s bad for natural curiosity, the trait that has spurred virtually every significant advancement in human history. How can we ever learn anything new if we narrow our world to what we already know? We can only hope that as the news moves online, its packagers will continue to present the equivalent of front pages and indexes and briefs that will intrigue us enough to make that extra click and learn something new. Besides, the new technology is unfolding new ways for us to follow our curiosity. For example, I often check the lists in the Times, both online and in print, of the “most e-mailed stories.” If there’s a story on the list I haven’t read, I’ll track it down. If it’s interesting enough that other people are forwarding it to each other, maybe I’ll be interested, too.

As the only private business or industry specifically protected in our Constitution, the press is the Fourth Estate, the unofficial watchdog on the legislative, judicial and especially the executive branches of government. Until now, newspapers have been the delivery vehicle for the sharing of information and opinion and the kind of robust public debate that is required to make democracy work. In addition, printed documents -- from the Declaration of Independence to your grocery list -- carry a certain value and efficacy. It’s reasonable to be concerned about whether the role of the press will be diminished once it’s digital, and whether written material will mean less if we can’t hold it, hand it to someone, put it aside to read later and, sometimes, tear it up and throw it away.

Steven Rattner, a former New York Times reporter who is now a venture capitalist specializing in media companies, suggests that one possibility for newspapers of the future is to become nonprofit organizations, perhaps with government subsidies. Newspapers and the media in general are moving away from substantial news to more sensational and entertaining content because that’s what most people want. Reasoning that children need to be at least introduced to serious news, some traditionalists argue -- perhaps tongue in cheek -- that instead of allowing newspapers to die, we should give them public subsidies and make them required reading in schools. It’s an admirable goal: to slow the dumbing down of our society, and the growing fixation with celebrity over substance.

When newspapers disappear, as it’s widely presumed they will, their function will not disappear with them. Their online successors will fill the traditional role of the print media in setting the public agenda, and serving as a source of common inspiration. The segment of the population that reads the Times and other serious newspapers is not going to go underground. There will still be interest in politics and current events and culture. Concerned, involved citizens created newspapers, not the other way around.

The best guesses I’ve seen -- all online, incidentally -- are that newspapers will last 30 to 40 years more. Frankly, that seems optimistic. Changes are coming much sooner, it seems, for mainstream daily newspapers that are the financial engines for large businesses such as the New York Times Co.

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