

Christopher Ma, Washington Post Company senior vice president, dies at 61

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By Emily Langer
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Christopher Ma, a veteran journalist and innovative new-media pioneer who was senior vice president for development of The Washington Post Co., died Nov. 23 at a hospital in New York City. He was 61.

He had a heart attack, said his wife, Nathalie Gilfoyle.

Over the past 14 years, Mr. Ma played a pivotal role in taking The Post's family of products beyond those of a traditional newspaper. He pushed the company to launch Express, a daily tabloid designed for commuters that became profitable, and guided the purchase and business-side operations of El Tiempo Latino, a Spanish-language weekly that The Post acquired in 2004.

Mr. Ma spearheaded whorungov.com, an online resource with profiles of lawmakers, lobbyists, military leaders and other Washington figures. Other online projects he shepherded included a collaboration with OnGo.com, a news aggregation site.

"Chris was a man of impressive journalism and business achievements, but he was also ... much more important to people than that," said Washington Post Chairman Donald E. Graham. "He was wise, generous, kind and patient."

Mr. Ma's colleagues described him as a modest leader and creative thinker who, at a time of enormous turmoil in journalism, looked for ideas and expertise from many sources. He considered his two children trusted advisers about media consumption, especially among young people.

Mr. Ma "was always interested in harnessing the change that was upending our industry for the good of The Post," executive editor Marcus Brauchli said. "He had a bias towards change... in an industry that is all too often shackled by inertia and legacy."

Mr. Ma had worked as a correspondent at Newsweek and as an editor at U.S. News and World Report before he joined The Post Co. in 1997. His first role was as a vice president and executive producer at Digital Ink, The Post's online subsidiary, which was renamed Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive (WPNI).

As executive editor of WPNI from 1998 to 2000, Mr. Ma oversaw operations of The Post's Web site. He launched the Live Online features, which included chats with Post reporters and other writers, as well as partnerships with Newsweek, MSNBC and NBC News.

He joined the corporate staff in 2000 as a vice president in the planning department and in 2008 became a senior vice president.

Mr. Ma made one of his most significant business moves about 10 years ago, when he convinced other top Post executives that the company should begin publishing a free tabloid-size newspaper for commuters before another publisher, Metro International, moved into the market.

Free commuter dailies had taken off in Europe and in some U.S. cities. Mr. Ma saw the potential not only to increase the company's advertising revenue but also to attract new print readers, especially a younger audience that tended to consume news online. The publication, with Post, wire and original content, was designed to be just substantial enough for a Metro ride.

In 2003, The Washington Post launched Express with Mr. Ma as publisher. He was involved not only in business decisions, editor Daniel Caccavaro said, but also in shaping the identity of the new publication. Today, Express has a print run of more than 180,000 and brings several million dollars to The Post annually in profits.

Shortly after the launch of Express, Mr. Ma became involved with The Post's efforts to better reach the growing Spanish-speaking communities in the Washington area. He developed a business plan to buy the area's leading Spanish-language weekly, El Tiempo Latino.

Under Mr. Ma's direction, the newspaper increased its circulation, enlarged its staff and redesigned its appearance, while continuing to be cited year after year as the best Spanish-language weekly in the country by the National Association of Hispanic Publications.

Christopher Yi-Wen Ma was born March 20, 1950, in Columbus, Ohio. His parents immigrated to the United States from China.

He received a bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1972 from Harvard University, where he was editor of the literary journal, and a law degree in 1978 from the University of California at Berkeley. He practiced law for six months before beginning a career in journalism.

From 1979 to 1985, Mr. Ma was a correspondent in the Washington bureau of Newsweek magazine, which was owned by The Washington Post Co. He then moved to U.S. News and World Report, where he became deputy editor. In that role, former executive editor Peter Bernstein said, Mr. Ma was responsible at various times for economics, arts and science coverage.

Mr. Ma was a member of the board of the Sidwell Friends School in the District, which both of his children attended.

Survivors include his wife of 33 years, Nathalie Gilfoyle of Washington; two children, Olivia Ma of San Francisco and Rohan Ma of Oakland, Calif.; his mother, Margaret Ma of Menlo Park, Calif.; two sisters; and a brother.

Mr. Ma's colleagues described him as a soft-spoken intellectual with a vast range of interests. He was the author of several books, including multiple editions of an almanac co-authored with Bernstein, "*The Practical Guide to Practically Everything*."

SOURCE: The Washington Post