

Testimony of
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Before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Courts and Competition Policy of the
Committee on the Judiciary

Regarding
A Hearing on “A New Age for Newspapers:
Diversity of Voices, Competition and the Internet”
April 21, 2009

Chairman Conyers, Ranking Member Smith, Members of the Committee, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I’m Dan Gainor, Vice President of Business and Culture for the Media Research Center. It’s an honor and privilege to come here and speak about one of my favorite topics in the world – newspapers. From the first time I ever read on my own, newspapers have been a part of my life. I’ve worked at three different dailies and several weeklies and online news operations following that calling.

You don’t have to tell me that the newspaper business is changing. Three of those organizations I have worked for are now out of business. Until recently, I wrote a column for the Baltimore Examiner, but it closed putting dozens of friends and fellow journalists out of work.

The news media are going through a time of epic changes and that is never easy. In a few short years, evening dailies have all but died out. The rise of the Internet changed even more. Newspapers first lost most of the employment advertising to firms like Monster.com and since have lost classified ad revenue to Craigslist. Other sources of revenue – from personal ads to real estate – have met with smarter, more nimble competition.

While it is fair to blame much of the decline in newspapers to technology, it is not the only factor. The newspaper industry has changed too – for the worse. Standards

have slipped or all but disappeared. The concept of a journalist as a neutral party has become a punch line for a joke, not a guideline for an industry.

We all saw how poorly the mainstream press covered the last election. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, voters believed that the media wanted Barack Obama to win the presidential election. “By a margin of 70%-9%, Americans say most journalists want to see Obama, not John McCain, win,” Pew reported. Other surveys confirmed it: According to Rasmussen, “Over half of U.S. voters (51%) think reporters are trying to hurt Sarah Palin.”

It wasn’t just surveys, it was journalists themselves. According to Washington Post ombudsman Deborah Howell, in a column headlined: “An Obama Tilt in Campaign Coverage,” the paper’s election coverage consistently supported Obama in everything from positive stories to flattering photos.

That same slant reappeared last week during the Tax Day Tea Party protests. The Post didn’t write a story about more than 750 events nationwide until the day they happened – far different from how they handled other protests. Their own media critic Howard Kurtz even knocked such minimal coverage. The New York Times did preview the events six times – and five of those were negative.

Such one-sided reporting has destroyed the credibility of the print press. Among newspapers, the most trusted name in news is The Wall Street Journal and just 25 percent of readers “believe all or most of what [that] organization says” according to Pew. For The New York Times, that number is 18 percent and USA Today 16 percent. The only publications lower are People magazine and The National Enquirer.

In fact, for The New York Times, the number who believe “almost nothing” in the newspaper is nearly identical to those who do believe. And while newspaper credibility has taken a hit among both Democrats and Republicans, it is lowest among Republicans with the Times having just a 10 percent credibility rating in that group. One person in 10? You could write graffiti on a wall and have more people believe you. But the Times still has widespread influence and a story on the front page can be picked up appear in some form in countless media outlets.

The Times’s former Public Editor Daniel Okrent answered the question the Times is a liberal newspaper by saying: “Of course it is....These are the social issues: gay rights, gun control, abortion and environmental regulation, among others. And if you

think The Times plays it down the middle on any of them, you've been reading the paper with your eyes closed."

For decades many in the media have been working with their eyes closed – convinced of their own neutrality when all around them feel otherwise. In study after study, journalists consistently admit they support liberal causes and vote for Democratic candidates. In 2004, Pew found journalists identified themselves liberal over conservative by a five-to-one ratio. Were journalists the only ones voting for president, they would have elected a Democrat every time since 1972.

The Society of Professional Journalists, to which I belong, has a detailed Code of Ethics. At its heart, it says journalists should provide "a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues." They do neither. It's fitting, then, in a hearing to discuss the "diversity of voices," that everyone here grasp a key point. Diversity of voices in print isn't about news, it's fiction.

Thank you.

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<http://www.mrc.org/biasbasics/pdf/BiasBasics.pdf>

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/07/AR2008110702895_pf.html