

TESTIMONY OF JOHN NICHOLS

U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on the Judiciary

Subcommittee on Courts and Competition Policy

Hearing on "A New Age for Newspapers: Diversity of Voices, Competition and the Internet"

April 21, 2009

My name is John Nichols. I grew up in Union Grove, Wisconsin, population 970. Our village was not big enough to support a daily newspaper. We had a weekly, the Union Grove Sun. When I was 11 years old, I rode my bicycle down Union Grove's Main Street and walked into the Sun's office, where I was greeted by Carl Krueger, the publisher, editor, reporter, photographer, printer, deliveryman and janitor. I explained that I had read the Bill of Rights, Tom Paine and I.F. Stone. I knew a free press was the essential underpinning of the American experiment and that journalists were the frontline soldiers in the struggle for democracy. I snapped to attention and announced I was "reporting for duty."

It will give you a sense of the Sun's circumstance that our community's media magnate took one look at a rather small for his size adolescent and said, "I'll give you \$5 a story and a \$1 for every picture that turns out." I was a journalist. A year later, Hubert Humphrey, the former vice president of the United States, arrived in Union Grove on a campaign swing. His staff made it known that Humphrey would answer questions from local media. After the vice president's speech, I was ushered onto his bus, where Humphrey graciously answered my 20 questions and posed for a picture. It was the high point of young career, although I suspect it was a low point of his.

I have practiced the craft of journalism ever since, as a reporter, columnist and editor of major metropolitan daily newspapers, the part owner of an alternative weekly newspaper, the editorial page editor of a state capital daily, the host of television and radio programs and a political writer for national magazines. Along the way, I have written or co-written seven books dealing with the state of American politics and media – especially that of the print press.

So what is the state of that print press? One of our country's first journalists, Thomas Paine, would surely describe our current circumstance as: "The Crisis." A daily newspaper industry that still employs roughly 50,000 journalists--the vast majority of the remaining practitioners of the craft--teeters on the brink.

Media corporations, after running journalism into the ground, have determined that news gathering and reporting are no longer profit-making propositions. So they're jumping ship. Great regional dailies -- the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*,

the *Philadelphia Inquirer* -- are in bankruptcy. Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* recently closed down, ending daily newspaper competition in that city. The *San Francisco Chronicle* may soon close, along with The Boston Globe. Big dailies in Chicago (the *Sun-Times*), Newark (the *Star-Ledger*), Philadelphia (*Daily News*) and other cities are reportedly near the point of folding, and smaller dailies like the *Baltimore Examiner* have already closed. The 101-year-old *Christian Science Monitor*, in recent years an essential source of international news and analysis, has folded its daily print edition. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* has scuttled its print edition and downsized from a news staff of 165 to about twenty for its online-only incarnation. Whole newspaper chains--such as Lee Enterprises, the owner of large and medium-size publications that for decades have defined debates in Montana, Iowa and Wisconsin--are struggling as the value of stock shares falls below the price of a single daily paper.

Those are the headlines. Arguably uglier is the death-by-small-cuts of newspapers that are still functioning. Layoffs of reporters and closings of bureaus mean that even if newspapers survive, they have precious few resources for actually doing journalism. Job cuts during the first months of this year--300 at the *Los Angeles Times*, 205 at the *Miami Herald*, 156 at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 150 at the *Kansas City Star*, 128 at the *Sacramento Bee*, 100 at the *Providence Journal*, 100 at the *Hartford Courant*, ninety at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, thirty at the *Wall Street Journal* and on and on--suggest that this year will see far more positions eliminated than in 2008, when almost 16,000 were lost. Even *Doonesbury's* Rick Redfern has been laid off from his job at the *Washington Post*.

The toll is daunting. As former *Washington Post* editors Leonard Downie Jr. and Robert Kaiser have observed, "A great news organization is difficult to build and tragically easy to disassemble." That disassembling is now in full swing. As journalists are laid off and newspapers cut back or shut down, whole sectors of our civic life go dark. Newspapers that long ago closed their foreign bureaus and eliminated their crack investigative operations are shuttering at warp speed what remains of city hall, statehouse and Washington bureaus. The Cox chain, publisher of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *Austin American-Statesman* and fifteen other papers, padlocked its DC bureau on April 1--a move that follows the closures of the respected Washington bureaus of Advance Publications (the *Newark Star-Ledger*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and others); Copley Newspapers and its flagship *San Diego Union-Tribune*; as well as those of the once great regional dailies of Des Moines, Hartford, Houston, Pittsburgh, Salt Lake City, San Francisco and Toledo.

Newspapers as we have known them are dying, and there is little evidence to suggest that broadcast or digital media is prepared to fill the void that is being created. (I say this as a blogger whose posts frequently top the Google and Yahoo news and opinion reviews, and as an editor of a newspaper that has ceased daily publication in favor internet publication.) The digital day may come, but it is not here. Thus, those of us who believe in the essential role of an informed citizenry fear that we are facing not a journalism crisis, not a media crisis, but a democracy crisis.

In this circumstance, it is entirely appropriate to consider the steps government might take to protect the public's need to know. From the founding of the republic, federal, state and local governments have been actively engaged in shaping media systems. Newspapers and large

magazines have historically enjoyed favorable postage rates and other benefits. Broadcasters are given free use of airwaves owned by the American people.

So today's discussion is not merely timely but appropriate. If Congress is to address the crisis, however, that response must recognize the importance of maintaining and expanding the practice of journalism as a tool for informing and engaging citizens. The emphasis should be on fostering competition, diversity and localism – not on protecting the bottom lines of large media companies and speculators who have already shown a penchant for balancing their books by dismissing reporters and shuttering newsrooms.

A crisis for journalism and democracy must not become an excuse for eliminating existing rules that promote competition and diversity – especially cross-ownership restrictions that prevent consolidation of print, broadcast and digital newsrooms into one-size-fits-all “content provider” services. Congress should recognize that the existing ownership model has proven in this crisis to be anti-journalistic. As such, government policies and spending should be tailored to support the development of new ownership models for newspapers and newsrooms – not-for-profit operations, cooperatives, employee-owned publications – and on allowing citizens, unions, foundations and enlightened local owners to purchase financially-troubled daily papers. It should encourage the consumption of journalism, perhaps by providing tax breaks for newspaper and magazine subscriptions. And postal rates should be structured to help journals of inquiry and dissent to stay afloat. Additionally, Congress can defend journalism by expanding support for public broadcasting, supporting community and low-power radio, providing money for school newspapers and radio stations and defending net neutrality.

I am a journalist. I love my craft and I hope to continue practicing it for a long time. But I love our democratic discourse, and the society it fosters, more. I would ask my Congress to recognize, as did the founders, that journalism and democracy are closely linked. James Madison was right when he said, "A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both." We are deep in the prologue moment. It is essential now to act wisely and responsibly to avert tragedy and farce.