

Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation  
Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, and the Internet  
Hearing on the Future of Journalism  
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Testimony of David Simon  
Baltimore Sun, 1982-95  
Blown Deadline Productions, 95-09  
Baltimore, Md.

Thank you all for the invitation and opportunity to speak on this issue today, but I start by confessing reluctance.

My name is David Simon and I used to be a newspaperman in Baltimore. Head and heart, I was a newspaperman from the day I signed up at my high school paper until the day, eighteen years later, when I took a buyout from the Baltimore Sun and left for the fleshpots of Hollywood.

To those colleagues who remain at newspapers, I am therefore an apostate, and my direct connection to newspapering – having ended in 1995 – means that as a witness today, my experiences are attenuated.

Ideally, rather than listening to me, you should be hearing from any number of voices of those still laboring in American journalism. I am concerned that the collective voice of the newsroom itself – the wisdom of veteran desk editors, rewrite men and veteran reporters is poorly represented in this process. But of course newspapers are obliged to cover Congress and its works, and therefore the participation of most working journalists in today's hearing would compromise some careful ethics. I know your staff tried to invite working journalists but were rebuffed on these grounds. And so, tellingly, today's witness list is heavy with newspaper executives on the one hand, and representatives of the new, internet-based media on the other.

And so, I've accepted the invitation, though to be honest,

I'm tired of hearing myself on this subject; I've had my say in essays that accompany this testimony, and in the episodes of a recent television drama, and I would be more inclined to hear from former colleagues if they were in a position to speak bluntly.

I am glad, at least, to be testifying beside Steve Coll, who labored at the Washington Post for two decades and whose coverage of complex issues upholds the highest journalistic standards. And I will leave to Mr. Coll a more careful and considered analysis of where journalism and newspapering must travel. I fully agree with his fundamental argument that non-profit status is the industry's last hope, and I believe his thoughts on the subject are more advanced and detailed than my own.

If Mr. Coll can be prescriptive, I will do my best to be diagnostic. I'll set him up by concentrating on what went wrong in American newspapering.

What I say will likely conflict with what representatives of the newspaper industry will claim for themselves. And I can imagine little agreement with those who speak for new media. From the captains of the newspaper industry, you will hear a certain martyrology – a claim that they were heroically serving democracy to their utmost only to be undone by a cataclysmic shift in technology and the arrival of all things web-based. From those speaking on behalf of new media, weblogs and that which goes twitter, you will be treated to assurances that American journalism has a perfectly fine future online, and that a great democratization in newsgathering is taking place.

In my city, there is a technical term we often administer when claims are plainly contradicted by facts on the ground. We note that the claimant is, for lack of a better term, full of it. Though in Baltimore, of course, we are explicit with our nouns.

High-end journalism is dying in America and unless a new economic model is achieved, it will not be reborn on the web or anywhere else. The internet is a marvelous tool and clearly it is the informational delivery system of our future, but thus far it does not deliver much first-generation reporting. Instead, it leeches that

reporting from mainstream news publications, whereupon aggregating websites and bloggers contribute little more than repetition, commentary and froth. Meanwhile, readers acquire news from the aggregators and abandon its point of origin – namely the newspapers themselves.

In short, the parasite is slowly killing the host.

It is nice to get stuff for free, of course. And it is nice that more people can have their say in new media. And while some of our internet commentary is – as with any unchallenged and unedited intellectual effort – rampantly ideological, ridiculously inaccurate and occasionally juvenile, some of it is also quite good, even original.

Understand here that I am not making a Luddite argument against the internet and all that it offers. But democratized and independent though they may be, you do not – in my city -- run into bloggers or so-called citizen journalists at City Hall, or in the courthouse hallways or at the bars and union halls where police officers gather. You do not see them consistently nurturing and then pressing sources. You do not see them holding institutions accountable on a daily basis.

Why? Because high-end journalism – that which acquires essential information about our government and society in the first place -- is a profession; it requires daily, full-time commitment by trained men and women who return to the same beats day in and day out until the best of them know everything with which a given institution is contending. For a relatively brief period in American history – no more than the last fifty years or so – a lot of smart and talented people were paid a living wage and benefits to challenge the unrestrained authority of our institutions and to hold those institutions to task. Modern newspaper reporting was the hardest and in some ways most gratifying job I ever had. I am offended to think that anyone, anywhere believes American institutions as insulated, self-preserving and self-justifying as police departments, school systems, legislatures and chief executives can be held to gathered facts by amateurs pursuing the task without

compensation, training or for that matter, sufficient standing to make public officials even care to whom it is they are lying or from whom they are withholding information.

The idea of this is absurd, yet to read the claims that some new media voices are already making, you would think they need only bulldoze the carcasses of moribund newspapers aside and begin typing. They don't know what they don't know – which is a dangerous state for any class of folk -- and to those of us who do understand how subtle and complex good reporting can be, their ignorance is as embarrassing as it is seemingly sincere. Indeed, the very phrase citizen journalist strikes my ear as nearly Orwellian. A neighbor who is a good listener and cares about people is a good neighbor; he is not in any sense a citizen social worker. Just as a neighbor with a garden hose and good intentions is not a citizen firefighter. To say so is a heedless insult to trained social workers and firefighters.

So much for new media. But what about old media?

When you hear a newspaper executive claiming that his industry is an essential bulwark of society and that it stands threatened by a new technology that is, as of yet, unready to shoulder the same responsibility, you may be inclined to empathize. And indeed, that much is true enough as it goes.

But when that same newspaper executive then goes on to claim that this predicament has occurred through no fault on the industry's part, that they have merely been undone by new technologies, feel free to kick out his teeth. At that point, he's as fraudulent as the most self-aggrandized blogger.

Anyone listening carefully may have noted that I was bought out of my reporting position in 1995. That's fourteen years ago. That's well before the internet ever began to seriously threaten any aspect of the industry. That's well before Craig's List and department-store consolidation gutted the ad base. Well before any of the current economic conditions applied.

In fact, when newspaper chains began cutting personnel and content, their industry was one of the most profitable yet

discovered by Wall Street money. We know now – because bankruptcy has opened the books – that the Baltimore Sun was eliminating its afternoon edition and trimming nearly 100 editors and reporters in an era when the paper was achieving 37 percent profits. In the years before the internet deluge, the men and women who might have made The Sun a more essential vehicle for news and commentary – something so strong that it might have charged for its product online – they were being ushered out the door so that Wall Street could command short-term profits in the extreme.

Such short-sighted arrogance rivals that of Detroit in the 1970s, when automakers – confident that American consumers were mere captives – offered up Chevy Vegas, and Pacers and Gremlins without the slightest worry that mediocrity would be challenged by better-made cars from Germany or Japan.

In short, my industry butchered itself and we did so at the behest of Wall Street and the same unfettered, free-market logic that has proved so disastrous for so many American industries. And the original sin of American newspapering lies, indeed, in going to Wall Street in the first place.

When locally-based, family-owned newspapers like The Sun were consolidated into publicly-owned newspaper chains, an essential dynamic, an essential trust between journalism and the communities served by that journalism was betrayed.

Economically, the disconnect is now obvious. What do newspaper executives in Los Angeles or Chicago care whether or not readers in Baltimore have a better newspaper, especially when you can make more putting out a mediocre paper than a worthy one? The profit margin was all. And so, where family ownership might have been content with 10 or 15 percent profit, the chains demanded double that and more, and the cutting began – long before the threat of new technology was ever sensed.

But editorially? The newspaper chains brought an ugly disconnect to the newsroom, and by extension, to the community as well.



A few years after the A.S. Abell Family sold The Sun to the Times-Mirror newspaper chain, fresh editors arrived from out of town to take over the reins of the paper.

They looked upon Baltimore not as essential terrain to be covered with consistency, to be explained in all its complexity year in and year out for readers who had and would live their lives in Baltimore. Why would they? They had arrived from somewhere else, and if they could win a prize or two, they would be moving on to bigger and better opportunities within the chain.

So, well before the arrival of the internet, as veteran reporters and homegrown editors took buyouts, newsbeats were dropped and less and less of Baltimore and central Maryland were covered with rigor or complexity.

In a city in which half the adult black males are without consistent work, the poverty and social services beat was abandoned. In a town where the unions were imploding and the working class eviscerated, where the bankruptcy of a huge steel manufacturer meant thousands were losing medical benefits and pensions, there was no longer a labor reporter. And though it is one of the most violent cities in America, the Baltimore courthouse went uncovered for more than a year and the declining quality of criminal casework in the state's attorney's office went largely ignored.

Meanwhile, the editors used their manpower to pursue a handful of special projects, Pulitzer-sniffing as one does. The self-gratification of my profession does not come, you see, from covering a city and covering it well, from explaining an increasingly complex and interconnected world to citizens, from holding basic institutions accountable on a daily basis. It comes from someone handing you a plaque and taking your picture.

The prizes meant little, of course, to actual readers. What might have mattered to them, what might have made the Baltimore Sun substantial enough to charge online for content would have been to comprehensively cover its region and the issues of that region, to do so with real insight and sophistication and

consistency.

But the reporters required to achieve such were cleanly dispatched, buyout after buyout, from the first staff reduction in 1992 to the latest round last week, in which nearly a third of the remaining newsroom was fired. Where 500 men and women once covered central Maryland, there are now 140. And the money required to make a great newspaper – including, say, the R&D funding that might have anticipated and planned for the internet revolution – all of that went back to Wall Street, to CEO salaries and to big-money investors. The executives and board chairman held up their profit margins and got promoted; they're all on some golf course in Florida right now, comfortably retired and thinking about things other than journalism. The editors took their prizes and got promoted; they're probably on what passes for a journalism lecture circuit these days, offering heroic tales of past glory and jeremiads about the world they, in fact, helped to bring about.

But the newspapers themselves?

When I was in journalism school in the 1970s, the threat was television and its immediacy. My professors claimed that in order to survive, newspapers were going to have to cede the ambulance chasing and reactive coverage to TV and instead become more like great magazines. Specialization and detailed beat reporting were the future. We were going to have to explain an increasingly complex world in ways that made us essential to an increasingly educated readership. The scope of coverage would have to go deeper, address more of the world not less. Those were our ambitions. Those were my ambitions.

In Baltimore at least, and I imagine in every other American city served by newspaper-chain journalism, those ambitions were not betrayed by the internet. We had trashed them on our own, years before. Incredibly, we did it for naked, short-term profits and a handful of trinkets to hang on the office wall. And now, having made ourselves less essential, less comprehensive and less able to offer a product that people might purchase online, we

pretend to an undeserved martyrdom at the hands of new technology.

I don't know if it isn't too late already for American newspapering. So much talent has been torn from newsrooms over the last two decades and the ambitions of the craft are now so crude, small-time and stunted that it's hard to imagine a turnaround. But if there is to be a renewal of the industry a few things are certain and obvious:

First, cutting down trees and printing a daily accounting of the world on paper and delivering it to individual doorsteps is anachronistic. And if that is so, then the industry is going to have to find a way to charge for online content. Yes, I have heard the post-modern rallying cry that information wants to be free. But information isn't. It costs money to send reporters to London, Fallujah and Capitol Hill, and to send photographers with them, and to keep them there day after day. It costs money to hire the best investigators and writers and then to back them up with the best editors. It costs money to do the finest kind of journalism.

And how anyone can believe that the industry can fund that kind of expense by giving its product away online to aggregators and bloggers is a source of endless fascination to me. A freshman marketing major at any community college can tell you that if you don't have a product for which you can charge people, you don't actually have a product.

Second, Wall Street and free-market logic, having been a destructive force in journalism over the last few decades, are not now suddenly the answer. Raw, unencumbered capitalism is never the answer when a public trust or public mission is at issue. If the last quarter century has taught us anything – and admittedly, with too many of us, I doubt it has – it's that free-market capitalism, absent social imperatives and responsible regulatory oversight, can produce durable goods and services, glorious profits, and little of lasting social value. Airlines, manufacturing, banking, real estate – is there a sector of the American economy where laissez-faire theories have not burned the poor, the middle class and the



consumer, while bloating the rich and mortgaging the very future of the industry, if not the country itself? I'm pressed to think of one.

Similarly, there can be no serious consideration of public funding for newspapers. High-end journalism can and should bite any hand that tries to feed it, and it should bite a government hand most viciously. Moreover, it is the right of every American to despise his local newspaper – for being too liberal or too conservative, for covering X and not covering Y, for spelling your name wrong when you do something notable and spelling it correctly when you are seen as dishonorable. And it is the birthright of every healthy newspaper to hold itself indifferent to such constant disdain and be nonetheless read by all. Because in the end, despite all flaws, there is no better model for a comprehensive and independent review of society than a modern newspaper. As love-hate relationships go, this is a pretty intricate one. An exchange of public money would pull both sides from their comfort zone and prove unacceptable to all.

But a non-profit model intrigues, especially if that model allows for locally-based ownership and control of news organizations. Anything that government can do in the way of creating non-profit status for newspapers should be seriously pursued. And further, anything that can be done to create financial or tax-based incentives for bankrupt and near-bankrupt newspaper chains to transfer or even donate unprofitable publications to locally-based non-profits should also be considered.

Lastly, I would urge Congress to consider relaxing certain anti-trust prohibitions with regard to the newspaper industry, so that the Washington Post, the New York Times and various other newspapers can sit down and openly discuss protecting their copyright from aggregators and plan an industry wide transition to a paid, online subscriber base. Whatever money comes will prove essential to the task of hiring back some of the talent, commitment and institutional memory that has been squandered.

Absent this basic and belated acknowledgment that content

has value -- if indeed it still does after so many destructive buyouts and layoffs – and that content is what ultimately matters, I don't think anything else can save high-end, professional journalism.

Thank you for your time and again, for your kind invitation.