

**SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND
TRANSPORTATION**

**Hearing on the Future of Journalism
Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, and the Internet**

Wednesday, May 6, 2009

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for inviting me today.

For the first time in the history of the Republic, news and information are being delivered on platforms far broader than the geographic boundaries of our democratic institutions. Until recently, the circulation area of a newspaper or the reach of a local television or radio signal roughly coincided with the physical boundaries of cities and counties. From these districts we elected mayors, school boards, and members of Congress. We sent our children to school, connected with our neighbors, worked, and shopped. But, times have changed.

We're already in an era where it is more likely that a high school student can more easily access information about swine flu or the crisis in Darfur than corruption in city government or decisions about education in his town.

Mine is not a lament for a past that excluded many in our society, especially women and minorities, from the main pages of a newspaper. Nor do I pine for the symbolic authority of three, broadcast television, white male anchors. I enthusiastically welcome the democratization of media and am thrilled by its possibilities.

At the same time, it's important to note that the information systems, print and broadcast, that helped define American communities, that helped give them individuality and character, have changed dramatically and continue to change rapidly. The end result may be a more informed national and international audience but I am concerned that it not be at the price of an insufficiently informed local electorate.

So the focus of our concern should be to meet the information needs of our communities. Our health, our security and our prosperity, depend on meeting the needs of a democracy built, as ours is, on the assumption of an informed electorate.

I commend you for taking on this issue.

This question is not, of course, how to save the newspaper and broadcast news industries. It is a matter of ensuring that the information needs of communities in a democracy are

met to a sufficient degree that the people might, as Jack Knight put it, be informed so they might “determine their own true interests.”

I confess to great qualms about the role of government in this arena.

The stunning clarity of the First Amendment, that Congress shall make no law abridging five basic freedoms, including free speech and free press, should inform every action you take. My own sense is that you have a role – even a duty – to protect free speech and free press, perhaps even as an enabler, as in the case of public broadcasting. But not as a participant or controller of information, not if we believe in the Jeffersonian idea of checks and balances that has served this nation well.

With respect, we at Knight Foundation believe that there are at least four areas where Congressional action might properly and significantly help our transition from paper and local broadcast to digital.

1. Nothing Congress can do is as important as providing universal digital access and adoption.

If the future of democracy’s news and information is online – then we must ensure everyone is online. Otherwise, we disenfranchise millions of our fellow citizens.

Even today, if you’re not digital, you’re a second class citizen in the United States. You’re second class politically, economically and even socially. There are three great digital divides and they are economic, geographic and generational.

Poor people, by and large, do not have access today. As low as the price has gotten, it is still too high for too many Americans. In an age where application for an entry level job at McDonald’s or Wal-Mart must be made online, the economic divide is real and there is a role for government in bridging it. The focus should be not just on universal access and lowering prices. It should also be on universal adoption by increasing the perceived value of Internet access by bringing technology training, digital literacy and higher quality networks to our local communities.

Rural areas are notoriously underserved and American citizens who live outside of urban regions do not have access to the same information as urban dwellers. They are simply being treated as second-class.

Age is the third great divide. The ever-changing digital world naturally appeals to the ever-changing young. That said, groups like the AARP are already focusing on this issue and would be willing partners in training and outreach.

These are daunting divides, but America possesses great institutions and innovations – from libraries to wireless technologies – that can help.

Already, universities like Texas, the City University of New York, Duke, UCLA, the Cronkite School at Arizona State, to name just a few, are studying the matter and sponsoring conferences. Knight Foundation was created to focus on these issues, so it's no surprise that we're active in the area and support many of these initiatives. But I'm glad to report that others, like MacArthur Foundation have seriously engaged in the field and more are joining, including a recent grant from Atlantic Philanthropies to support investigative journalism at the Huffington Post.

Groups like One Community in Cleveland, Ohio are actively assisting local and regional communities reach their broadband potential.

Next Thursday, the organization, Free Press, based here in Washington, will hold a seminar on this issue at the Newseum. They will gather more than 400 citizens from around the country to debate the issue and propose government policy and citizen action.

Next Wednesday, Aspen Institute will convene a further meeting of its Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, a group of citizens ably co-chaired by my fellow panelist, Marissa Mayer and former Solicitor General, Ted Olson. The Knight Commission will issue its findings later this year but already has received hundreds of comments from the public, which we will be glad to share with the Committee's staff.

Greater use of federal stimulus money for universal digital access should be encouraged. Support should also be given to media literacy programs like the ones developed by State University of New York at Stony Brook, where thousands of their students emerge from an intensive course far more sophisticated media users.

2. This is a time for experimentation.

At Knight Foundation, we've decided to fund dozens of experiments seeking to find ways to use digital platforms to provide communities with information they want and need. Our work has ranged from funding experiments like Spot.us, Everyblock.com, and the Media Lab at MIT to supporting online dailies like the Voice of San Diego, ChiTown Daily News in Chicago, Gotham Gazette in New York, Village Soup in Maine and MinnPost in Minnesota. We've also funded World Wide Web inventor, Sir Tim Berners-Lee's efforts to bring fact-checking programs to the web and to start the WWWeb Foundation to support further experimentation with news on the web.

I cite these not as definitive examples but as illustrative of what one organization, small by comparison to government, can do to support the imagination of the people who will eventually figure out what will work...what will be the “killer app” that will substitute for newspapers and local broadcast news. A worthy area of exploration is what role government can play in encouraging the experimentation that is so natural to American markets.

3. Newspapers and broadcast are not dead and there may be ways to support their extended usefulness.

With respect, Congress should review laws that prohibited the combination of print and broadcast operations. At the time those laws were passed, the people’s interest lay in preventing the concentration of power and to encourage a democratic diversity of voices. One might question whether, given the trends accelerated by the current recession, this is still a valid concern and whether the bankruptcy of a news organization that is not allowed to merge to survive serves the democracy. I acknowledge the deep philosophical divide that has existed on this issue and question whether, with the decline of broadcast, it makes sense to combine two challenged businesses. But I think it is at least worth a fresh look under current circumstances to see if a resulting combination, perhaps combined with stronger use of new and social media, can help to survive traditional news operations that still have such great expertise in reporting and presenting news in ways that make sense to the American public.

Congress might also seek to make easier or more inviting the creation of not-for-profit local news organizations, or the conversion of for-profit news businesses into non-profit, community-based, mission-driven organizations. In that connection, the L3C proposals encouraging limited profit organizations might also help the transition. These will not solve overall revenue issues of traditional news operations but will almost certainly help them extend their useful life until we, as a society, figure out what will be next.

4. There is a role for public media.

The Obama transition team discussed a document called Public Media 2.0. An approach to public media that requires the rapid transition to a different kind of PBS and NPR, more inclusive and engaging of their audiences, should be encouraged. The challenges of changing those traditional organizations are great but the leadership is willing and able.

It is important to note that public media has the capacity to reach the entire nation. That has enormous security implications, in addition to its role as educator and news producer. Using new technologies to distribute information and to store vast repositories of searchable, public media content, the new generation of public journalism and education has enormous potential.

We're living a moment of extraordinary creativity. I liken the analogy of our time to the years just after Gutenberg invented the printing press. Before Gutenberg, the monks who copied illustrated manuscripts were the keepers of information and there was order. Long after Gutenberg, there was the Renaissance, when society more or less figured out how to handle information. But those crazy years in-between, when Gutenberg's technology allowed something new called literacy, are like the years we're living in today, when the World Wide Web allows a form and kind of communication we did not know even as recently as the 1980's.

The media that we're going to and that is going to be effective is not only digital but mobile and the object is going to be a media user, not a passive consumer. We will be a nation of media users, not consumers.

We're going from the information model of one-to-many, of "I broadcast/You listen" to many-to-many and even many-to-one made possible by technology. We're moving from slower form print and film delivered through stationary furniture or transmission monitors to digital transmission of images on portable devices that are clear and allow interactivity.

Congressional action that will determine the news and information allowed to our citizens is certainly not the object of your inquiry and I agree with you. I hope this is the beginning of great and serious action by Congress to encourage experimentation, to enable markets to find their way, to promote the evolution of public media 2.0 and, most urgent of all, to provide digital access to every American.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these observations.

Alberto Ibargüen