

Testimony on the Future of Journalism

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Dan Gainor

Vice President of Free Speech America and Business
Media Research Center

Chairperson Klobuchar, Ranking Member Lee, and Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity today to speak about one of my favorite subjects — local journalism.

I have worked as an editor on three different local daily newspapers, as well as an editor at two weeklies and editor and associate publisher at a third. The best, and honestly, the most fun jobs I've ever had were in local news.

If I could snap my fingers and fix local news, I would. I would hazard a guess that every single member of this committee would do the same.

But the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act of 2021 does not fix the problems. It is a well-intentioned attempt to level the playing field between Big Tech and local journalism. But that's not what it does.

It seems premised on a misinterpretation of history, that somehow local journalism was killed by a few Big Tech companies. It was not. How do I know? I was there.

I was there working in local journalism as news outlets brought in 20, 25 or 30 percent profits year after year and didn't reinvest those epic gains. Newspapers consolidated because delivery became difficult in rush hour traffic and more readers turned to TV news.

Baltimore, where I grew up, went from three dailies down to one in less than a decade. None of that was caused by the internet.

I was a director of new media for a weekly chain as the internet began to catch on. I watched as news organizations downplayed the threat and posted their content online ... for free. Sclerotic news outlets were unable or unwilling to respond to the opportunities online.

And so they were dissected by the competition.

The Great Recession took a particular toll on local businesses and that meant advertisers stopped advertising. And Covid restrictions were just another example of how the heavy hand of government harmed local news.

That's the background that brings us here today to discuss the future of journalism.

The JCPA allows big media companies to ignore antitrust laws and work together. That isn't fixing the problem of having a Big Tech advertising cabal. It is simply adding another cabal to negotiate with it. Allowing a few of the largest and most powerful media companies to act as proxies for others only ensures that big firms will secure deals that benefit them.

We all want trustworthy local journalism that helps inform the public, as well as holds powerful people accountable. Except that's not how corporate media have handled local journalism in the past. Local outlets were treated as cash cows. Big corporations milked them and slaughtered their remains.

This law would only serve to support huge existing corporate media instead of independent media. Corporate news organizations don't need our help.

The New York Times just spent \$550 million *in cash* purchasing The Athletic, which, according to journalist Aron Pilhofer, "covers 270-plus sports teams in more than 47 local markets." "The Times has placed itself in direct competition with every local news site for the same pool of subscribers," he wrote. The Times already had more than 8 million paid subscribers.

And The Times even just bought the popular game Wordle for a price "in the low seven figures."

So why are we helping them?

The Washington area used to have a thriving chain of community weeklies. The Gazettes were founded in 1959 and grew to 550,000 circulation in suburban Maryland. They were closed down by its owners ... The Washington Post ... in 2015.

"In 2021, The Post achieved record-breaking digital advertising." And it's also owned by Big Tech billionaire Jeff Bezos. He purchased the company in 2013, two years *before* it killed the chain of weeklies.

So why are helping *them*?

Corporate media already benefit from better treatment by social media algorithms than smaller and independent outlets. Consolidating their already enormous advantages only makes them even more powerful.

This JCPA also treads dangerously into areas best left alone like defining a “news content creator” as one that has “a dedicated professional editorial staff.” Independent journalists still make news but they would be squeezed out by corporate media.

Lastly, this issue needs to be seen in context. There are a few journalism bills floating around in this Congress. There is a concerted effort to get government involved in the practice and funding of journalists and journalism.

It is unrealistic to expect journalists funded or supported by politicians to turn around and report aggressively on those same politicians. We can't expect journalists to hold powerful people accountable when they are accountable to those powerful people for their paychecks.

And all this happens at a time when American trust in media is near an epic low.

According to Gallup, “Americans' trust in the media to report the news fully, accurately and fairly” has fallen to just 36 percent. For Republicans, that number stands at 11 percent.

Why then are we bailing out corporate media when ordinary Americans would rather find new sources of information?

Thank you.