

Opinion

The perilous state of journalism is getting a look in Illinois

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

Gov. Pritzker recently signed a bill that invites experts to weigh in on the state of journalism.



Grubaugh

Good luck on that. It's in a perilous state and not just the Land of Lincoln. Milked by hedge fund firms, some of the nation's largest metropolitan newspapers are on the verge of extinction. Smaller newspapers aren't much better. Aggravated by slowdowns at the postal service, mailed periodicals can't depend on getting into the hands of the people who want to read them.

And, as everyone in the trade knows, only the smartest advertisers are advertising, costs are skyrocketing, supplies are running short and employee vacancies are overrunning the place.

The pandemic only exacerbated problems. Twenty years ago, the digital revolution forced all-new thinking for those who survive on telling everyone else about the world around them. And that evolution continues today.

Journalism isn't just generated by newspapers, of course. It's also the com-

petitive chatter created by readers of Facebook and other smartphone sites, where the ill-informed turn to supposedly find out what's going on in the world. It's also the work of TV, radio, magazines, bloggers and podcasters. Anyone who has a venue for getting a message to the masses qualifies as a journalist today, diploma or not.

The extent to which any of the sources are reliable depends, of course, on the source. If you listen only to CNN, or to Fox News, or to Joe Rogan, or to Howard Stern, you get a skewed sense of opinionated reality. It's a little like unwittingly stumbling onto a toxic waste dump, unaware of the fumes, and the safety that lies in taking a step back.

So, when the governor proclaims concern for the fate of the Fourth Estate, one takes pause. What could a state law possibly do that would provide a miracle cure? A vaccine for the editorial epidemic?

Senate Bill 134, which will be effective Jan. 1, 2022, creates the Local Journalism Task Force, which will conduct a "comprehensive study" of the status of journalism and make recommendations for improvements to the governor and General Assembly.

"Many communities across our country have become news deserts. Illinois is taking a step toward addressing that challenge," said the governor. "Robust local journalism is vitally important."

Improving the "robust-ivity" of the

industry would seem to be in the best interests of everyone, whether they realize it or not. And I must say, the governor had a choice in signing this bill. He often peers out, hoping journalists aren't peering in. We appreciate his support.

The Atlantic magazine last month had an absolutely riveting, spot-on look at the trade, a long essay on how journalism is falling apart, particularly for large newspapers. It cites the case of Alden Global Capital, which swooped in and bought Tribune Publishing last May and began slashing and burning at papers in Chicago, Baltimore and New York. The result is similar to what has transpired at many papers across the country.

"The model is simple," author Dan Winters said, "gut the staff, sell the real estate, jack up subscription prices, and wring out as much cash as possible."

Since 2004, about 1,800 newspapers have closed in the United States, Poynter Institute for Media Studies says. Some 1,700 were weeklies, or about 100 a year.

I have watched all this during 40-plus years of sympathizing for my peers.

In my old, daily newspaper days, we had what we called a "butt in the chair" philosophy, meaning that if we could just have somebody present to transcribe what was happening at a council meeting, or a school function or a trial, we could at least present some semblance of the truth to readers.

Now, editors are lucky to have any butts in the chairs — outside or inside the newsroom.

The Local Journalism Task Force will look at communities underserved by local journalism in Illinois. The panel's stated purpose is to "look at the adequacy of press coverage of communities, print and digital business models for media outlets, the impact of social media on local news, strategies to improve local news access, and public policy solutions to improve the sustainability of local press business models."

Yadda, yadda. The impersonality of a press release belies the significance of all this. The findings and recommendations will be due Jan. 1, 2023.

The 15-person membership of the Task Force will be comprised of elected leaders, educators, municipal representations and — thank God — media members.

I wish membership could also be open to former members of the media, those great reporters and writers who have left the industry over the years through frustration and cost cutting.

When I say good luck finding solutions, I mean it. The truth depends on it. Our democracy depends on it.

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\$1.7 billion NGA project not catalyzing St. Louis development

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

In its Oct. 12 editorial, "Opportunity Versus Reality: Investment potential abounds near NGA site. But the money



Ortals

isn't going there," the St. Louis Post-Dispatch lamented the fact that the \$1.7 billion NGA project has not sparked new investment and development in the surrounding area. Perhaps they should have read one of the four editorials I wrote on the subject in 2015-16. I never expected it to do anything for the revival of north St. Louis.

The battle between the east side and the west side over the NGA was déjà vu all over again. In the early 1970s Lambert-St. Louis International Airport was booming and was projected to be handling 31 million flights per year by 2000. That kind of growth was going to require a massive expansion and a plan was devised that would have taken out both the adjacent

Ford and McDonnell-Douglas plants.

This, of course, was met with huge opposition and then-Mayor Alphonse Cervantes proposed moving the airport across the river to Waterloo, Ill., where it could grow unimpeded. The feds liked the idea and authorized the purchase of land because as then-Department of Transportation Secretary William Coleman Jr. remarked, he did not see anything that could be done to make Lambert able to meet future needs.

The fight over the NGA was nothing compared to the brouhaha that ensued after that. Missouri unleashed a political and legal onslaught that caused the feds to rescind their approval, killing the idea. Today, Lambert handles a meager 16 million flights per day and is generally an embarrassment. It's one of the reasons why the metro St. Louis economy languishes.

That same parochial attitude came to the fore again when the Department of Defense announced its intent to move the NGA. Frankly, I don't think there would have been much of a ruckus if the finalists had both been Missouri sites. But when the alternative was across the river, the gloves came off.

At the time, I opined that the best thing for the region would be for the NGA to be moved adjacent to Scott

Air Force Base and the city to focus on creating business parks in north St. Louis similar to the Union-Seventy Center (so named because that's its location). It is a 161-acre, multi-tenant development that is home to businesses like Pepsi-Cola, Rock-Tenn, MFR Tire, and many others, providing good jobs for hundreds of workers living in the surrounding area.

But the city has always been hung up on the one big thing approach to economic development—an arena, a stadium, Ball Park Village—and it has never worked. Add the NGA to the list.

That's because the NGA will not provide jobs for nearby residents. The 3,000 people who work there come from throughout the bi-state region and will continue to do so. When completed, there will be a big building and a big parking lot with a big fence around it. People will come and go but they'll have no effect on the surrounding area. Instead of forcing out Faultless Healthcare Linen to make room for the NGA, they should have kept it there, assembled the land around it and used it to attract businesses that would provide jobs for working people instead of just relocating computer engineers.

With those kinds of jobs as a base, they could then focus on developing housing for that workforce which in turn

would have attracted providers of goods and services. That approach could have brought real jobs and real economic development to an area that sorely needs it.

Meanwhile, the NGA, because it already interfaces with DOD missions like the US Transportation Command and the Defense Information Systems Agency, both located at Scott, could have been a catalyst to attract more development both on the base and surrounding it. There are two dozen tech companies that service SAFB. The NGA would have expanded that number. The collaborations that have been announced in St. Louis between the NGA and Washington University, Saint Louis University and Cortex, would all still have been possible.

Woulda, coulda, shoulda. When I told Jeff Rainford, the chief of staff of former Mayor Francis Slay, that the city should focus on creating real jobs for people who need them, he told me that St. Louis didn't need to be taking economic development advice from Southwestern Illinois. Maybe not. But it sure needs to be taking it from somebody.

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The *Illinois Business Journal* is owned and operated by Better Newspapers Inc.
P.O. Box C • Mascoutah, IL 62258

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Periodical mailing permit 332440

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