



Media Minutes

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TRANSCRIPT

The Death and Life of American Journalism

Two centuries after the Founders wrote about the necessity of a free press for the survival of a democratic republic, the American news media appear to be in trouble. As newsrooms and foreign bureaus shrink and disappear, the debate about the crisis in journalism has shifted from a blame-game to generating ideas for ensuring the survival of investigative reporting.

Professor Robert W. McChesney and journalist John Nichols have been vocal participants in this debate. They've written a new book, the *Death and Life of American Journalism*, excerpted in the latest issue of *The Nation* magazine, which clears up long-held misconceptions about the production of news and discusses new ideas for a vibrant American media that supports good journalism.

McChesney, who teaches at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is the author of numerous books on media and politics and is the co-founder of [Free Press](#). He says that the 100-year old idea of getting journalism from newspapers that serve as profit-maximizing vehicles fueled by advertising has run its course.

Robert McChesney: *One of the great misconceptions that really damages our ability to grasp the crisis of journalism and what to do about it is the belief that it's actually a free market function set up to maximize profit based on getting revenues from advertising. In fact, this model is a relatively recent historical development. Advertising came to play the dominant role of providing revenues to bankroll journalism in the late 19th century and has done so for a century. But now that model is ended. And we have to look at the fact that wasn't really the rule of thumb -- that was the exception to the rule.*

Before advertising had emerged to take over the sponsorship of journalism, it had been a heavily subsidized matter by the federal government through postal and printing subsidies. Because they understood – the Founders did, the Congress did in the first 100 years of the United States -- that unless there were massive public subsidies, the public good that is journalism wouldn't have been produced sufficiently by the market – nowhere near sufficient.

That's the moment we're in now, McChesney says. The realization that if the existing market is not producing good journalism, we need to look elsewhere — starting by looking at our own history — for ways to subsidize the news we need.

Robert McChesney: *In the first several generations of the Republic, the federal government instituted massive postal subsidies. And this is crucial because almost all newspapers and magazines were distributed by the mail – that was the distribution system of America's free press. And the subsidies were extraordinary. To send a newspaper cost just a small pittance during this period. You know, the big debate in Congress throughout this period was whether to have a very small charge for newspapers or let them all be sent for free.*

At the time, subsidies for news actually accounted for a large part of the federal budget.

Robert McChesney: *By our calculation, if you took the same percentage of Gross Domestic Product today and dedicated it to journalism subsidies, as the government of the United States did in the first half of the 19th century, it would be approximately \$30 billion – \$30 billion subsidy – that's how crucial supporting a free press was to the American government prior to the late 19th century.*

Government spending for subsidizing a free press was only second to military spending back then, McChesney says. Yet today we spend only \$400 million in public funds for all of public broadcasting – not just journalism. That's a mere pittance compared to other countries in Western Europe and Asia. These countries heavily subsidize their public broadcasting systems and their newspapers.

Robert McChesney: *What the records shows us from Western Europe is that these countries also are regarded as the strongest democracies, the least amount of government corruption, the most amount of public involvement in political life. They also, by the calculations of Freedom House, which is a very pro-private, pro-commercial media organization, have the least amount of government harassment of private commercial media.*

McChesney argues that, although successful commercial media models are welcome, we need public subsidies as the foundation of a strong, independent, nonprofit, noncommercial media.

Robert McChesney: *So in the short term, in the crisis phase, the most important thing we need to do is really heavily bankroll our existing public and community stations to have them ramp up their journalism, particularly at the local level. Down the road, we have to think about ways and policies to get young people back into journalism. We're losing an entire generation. And we have to ultimately think about ways of creatively funding digital news operations that haven't even begun yet, that we can't even imagine, so they have the resources to do the job and they don't have to beg for micropayments or advertising, and they can do the job of journalism.*

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