

Week of January 14, 2013

LOCAL NEWSPAPERS PROVIDE INFORMATION THAT EMPOWERS US

By Dick Yarbrough

I have the privilege of being with a group of newspaper publishers at the Georgia Press Association's winter gathering in Atlanta this week. It is one of those times I wish my momma and daddy were still around to see the crowd their little boy is hanging out with these days. Momma would be pleased; Daddy would be surprised.

This is a special group of people, as is their work. Newspaper publishers manage a business that is more than a business. Their product is information and in a democracy it is information that keeps us free. There is an old adage that says if I know something and don't tell you, I have the power. If I tell you, I transfer that power to you. Newspapers transfer power from the powerful to We the People.

Our government – yours and mine – will go to extraordinary lengths to hide information from us; information that we have a right to see because it is our hard-earned tax dollars they are spending. The newspapers are there to see that conducting the public's business behind closed-doors is the exception and not the rule. If newspapers did not, who would?

Thomas Jefferson said, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." Like you and me, Mr. Jefferson did not always agree with what he read in the newspaper but he recognized that the alternative was unthinkable. It still is.

The newspaper business is under siege these days. The future of the industry seems to be in doubt according to some pundits. I don't share that view even though I can't say I am optimistic about the big-city papers. Frankly, the big boys have lost credibility with a lot of Americans because, in my opinion, they have lost touch with the common people. They talk at us, not to us.

If you disagree with something you read in the Washington Post, how do you know anyone of any import will (a) see your complaint or (b) give a flip if they do? Not so with the local paper. You likely know the staff at the local paper

and probably shop at the same grocery store, belong to the same church or civic club. You don't like something you read, you can give them instant feedback. I know. I have been known to generate some of that feedback – good and bad.

Your local paper is less concerned with trying to influence your political philosophy and more concerned with keeping you informed. Where else will you read about what the city council or the county commission is up to? The New York Times? I don't think so.

It is here that you learn what roads are going to be closed and for how long or proposed changes in the millage rate or how your local school system plans to do to deal with the aftermath of the tragedy in Newton, Conn. Add photographs and stories about your friends and neighbors, the high school band and the soccer team and you have the pulse of the community in your hands.

As technologies change, the newspapers are changing with them. That is nothing new. The editors used to handset type. Then they got machines that set the type for them. Now, a lot of stuff is done by computer. And the way you read this information will change as well. A lot of people already read their paper on the Internet.

But what won't change is that local newspapers will continue to empower you by providing you information that you need and that the powerful would just as soon you not have.

That is why I am honored to be asked to speak to the publishers. Without them, it wouldn't be possible for you and me to have this weekly dialogue. We wouldn't be able to laugh together at some of the human foibles we witness or fume together at some of the arrogances we experience. And there would be no opportunity to poke fun at the pompous or to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Most of all, there would be no free flow of information allowing us to make decisions that affect the way we live. The newspaper publishers provide that. They give us information and information is power. I am going to thank them when I see them. I hope you will, too.

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