

Editorial: Helping local news organizations stand up to Big Tech

By the Editorial Board Apr 16, 2023 31



House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., heads to his office surrounded by reporters on May 12 after House investigators issued a subpoena to McCarthy and four other Republican lawmakers as part of their probe into the violent Jan. 6 insurrection. J. Scott Applewhite, Associated Press



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By the Editorial Board

In one of the most pleasantly bizarre bipartisan pairings, Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota has joined forces with hardline conservative Louisiana Sen. John Kennedy supporting the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act. Lawmakers from both sides of the aisle increasingly recognize the threat to the survival of local independent journalism posed by social media platforms that are dipping into local publications' content but keeping the advertising revenues all to themselves.

The internet long ago began luring news consumers away from standard news organizations, primarily print subscribers, forcing those entities to rely more and more on advertising revenues for their survival. But then the advertising started drifting away to major social media platforms, adding an additional budget squeeze that has pushed thousands of local journalism outlets to the brink of collapse.

The result has been drastically pared newsroom staffing over the years. It's been no secret that the Post-Dispatch is among those news organizations caught in the pinch. For all the complaints about news media bias, lawmakers in Washington recognize that strong local journalism constitutes a pillar of democracy. When news organizations have to close or pare back their coverage, the risk grows that corrupt practices in government and business will go undetected and unreported. Public meetings in which important government decisions are made might go uncovered. Legislatures can pass bills detrimental to the public good or designed to serve special interests, but if no one is there to cover it, members of the public are left in the dark.

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"Local papers ... are the heart and soul of journalism, and they break the news that millions of Americans rely on every day," Kennedy said in a statement. "However, tech giants like Facebook and Google are hammering local publications by keeping them from making a profit on Big Tech platforms — and it's killing local journalism."

It matters hugely that someone with the strong conservative credentials of Kennedy is willing to step up in defense of the news media. Others include Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina.

The bill would allow news organizations with fewer than 1,500 total employees to **bargain collectively** to force more equitable revenue sharing with the big social media companies. Without collective bargaining permission from Congress, those organizations could be subject to prosecution under federal antitrust laws.

The same bill, with 90 cosponsors in the House and Senate, was **on the verge of passage in Congress** last year when Facebook threatened harsh retaliation. Congress these days seems far more inclined to stand up against Big Tech, and the industry's own budgetary pinch has prompted massive layoffs, making the industry seem politically less formidable than before.

Any member of the public who wants to preserve journalistic checks and balances should urge members of Congress to stand up to Big Tech and pass the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act.

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