

**STATEMENT OF JAMES O'SHEA
EDITOR AND CO-FOUNDER
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Thank you for inviting me to appear here today. My name is James O'Shea and I am the editor and co-founder of the Chicago News Cooperative, a news start-up that I founded about six months ago with Peter Osnos, an esteemed journalist and book publisher from New York.

I applaud the Federal Communications Commission for its inquiry into the future of journalism. Reporters and editors across the country face unprecedented challenges. Although most journalists hate to admit it, they need help more than ever.

I've been a journalist for 40 years and led the newsrooms of two of the nation's most reputable newspapers, the Chicago Tribune, where I was a reporter, editor and managing editor and the Los Angeles Times, where I was the editor until my employer, the Tribune Company of Chicago, not so graciously gave me an opportunity to spend some more time with my family.

I was dismissed as the editor of the Times in January, 2008, 16 months after I took over , because I refused to endorse newsroom budget policies that I didn't think were in the best interests of the newspaper, its journalism and its journalists.

I know you have heard much about the woes of the newspaper industry from those who have appeared before me.

The speed of the collapse in the industry's business model is truly breathtaking and can be traced to myopic business practices that became as common to newsrooms as headlines and deadlines. I'm not going to dwell of those problems, although I fear that the troubles facing the newspaper industry are far from over.

What is not as evident and what I want to talk about today are the evolving gaps in news coverage created by this carnage and the challenges faced by journalists who are trying to bridge that gap to sustain public service journalism, the kind of reporting that is vital to a functioning democracy but also the kind that is all too easy for news

organizations to abandon as they attempt to put some muscle on their flabby bottom lines.

In building the Chicago News Cooperative over the last year, I've often been asked just what is this "public service journalism" that you are so worried about. And my response is that it's like pornography; you know it when you see it.

I saw it when I ran the Chicago Tribune newsroom and three reporters embarked on coverage that scrutinized the criminal justice system in Illinois. In a series of projects that lasted for more than five years, they documented numerous cases of misconduct by prosecutors, torture-induced confessions, violence at the Cook County jail, defense lawyers who slept through court hearings and judges oblivious to wobbly scales of injustice in their own courtrooms.

Thanks in no small part to their work, state officials eventually found that 17 people on death row had been wrongly convicted. After reading the coverage, a Republican Illinois governor slapped a moratorium on capital punishment in Illinois. This reframed the parameters of the debate over the death penalty, the ultimate form of punishment that Tribune reporters showed was much more likely to be applied to the most vulnerable among us without the means and microphones to defend themselves.

I saw public service journalism in Los Angeles, too, when three reporters from the Los Angeles Times documented scandalous conduct in a public hospital just south of Watts. They showed that instead of caring for and curing the poor and sick, the hospital had a long history of killing or harming those it was meant to serve. Their stories chronicled how nurses neglected dying patients, how hospital staffers withheld crucial drugs from patients or administered toxic ones by mistake; how guards used Taser stun guns on psychiatric patients. The reporters documented this travesty under the editorship of my predecessor, Dean Baquet, who also was fired for refusing to slash newsroom budgets.

I could go on and on and on recalling stories from the Tribune, the Times and many other respected journals across America. But I'm here today to talk about the future, not the past. I want to emphasize that these stories and projects were not episodic stories with flashy headlines; they were the dividends of systematic, ongoing scrutiny of important civic, government and commercial institutions by journalists and news organizations that spent time, money and effort to cover news that doesn't generate a return on investment.

Unfortunately, the journalists at the Chicago Tribune and Los Angeles Times today are too busy fending off budget and space cuts to systematically scrutinize institutional power. When I left the Chicago Tribune in 2006, the paper had a staff of more than 600 journalists. Today it's about 400 if you believe their numbers, which I don't. When I left the Los Angeles Times just a little over two years ago, the paper had more than 900 journalists at the paper and on its online staff. Today it has just 550. Readers are reacting by canceling their subscriptions, predictably making the problem worse.

The damage extends beyond the numbers. With the exception of a few papers like The New York Times, which helped me get my venture in Chicago started, many newspapers today practice reporting by ROI; they resemble content machines generating cosmetic coverage designed to propagate ad stacks rather than news.

There are a handful of enterprises around the country trying to fill the gap and sustain the kind of journalism I support. In Chicago, there's our Chicago News Cooperative, which produces two pages of local news for The New York Times every Friday and Sunday while we build a website designed to engage citizens philosophically and financially to invest in the news.

In California, there's the Voice of San Diego and California Watch in the Bay Area. Another New York Times venture in San Francisco is about to launch. There's the Minn Post in Minneapolis and the Texas Tribune, the Austin based venture that covers state government in Texas. In St. Louis there's the Beacon, and many more ventures are springing up across the land.

But all are thinly-capitalized organizations with small staffs and smaller budgets fighting to finance their ventures through philanthropy, membership, sponsorship and experiments in paid content. Many will no doubt fail as they discover the difficulty of building audience. Some like ours are partnering with public broadcast outlets, such as WTTW, Chicago's public television station, with whom we share some resources and a reporter. But much work remains to be done before we can blend the clashing cultures of print and broadcast reporters to form a more seamless partnership.

For my part, I will remain committed to the Chicago News Cooperative for as long as it takes. I truly believe that legacy media organizations will discover that paid advertising will not be a reliable partner in financing public service journalism and that they will

abandon true journalism in favor of superficial news coverage or apps that tell you six ways to water your lawn.

As an old-school, lifelong journalist, I am deeply suspicious of anything that smacks of government intervention in a free press. But that is not to say that there is no role for you in encouraging the rebirth of a commercially vibrant, public service-minded news media in this country. In particular, there might be ways for you to help promote private investment in start-up news organizations. I noted with interest a proposal for a \$200 citizen news voucher; I don't know if that's the solution, but anything that helps the public contribute to its own well-being is a step in the right direction. It doesn't take that much. We hope to enlist 30,000 to 40,000 Chicagoans, or less than one half of one percent of the metropolitan area's population, to pay \$2 a week to join our coop. If we're successful, we will employ 30 to 40 journalists to engage in public service journalism on our website and in the paper.

One other area where government has an obvious role is in helping ensure equal access to the widespread dissemination of information by supporting efforts to provide broadband internet service across the country. This would help ensure the United States doesn't become a country with one level of information for the rich, and another for the poor.

I became a journalist to see the world and I achieved my dreams. But my travels around the globe also showed me what the world is like without journalism -- the shuttered newspapers and jailed reporters in places like the Balkans and Iran; the ignorance, hatred and bigotry created by the iron hand of censorship across wide swaths of Africa and the Middle East. Time and again I've seen how the press is the first thing seized by soldiers for the forces of tyranny. It happens every time. We cannot let apathy become the soldiers of silence for public service journalism. We cannot abandon the kind of systematic scrutiny of public and civic institutions simply because some companies say they can no longer afford it.

The time has come to step forward and help journalists and their readers sustain journalism. Our democracy depends upon it.

Thank you.