Digital press outlets do not provide a “steady supply of trustworthy and relevant news,” argue Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols.

The Death and Life of American Journalism
By Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols | Nation Books | 334 pages | $26.95

Democracy will fail, Walter Lippman, the legendary journalist and political philosopher, wrote almost a century ago, “if there is no steady supply of trustworthy and relevant news. Incompetence and aimlessness, corruption and disloyalty, panic and ultimate disaster must come to any people which is denied an assured access to the facts. No one can manage anything on pap. Neither can a people.”

Very soon, Robert McChesney (a professor of communications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and host of NPR’s Media Matters) and Robert Nichols (Washington correspondent of The Nation and associate editor of The Capital Times in Madison, Wisconsin) warn us, “it is entirely plausible that we will not have even minimally sufficient resources dedicated to reporting and editing the news and distributing the information and informed analysis that citizens need.”

Thanks in no small measure to television, newspaper circulation in the US fell 44 percent between 1947 and 1998. With the advent of the Internet, newspapers have gone into free fall. From October 1, 2008, to March 31, 2009, weekday circulation dropped a whopping 7.1 percent. In the second quarter of 2009, newspaper revenues declined 29% from the previous year, the 12th consecutive quarterly decrease.

Several dailies – The Christian Science Monitor, Denver’s Rocky Mountain News, Seattle’s Post-Intelligencer – have stopped the presses, permanently. Many, many others have closed bureaus, fired editors and pulled the plug on investigative reporting. And the Web, McChesney and Nichols point out, hasn’t picked up the slack. At least 85% of all professionally reported news, they estimate, still originates with newspapers. With a few exceptions – like the Huffington Post – Internet sites don’t break news: They aggregate, disseminate and pontificate.

In The Death and Life of American Journalism, McChesney and Nichols argue strenuously that free markets and digital technologies will not produce the “steady supply of trustworthy and relevant news” that citizens need. Consumers, they suggest, won’t buy news from new media. Even if they did, it would take us in the wrong direction, aggravating class inequalities and subverting the genius of the Internet: the democratization of information. Instead, the authors claim, provocatively if not always persuasively, the government can – and should – subsidize a free press without compromising editorial independence or running the risk of official censorship.

In fact, they demonstrate, the press system in the US was built on a foundation of subsidies from the federal government. In the first half of the 19th century, when the charge for a letter varied from six to 25 cents, depending on the distance, the maximum postage for a newspaper was one and one-half cents. The government exempted newspapers from taxation. And the president, the cabinet, the House of Representatives and the US Senate augmented newspaper revenues by granting contracts to publish notices, laws and legislative proceedings. Little wonder, then, that the number of newspapers in the US
increased from 200 in 1800 to well over 2,000 in 1850. And, the authors are delighted to report, the subsidy spawned a “raucous democratic discourse,” with a paper representing each political party in many small markets.

McChesney and Nichols actually prefer a government-subsidized press to the “profit-driven, advertising supported journalism” that dominated the US in the 20th century. Corporate control, they insist, means that content is in thrall to commerce – and publishers prefer inexpensive stories based on press releases, or gossip about celebrities and sex scandals, to “hard news.”

To ensure a robust and independent press, McChesney and Nichols propose that the US government, like some of its European counterparts, foster competition by subsidizing second or third daily newspapers in American communities; cut postal rates for all newspapers and magazines with less than 25% advertising in their pages; fund high-school newspapers and radio stations; purchase collapsing newspapers, hold them for a year, then sell them (preferably to nonprofit corporations) or shut them down; grant newspapers a tax credit of 50% of the salaries of all journalistic employees, up to a maximum credit of $45,000 for each journalist; and provide every adult with a $200 voucher that can be donated to any nonprofit print or digital news medium of his or her choice (provided it gets commitments of at least $20,000). “Post-corporate newspapers” receiving government aid would be required to post everything they produce on the Web for free.

A call to action, the authors’ plan is a laudable “first cut” at a genuine crisis. It is not, however, all that practical or politically feasible. The Citizenship News Voucher, for example, would almost certainly be a costly, bureaucratic nightmare. Imagine a government agency, operating out of the Internal Revenue Service, trying to determine the eligibility of tens of thousands of publications, using standards that “err on the side of expanding rather than constraining” the number of credible sources of information. Despite the authors’ optimism that “nobody wants to mess with the IRS,” you don’t have to be Rush Limbaugh to believe that fraud would, indeed, be a problem.

Nor would the plan do much to reverse the “celebrification of culture,” the principal obstacle to serious political discourse. As long as Americans remain obsessed with personalities and not policies, alas, it isn’t easy to imagine them, along with McChesney and Nichols, armed with questions, challenges and pushes from watchdog journalists, “rising up, shedding the lethargies of manufactured consent and saying ‘No more.’”

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