

## **Commonwealth Forum Transcript**

### ***Public Trust/Private Profit: The Future of Community Newspapers in Massachusetts***

**Date:** June 19, 2000

**Location:** Boston, MA

**The following is a summary of the main points of the forum. It is not an exact transcript and should not be relied upon. This summary was prepared by State House News Service and is re-printed here with their kind permission.**

SHNS 6/19/00 Introduction: The old adage holds that newspapers are more than just businesses, they're public trusts. If that's true, how well are Massachusetts newspapers, in the face of changing economics in publishing, meeting that responsibility?

A panel of experts last week discussed that broad question. The talk turned to the evolution of newspapers, the impact on journalism of corporate versus independent ownership, the booming economy, technology, and the low wages of starting reporters.

The Parker House forum was sponsored by the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth and the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. As it has for previous MassINC forums, the State House News Service has compiled an edited transcript of the event.

#### **Moderator:**

**Robert Keough**, Editor of *CommonWealth* magazine

#### **Panelists:**

**Christopher Daly**, Boston University journalism professor and New England *Washington Post* correspondent

**Mark Jurkowitz**, *Boston Globe* media critic

**Mary Jo Meisner**, Community Newspaper Co. Editor-in-Chief

**Melvin Miller**, *Bay State Banner* Editor and Publisher

Commonwealth Forum project director Matt Malone said the forums are dedicated to fostering a civil discourse so this topic is appropriate. Newspapers are an essential component of the public discourse. Because of the important position newspapers occupy, a newspaper is something more than a public business. It is a kind of public trust and has a compelling interest to act in the public interest. We will look at whether changing economics are helping or hurting newspapers. Papers have fallen on hard times. More and more owners are looking for corporate parents and if they can't find them, are stopping the presses for good. What does the move away from local ownership mean? At the local level, the newspaper is one of the only historical drafts. We want to improve the public discourse with the aim of improving public policies. Since 1996, the Commonwealth has looked extensively at this topic.

Malone introduced the panelists and said *Boston Herald* Publisher Pat Purcell was scheduled to attend but could not because of an unavoidable personal obligation.

**KEOUGH:** I wrote the article in the spring issue on the Worcester newspaper market. The story at the time was the purchase of the Worcester Telegram & Gazette by the New York Times Company, which owns the *Globe*. Since then, we have a new big story, the *Quincy Patriot Ledger* and *Brockton Enterprise* being on the auction block. They're the 4th and 10th largest daily circulation papers. You have to run pretty fast just to keep up with the changes. When I was reporting, two facts were driven home. There's hardly such a thing as an independent freestanding and thinking publication in the media world. The *Worcester Phoenix* and *Worcester Magazine* were the others I wrote about. The *Phoenix* is one of three outlying editions and is connected to WFNX radio, which has four outlets. *Worcester Magazine* is also part of a group. The other point was that when a major organization changes hands, the best-case scenario is the status quo and the worst case is the owner coming in and laying off people and cutting costs and kissing up to advertisers. Rarely is there any discussion of the great new possibilities opened up. I found that particularly depressing. Nobody talked about how the *T&G* might get the sophisticated state government coverage we get in the *Globe* or how the *Globe* could overcome its ignorance of things that happen outside Rte. 495. It's thoughts like these that encouraged us to have this forum today. Consolidation is nothing new but we're used to hearing about it on the national scale with big media. Now it's as evident on the local level. In 1946, three quarters of the daily newspapers were family owned. Now it's only 2 percent. This trend has been viewed fairly ominously but the dominance of large media organizations is now an accomplished fact. My goal is to get toward a consideration of how the changed situation can help meet the goals of public trust. I hope we can get things going by having Mark Jurkowitz tell us some stories that made a difference.

**JURKOWITZ:** I thought about this. I had a heads up. And I thought how long it's been since the barn door closed. I am asked how the *Globe* has changed. I don't know how to answer that except to say the changes are on the business side. I went to Worcester and talked to people and people said we had our moment in 1986 when the paper (*T&G*) changed hands and became a San Francisco business. People were blasé about the fact that the *Times* was going to buy this newspaper. *The Ledger*, a big player and a powerful journalistic force in the mid 80s, this is not the first turnaround for it either. So part of what we're starting to see are second-generation handovers of previously independent newspapers. The *Herald* reverted back to local ownership. The *LA Times* is in the midst of going from a local family-owned merger to be an arm of the Tribune Co. of Chicago.

It's interesting to listen to the terms in which chains and ownership are discussed. When you talk to people about who might buy the *Ledger*, it feels like you're playing a game of war or monopoly. The more people you talk to the more it's talked about as a game of strategy and filling out maps and moving troops around and economies of scale. The most amazing story clearly in local newspapering has been the CNC story, not only because they own upwards of 100 newspapers and essentially one by one bought out the private weekly chains, but because they work at the level closest to the community. There have been enormous changes in the way people receive information. Size of papers has changed and location of offices has changed. What's most striking is this still comes after a period when the competition in local newspapering was being demolished

by the disappearance of local owners. The *TAB* expanded to Boston in 1980 and I became the Boston reporter. I had to hack through City Hall bureaucracy and compete with the *Boston Ledger*. One week there was a fire in the Fenway. We didn't cover it well because I didn't know what I was doing. I walked into the office with dread, waiting to get whacked on the story. They had photos and interviews with tenants. That was the level competition was on in those days. It seems laughable now.

Bob is right. Let's not get too nostalgic about what mom and pop ownership was - a lot of typos and idiosyncratic journalism and people with bones to pick about not getting zoning permits. A lot of people who couldn't afford to pay people enough money to keep the good ones there more than six months. The problem is, just as a reporter learns a community, he's done. There's no career path. I made \$135 a week in my first job in journalism. The debate today is about will you have ownership by someone with a journalistic interest in the newspaper or someone who looks at newspapers like you would franchise McDonald's. Some reputations are deserved, some not. In Portland, a citizens groups was so worried about the sale of the Portland Press Herald that they rallied in public and produced their own studies about the adverse impact of outside owner. They got owners from Seattle that they're very happy with.

**KEOUGH:** How have we made out on that score Mark? Where are these newspapers today?

**JURKOWITZ:** In all candor, I don't see enough of them to know. There generally are cutbacks and shock waves and then things disappear behind the radar screen as things operate more normally. The Globe experience is an interesting one. The Taylor family saw the breakup of the trust and went around the country trying to see who the best white knight was. In the long run, we'll see. The Ledger will be interesting. Its former owners had a serious commitment to local news and weren't interested in taking every penny out of the operation. The men selling it now, I wouldn't put it necessarily in those terms. They'll say they wanted to keep the paper. Fifteen years ago, it was a journalistic powerhouse. The record is mixed at best.

**KEOUGH:** CNC is a presumptive bidder for any paper. In amassing this group of papers, the point shouldn't be lost that many of the papers were on their way out. They weren't going to survive. Give me a sense of what it's been like to put together a single organization out of different parts.

**MEISNER:** Maybe we could just establish as a fact now that CNC is no longer an experiment. I'd like to submit that. We've been in business for 10 years and our goal is to continue to remain in business. We are an established locally owned newspaper company. I have been in the business for 25 years and that's what I want to do until I die or retire first. I worked for seven companies, three of which were locally owned. What it really takes is a great deal of patience, a really long view, a vision and a willingness to invest and a commitment that you're really in the newspaper business. By that I really mean you have a public trust. I don't go back to the beginning. I have been there three years. We have invested a considerable amount of money in these newspapers. Many of them were indeed struggling. Some were a week away from having their doors closed. We have invested millions of dollars in production facilities, computer systems and printing presses. All of our reporters are connected to the Internet. We have a local interactive edition. It really means investing a lot in the training and development of

reporters and deciding to maintain more than two dozen local offices, which is a considerable commitment. You are locally owned and locally based. If you are not in it for the long haul and interested in holding the public trust, you don't do this. You don't hold onto the newspapers, especially if they're struggling. You flip them. And we're seeing that in this state right now. We sponsor community events, forums, parades, spelling bees, whatever. Companies that are not interested in being around for the long haul don't do those kinds of things.

**KEOUGH:** Mark mentioned clustering. What are the business advantages of that? I can see how it would benefit advertisers and economies of scale with production and offices. Is there any advantage to the reader?

**MEISNER:** Sure. In the past, the *Cambridge Chronicle* probably reached the point where there was the consideration of whether it should be published. Economies of scale sounds like something you shouldn't talk about with journalism, but the fact that you can produce more efficiently allows you to put resources on the street with reporting and editing. The reader gets something on that. Our formula if you want to call it a formula - clustering doesn't resonate too well with people - is we produce extremely local papers that contain very little if any shared content. As a news organization, we have a responsibility to get out there and hold forums and talk about issues. I do think our readers gain from that.

**KEOUGH:** Chris Daly is here in a role of historian. Give us some perspective. Chain ownership is not something new. Is this the latest wave and nothing different or is it different?

**DALY:** As someone who studies history, I see some of these things with more equanimity and distance. Some new things are disturbing things. The first independent newspaper was published here. Printers were trying to keep busy. The perfect device was something that needed to be replaced constantly. From the beginning, these were private enterprises operated for profit and they were of uneven quality. Some were extremely boring even by their own standards of the time. Some were only available to elite members of society. I have looked at pricing from 200 years ago. It would have cost you \$8 or \$9 for one copy in today's prices and you would have to sign up for a year. This was not something regular people were part of.

This goes back to the question of when were the good old days. The 1830s brought the penny press and people said let's let them buy them one at a time and open this up. All of a sudden, a newspaper became something ordinary people took part in. It was used as a tool in politics and business. Maybe that was the good old days. People like Hearst and Pulitzer then began to combine them into chains and the story of the century is the trend of combining throughout the business. A company from San Antonio is about to buy its 874th operation. The radio business has become a business that is almost never locally owned. The difference is the order of scale, newspaper chains bigger than ever and ownership by people not primarily in the newspaper business. In some cases, there are direct conflicts of interest. Another issue has to do with the difference between profit and super profit. In the old days, papers were content to make a certain amount of money. Nowadays in combining small newspapers into giant chains, individual publishers come under more pressure to meet certain targets. If Gannett is making profit targets of 21 percent and you want to get a pat on the head, you've got to be up there.

That takes it out of the realm of what is one person willing to do? Those are the most pressing changes I see, the question of scale and this drive for super profit.

**KEOUGH:** Let's hear from the last of a dying breed. Mel Miller is the editor and publisher of the *Bay State Banner* since 1965. Is it getting harder?

**MILLER:** It's getting close to impossible. But let me correct something. I have known publishers and editors of weeklies and I can't say all of them were on the verge of collapse. Many were doing very well. The North Shore weeklies always won the prizes. You mentioned the *Arlington Advocate*. They were in the black. There are lots of reasons why one might sell but it's incorrect to believe everyone putting out a community weekly was lining up on the welfare list. However, I am. Here's why. It has to do with business unrelated to newspapers. Look around your town. What happened to the local drug store? CVS. You used to have a guy who would sell shirts and underwear. There anymore? He isn't. The Gap, somebody like that. Go down the list and try to find independent businesses that depend on their livelihood from the community. They're getting to be fewer and fewer. Newspapers were running up against a trend in the community that they couldn't overcome. The possibility of the advertising is getting slimmer and slimmer. Astute publishers saw the trend and said the way to beat it is to get out before it's a tidal wave. I saw it but there wasn't much to do about it.

The other part is technology. Everyone says how wonderful it is. It is when you're at a big daily. The problem is the little publishers worked out ways of producing a paper low tech. We did have computers but not highly sophisticated computers. The way we turned out a paper was to train someone easily on low-tech techniques. One source was women who wanted to be at home and send their children to school. That was a wonderful source of really smart, competent personnel. When you look at papers, I would tell you we didn't have any wandering columns and crooked pages. It worked. You can't do that anymore. The ad agencies want to send things in a high tech way. And people say I've mastered Macintosh computing and I'm worth x dollars an hour. All of a sudden our costs have gone up. The possibility of having an error has diminished but we have done so at a great cost. Once the technology tidal wave comes in, you resist it at your own peril. Postal rates have got to the point where it costs more to ship a paper than to print it. There's one more element. When you have an editorially competent publication, you can get burgeoning stars to work for you for a short period. But they learn too quickly. After you spend time and effort teaching them what they should know, the offer is coming in and it's too good to resist. With a small weekly, you can't afford the executive talent to make you a gangbuster. Even if you do everything right, you're not going to generate enough revenue to cover it. So why persist?

**MEISNER:** That's what we're waiting to hear.

**MILLER:** I was absolutely of the position that the development of the African-American communities would be stifled unless there was a source of information that could regularly and persistently inform them of issues that were important and that could set people right when they got out of hand. That has happened. In the media, there's a desire to decide who are the leaders in the black community. As bad as that is in the black community, it's confusing for people who live in the suburbs. There is so much disinformation out there. If the Banner was not there, you'd have to create something similar because there'd be mass confusion in the community. The people into

communications are not journalists with a commitment to journalism. Have you seen "The Insider"? One thing they never told you, they had an opportunity to break the news about what the tobacco companies were doing. They failed to do it. The reason in the film is exactly why it didn't happen. The station was in play and they wanted to sell it to Westinghouse. If they had closed the deal, they would have put hundreds of millions of dollars in escrow pending the outcome of the threatened lawsuit. The lawsuit was based on a non-disclosure agreement. Lawyers know that contracts contrary to public policy are unenforceable. They knew Brown and Williamson couldn't win the case. They didn't want the money held in escrow. We have more and more people who are going to make decisions that have nothing to do with the best interests of journalism and disclosure. That terrifies me. When we cover the government, politicians have to say what stock they own and what their involvements are. I submit the owner of a major network has more clout than a congressman. Anyone who doesn't think so doesn't understand how the game works. But they don't have to reveal a damn thing. There is a lot to be concerned about. I am concerned that we have all these kinds of distortions. We have distorted reporting on the Nation of Islam. Farrakhan called for a Million Man March and everyone said only 200,000 came. An objective analysis by a BU professor said there was well over a million. Why do we do that? Because we don't like Farrakhan? That's not good journalism. I hope I've set forth problems that publishers like me and a few other crazies have.

**KEOUGH:** Let's open it up to questions from the audience. Please state your name.

**SEN. FARGO:** I'm state Sen. Susan Fargo. I was editor of the *Lincoln Journal*. All of the papers in my district are put out of your chain and the coverage is excellent. I have no problem with it at all. But elected officials complain about the treatment women receive in newspapers. Treasurer O'Brien's male opponent in a debate was described as aggressively making his point. She was described as shrill. Shades of language show a healthy amount of sexism in editorial rooms. Would you comment?

**JURKOWITZ:** That is a frequent complaint. In most major newsrooms there are a cadre of key decisions makers who tend to be white and middle aged and male. That is no secret. It is one of the major problems in journalism. Journalism was once completely dominated by white males. Their newsrooms have started to look more like America but that doesn't mean that the editors' meetings do. The old definition of news is something that happens near or to an editor. Until journalism and major news outlets have developed enough diversity in the newsroom, you will see communities and issues not covered, not out of arrogance but because the common experience shared by decision makers is common and narrow.

**MEISNER:** Being the only women here, it is one of the most frustrating things about our business. It is appalling to a certain extent. The industry is supposed to be the most involved with its communities and doing the most complete portrait and it continues to be so dominated by whites and by men. We can pick any other kind of institution that frustrates so many of us, but those of us who are not white and not men continue to tackle that. Mark is right. Until we put a real commitment to change our newsrooms, it's not going to get any better.

**MILLER:** The same things happens when minorities are involved. Adjectives become very very different. The urban riots in the 60s, the interesting thing was it started out as a

welfare rights riot. The welfare office doors were chained. People were terrified. The people outside were racially mixed. When police arrived, people stepped off the buses and were clubbed by police. I wrote an account of that. It didn't happen next to the editors. They said this couldn't have happened. All of a sudden I got shut down because of that. I'm a lawyer. I know what happened. Things are just characterized very strangely and I am sensitive to the way women's assertiveness can be mischaracterized.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** My name is Todd Sharek and I live in Newton and work in state government. I am frustrated by the local coverage, the CNC papers. I am frustrated that I get news from the *Boston Globe*. If it weren't for John Laidler in *The Globe*, I wouldn't know what happened. The local coverage is by press releases. We have had some minor controversies that just haven't been covered. Anyone in college would look at a deadline for candidate's filing. I had to find out from reading the *West Weekly* about challengers. I look at the insert to see who the editors and reporters are and it changes every two months. The person who was the cub reporters becomes the editor.

**MEISNER:** I am certainly sorry to hear that. The Newton editor is a bright journalist named Don Seifert. We have two reporters on the *Newton Tab*. They're not part-time or acting and neither is Don. But we talked about turnover and we probably have more because these are often the first newspapers a journalist will start out at. We suffer turnover issues with web companies literally raiding staff. That has happened to us with eight people leaving in a matter of months and six going to web companies. That was the number one topic at a recent national convention. I am not going to stand up and say it's not a problem but that is not what we want to happen. My colleague was just saying how much he enjoys the *Newton Tab*. If we don't listen to you and don't try to do something about it we shouldn't be in the business.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** I am a Selectman in a community covered by CNC and we've been troubled by the quality of coverage and we have not had the local stories told in a responsible informed kind of way since CNC has taken over. I hear the explanation that economies of scale and a large chain should provide better coverage but I can see the people employed are being underpaid. We have gone through four editors in a year. We have had a page of our newspaper replaced mistakenly by a page from another community newspaper. We have had extraordinary confused facts about how local budgeting works. The paper is not serving our community well and that is a dramatic change. The community is Lexington.

**MEISNER:** I guess I will have the same response. We have 112 papers it's like having 112 children I guess. Our newspapers are going to have issues, some worse than others. My goal and my delight would be that at all times the standard would be to have employees in place for several years that know their communities well. Those issue however are issues under locally owned newspapers and at chains, but that is not what we want to do. We do not want those problems. I hear you.

**KEOUGH:** We'd love to get a question that isn't about CNC newspapers.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** I am John Worden, the town moderator in Arlington. They had an excellent local newspaper in Lexington before. In Arlington, ours wasn't that great but it's even worse now. We have to go to Lexington to talk to reporters. Well-intentioned young people there for six or eight months just disappear. My question to Mr. Jurkowitz

is what is the perceived role of the northwest and south and west and the little *Globes* on Sundays. They seem to be trying to be community newspapers but they don't do a real good or complete job.

**JURKOWITZ:** They don't tell me why or how they make decisions.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Isn't it your job to ask them?

**JURKOWITZ:** That was my job when I was ombudsman. My job isn't to find out why the *Globe* does what it does day in and day out. This was an attempt to compete with local newspapers, to give more flavor. Zoning papers has gone on for some time. *The Globe* is a little bit actually of a Johnny Come Lately. The bottom line is it's the *Globe* trying to put out a weekly newspaper for your community. I get *City Weekly* and I don't see the others much.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** What is the prevalence of non-English newspapers? Are there more or fewer?

**MEISNER:** My guess is Massachusetts is behind in having papers in different languages. You are seeing papers starting the Spanish language. This state has fewer.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** The large-scale control ought to give efficiencies to allow for better local news. How do you balance that with local news and political coverage and opinion. I know political endorsements have gotten some papers in hot water. How do people think about balancing local opinion?

**MEISNER:** We endorse in our newspapers. All of our editors are encouraged to endorse. The only guidance they get is to do it in a fair and impartial way. The difference we made two years ago was at the statewide level, we would endorse using the same process metro newspapers use and that is using an editorial board that brings the newspapers in. At a point close to the election, we would choose a candidate to endorse in all of our newspapers. It's very locally done and controlled except at the statewide level. I think it was the right decision to make.

**MILLER:** That's far more democratic than what happens at the *Banner*. I decide unilaterally and that's it. I don't get paid much but I have to have some perks.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** My name is David Rizzo. I am a candidate for state representative in Marblehead. Newspapers are run by big government liberals and those opinions flow through the papers tremendously. There are policies that repress the candidates that are not incumbents.

**MEISNER:** What are they?

**RIZZO:** Candidates cannot write letters to the editor between the first of the year and November but there are plenty of articles during that time that cover the incumbent.

**MEISNER:** The first of the year and November? (shaking her head to indicate disagreement)



**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** What are the factors that keep competition out of the marketplace. If we're going to have bias, can we have competing bias?

**DALY:** It's not correct to think that in the good old days editors were fair-minded. It's always been a privilege that being an owner you can have your way. You can tell people to buzz off. What's more important though, and it's a deep problem, is competition. If you had two papers in the same area, you might have a shot.

**MILLER:** We do have a strict rule that everyone gets fair coverage during the campaign process. A person who I have had difficulty ran for office. He came to see me. He said he was running and wanted my help. I said I'd give you fair coverage. He said he expected that but wanted an endorsement.

**MEISNER:** This is one of the most competitive newspaper environments that I've worked in. There are an awful lot of places where there are more than one weekly newspaper. There are always papers starting up. Folks want to start their own newspapers and that's certainly an option.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** My name is Howard Ziff. I was a reporter for many years in Chicago. We have talked about the problems of the newspapers but the problems in advertising are even broader in terms of the problems of the communities. How have the communities changed? Some of us want the old community, as well as the old community newspapers. How do you factor that in?

**MILLER:** I cover what is commonly called the black community. That is ethnic and geographic. You will read about (the late WGBH radio show host) Robert Lurtsema who is a good old homeboy from Roxbury. A lot of people don't know that. When I was young Roxbury was a lot more racially diverse than it is now. We have some more influenced member, like Stevie Flemmi, who a lot of people don't realize is from the Orchard Park area. I remember him and his brothers. I won't write any commentary on him. He may not like it.

**JURKOWITZ:** Journalism now offers people a shot at a pretty good lifestyle. You have seen a social and economic disconnect between the journalism and the people they write about. At a paper like mine you recruit from all over the country. You pick the cream of the crop. You are not necessarily part of that great middle class that journalists were from 25 years ago. A lot of issues start to disconnect you. The public intuits that we are not them anymore. At the Globe politics were the best beats. People fought and screamed to be at City Hall and be with the larger-than-life figures. Now everyone wants to do science and technology and media, like me.