



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

Sustainable Media

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The recent news that the *San Francisco Chronicle* is running an annual deficit of \$70 million has added to anxiety about the state of the U.S. commercial media. The great national

papers – *The New York Times*, the *LA Times* – are facing economic challenges, as well as the regional newspapers like the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and *Rocky Mountain News* that have recently ceased publication. TV news is also sorely challenged by the shifts in our economy and information society.

Many constructive efforts are underway to retain or rebuild quality news coverage. Here in the Bay Area, a group led by investor Warren Hellman and attorney Bill Coblentz has been discussing how to preserve the *Chronicle* by changing its business model. Active consideration has been taking place in the philanthropic community about what donors can do to help preserve media capabilities to inform the public about important societal issues.

Philanthropy certainly has an important role to play in supporting quality media. Constructive steps taken so far mainly provide philanthropic support to keep good reporting capacity in place. The Pulitzer Family has funded the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, while the Bay Area's Herb and Marion Sandler have set up Pro Publica, an investigative reporting center in New York.

But reporters ultimately need places to publish their work. Increasingly, the outlets through which journalists release their material are threatened, as one after another newspaper and commercial television outlet either cuts back dramatically or ceases publication or broadcasting.

Suggestions have been made to address this crisis by endowing newspapers or turning them into non-profit corporations. But there are not enough charitable dollars available to sustain mainstream media on an ongoing basis – think of the *Chronicle*, just one newspaper, and its current \$70-million annual loss.

For many years, a commercial model based on advertising and subscriptions sustained the media. I believe the media of the future will be an updated version of this model, combined with strengthened public media supported, as it is now, by tax dollars and individual and foundation donors.

As important as it is to seek a new business model for newspapers, thinking through how to preserve a lively and strong media should begin with a broader survey of the existing media. I would concentrate not just on the financially challenged major newspapers, but on other media that have an ongoing, functioning business model.

Obviously a more thorough survey needs to be done, but if we were to start by focusing here in the Bay Area, a quick scan reveals an extraordinary richness of media outlets available. We have strong public media, led by Northern California Public Broadcasting (KQED, KTEH, KQEI) as well as smaller outlets like KALW and KCSM. We have good commercial news radio, including KCBS, KGO and KLIV. We have a rich variety of ethnic media, including radio, television and print media in Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese, Russian, Portuguese, Japanese, Hindi and many other languages. We have strong business newspapers – the *San Francisco Business Times*, the *San Jose Business Journal* – and community newspapers. We have student publications and outlets like Youth Radio. We have glossy magazines including *San Francisco*, *Diablo* and *San José*. We have public forums led by The Commonwealth Club, providing information in a different, but no less important, way. We have Internet powerhouses like Yahoo and Google. We have alternative publications, including *The Bay Guardian*, *Metro* and *Mother Jones* magazine. We have creative ventures like the internationally focused LinkTV. And the list goes on.

What these outlets have in common is that they are successful and already supported by subscribers, advertisers, members or donors. They already have readers, viewers, listeners or users.

After cataloging our sustainable media, I would apply a filter of what characteristics of the mainstream media are particularly valuable to society. Among the key components of the journalistic ethic are neutrality, fact-checking to ensure accuracy, presenting multiple points of view, ensuring that important public policy issues are covered. An additional component is aggregating information in a way that is easily accessible and offers the public a framework of common information.

Then I would apply this template to the media above to see where improvements can be made. Ways could be found to improve the quality, neutrality and delivery of information from all of these outlets. Perhaps public broadcasting should do more to cover local news. Perhaps the business newspapers should do more investigative reporting. Perhaps Yahoo and Google could aggregate general news for users, in addition to what they provide on-demand through their search functions. One could envision philanthropic support for these improvements, through support for investigative reporting projects, fellowships for journalists, and funding for technology and dissemination.

Bottom line – let's make sure that however we address the current crisis in the media, we put our efforts into models that are financially sustainable. Ω