

A new declaration of independence

As we approach the 247th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, I think it's time to celebrate a step in the right direction for local news. Earlier this month, the Senate Judiciary Committee voted 14-7 in a bipartisan show of support for the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act (JCPA). I've visited with you before about JCPA, the measure that would allow digital journalism providers to collectively negotiate with Google and Facebook for fair compensation for use of their content.



From the Publisher's Desk
Tom Stangl

Google and Facebook, referred to as the duopoly because of their monopoly on digital advertising, are the dominant distributors of news content, reaping tremendous financial benefit without compensation to those who create the content. They also capture the majority of U.S. digital ad revenue.

The JCPA will allow print, broadcast and other digital news providers a one-time exemption from antitrust laws to negotiate with the duopoly for fair compensation for use of their content.

Advertising displayed next to search results for news are a billion dollar plus market for Google. Facebook's threat to remove all news content last winter when the JCPA was being considered is another indicator to me that they fill threatened by the measure.

A similar measure passed in Australia. Canada passed the measure last week and Meta has announced its intention to pull all news from Facebook and Instagram in Canada. Meta claims that news has no value to either the tech giant or to users who do not go to Facebook and Instagram to consume news.

In 2021, Pew Research Center reported results of a US survey finding that "when it comes to where Americans regularly get news on social media, Facebook outpaces all other social media sites." For Canadians in 2022, Facebook was still the most popular social media platform for weekly news, according to Statista, which ran a survey finding that 21 percent of Canadians check Facebook for news weekly.

I know change is scary for large organizations like Google and Facebook. Accustomed to large returns on investment from being nearly the only show in town for many digital advertising options, it's understandable that they are concerned about paying their fair share.

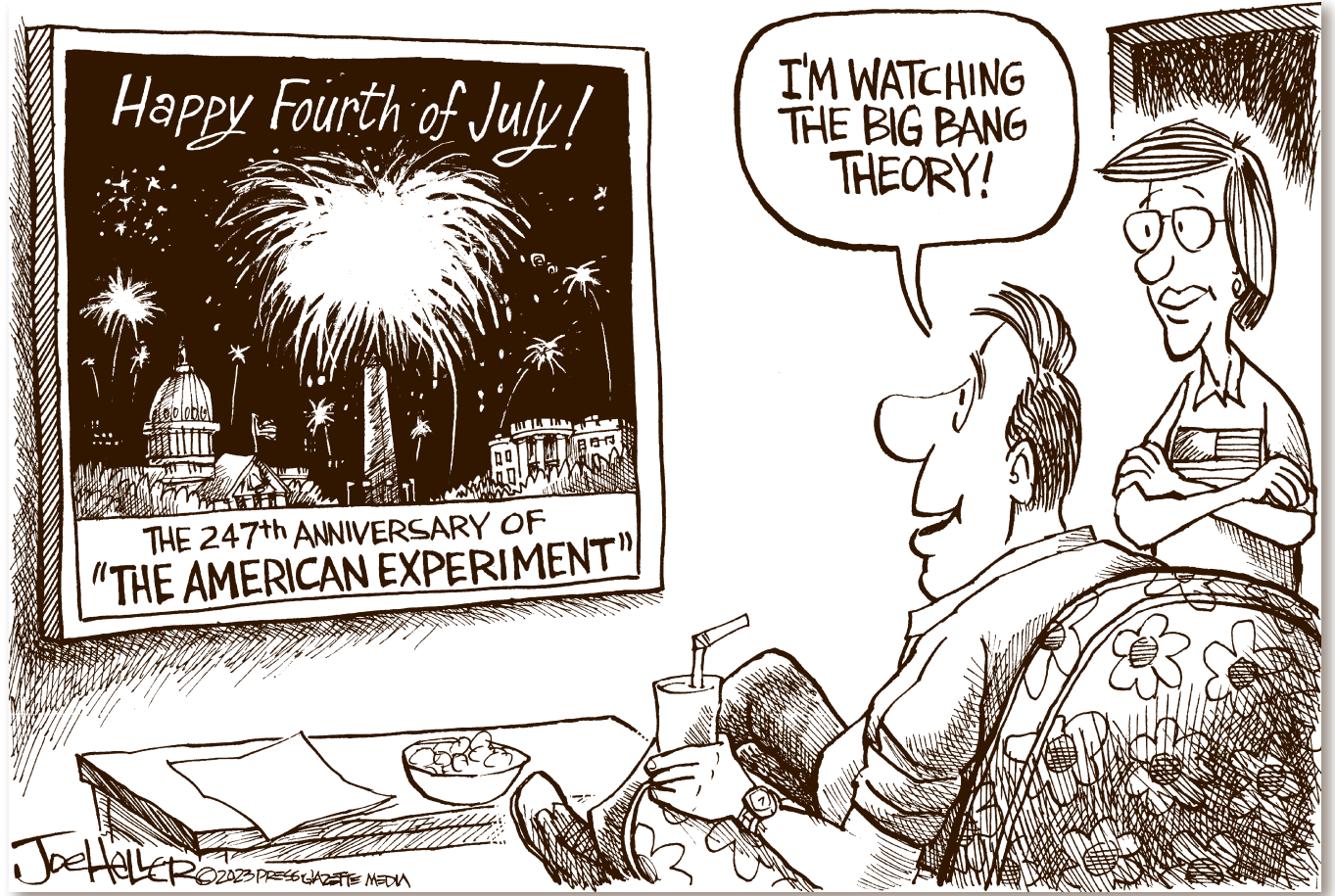
In 1776, King George III wasn't happy with the return on investment he was receiving from colonists. He asked parliament to pass a series of additional taxes without any input from the colonists. Colonists eventually had enough and rebelled against the crown.

I see JCPA as a similar tool for news outlets like this newspaper to find ways to pay for news staff. We deserve a share of the money the duopoly is earning from our work. If it literally takes an act of Congress for us to be able to get terms to do so, I hope our elected officials see that, like the colonists in 1776, it has become necessary to take drastic steps.

Getting an exemption from antitrust laws is a drastic step, one that has not been considered lightly.

News outlets the size of this paper can never expect a level playing field with Google or Facebook. But, joined with the other newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, we will be able to speak softly and carry a big stick to get a square deal.

Pass the JCPA. It's the right thing to do.



Where do we go from here?

As a newspaper editor there are several things that drive me nuts. The first is when people say, "I bet it is hard to work in your industry considering print is dying." The second is when I see people say anything they want on social media as rules applying to print, simply do not apply to online entities like Facebook.



Editor
April Ziemer

Some of you may have read the front page story concerning issues at City Hall and have seen what I have been looking into for the past six months.

I wish I could say my job was as easy as listening to some hearsay, logging

into social media and choosing to spew whatever I wanted — true or not.

There are rules in my line of work. Some are because of legal ramifications and others are rules I have set for myself, but both involve me getting my ducks in a row, proof of situations, and quite a bit of research before I start reporting on a subject—most definitely before I fully report on things.

Most times it is not easy when Open Records requests are involved. Open Records laws exist because all people should have the greatest possible information about decisions and activities of local government. According to the State of Wisconsin, in practice, very few requests to inspect records are denied and should take place within 10 days of a request.

Unfortunately, I can say this has rarely been the case for me when requesting from the City of Amery. Because every ounce of my being believes in the public's right to transparency, I will not go down without a fight, even if one time it meant waiting nine months before getting a request.

This, my friends, is just one reason why local newspapers are still indeed relevant and why it is important that print should never die.

Sure, maybe some of you started catching on there were issues at City Hall based off of Facebook posts over the past few months, but I must reiterate and say it louder for those in the back, "YOU CANNOT ALWAYS BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU READ ON FACEBOOK!"

Some of the information may have been correct, but I know I saw things that were not because I had been doing my own digging, investigating, interviewing and requesting since December 2022.

One major thing I saw on social media making my blood boil were posts slamming the Amery City Council for their part in the chaos. It did not take me long while looking into matters to realize the council was not privy to a lot of information. I myself was frustrated one time when I heard a council member say they were dealing with a "silly situation" and, based on what they had been told, it probably did seem silly indeed.

I do not personally feel an elected official can properly make decisions based off lies.

Were council members told lies? I guess that depends whether or not you consider having information withheld from you as being lied to?

I would like to say I have had conversations which give me proof to these claims.

The past handful of months knowing there has not been transparency, half-truths and having members of various boards in the community come to me at one time or another and tell me they felt as if they had been bamboozled has been very difficult, to say the least.

I carried information that was eating me alive and persevered in the hope wrongs would be made right. Slowly I watched residents

have less and less faith in the place they called home.

I heard ridiculous rumors that could not be farther from the truth. I watched as people were hurting from these rumors.

When truths were withheld, either by a person's choice or by ordinances made to prevent the sharing of records, I believe it was done to try to protect people from being hurt.

In the end, which I actually do not believe we have reached, people were hurt in the process of waiting or by the way information eventually came out. I personally believe if a complete truth would have been told in the very beginning, fewer people would have been hurt.

Amery has gone viral online, but not for any of the wonderful things I love about this amazing community. We lost good employees and we have distrust within and outside of the walls of City Hall. We have residents who feel as if our town has jumped from one controversy to another and they are begging for a city government with some form of translucency.

There is no doubt we are in quite a mess and we did not have to be here.

My promise to you is this: I like to think of the City as a tent that protects its dwellers. The newspaper is like the pole that supports the tent. We are holding the tent accountable for making decisions that continue to protect those underneath it. There is no way social media or a blog can replace the strength of the pole that has always been a part of the tent.

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