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Local congressman attempts to boost quality journalism through legislation

By Nick Marnell



Photo courtesy Office of Rep. Mark DeSaulnier

Feeling that quality local journalism is crucial to a strong democracy, Rep. Mark DeSaulnier introduced a House Resolution April 3 that would allow local news outlets to band together to negotiate terms of product distribution and compensation with major online platforms like Facebook and Google. The Democrat, whose 11th District includes Lamorinda, said that using social media is not the way to learn about democracy and he stressed that newspapers fill an important role in the furtherance of democracy - especially with their coverage of local news.

"I worked in Contra Costa County and I raised my kids in Contra Costa County," DeSaulnier said. "When I was first elected to the Concord City Council, there were local reporters there every day. The sexual harassment of one of my colleagues was uncovered by a local newspaper reporter."

How times have changed. According to the Pew Research Center, Facebook outstrips all other social media sites as a source for news, and Facebook and Google control the vast majority of online referrals for news and the bulk of digital advertising revenue, while revenue for news publishers has plummeted by \$31 billion since 2006. Over the past 15 years, 1,800 local papers have closed or merged, and in the Bay Area alone, newspapers have seen a drop from about 1,500 journalists to fewer than 300. Public officials are enjoying freedom from the press, not exactly what James Madison had in mind.

"Companies bought the papers, sold the iconic buildings, outsourced the printing and laid off the journalists," DeSaulnier said. "The papers that have survived have very little local news content." He recognized the San Francisco Chronicle as one of the few major market newspapers that has not abandoned its local news efforts.

"We promote and inspire civic discourse and we are here to make sure there is an informed electorate and to keep those in power accountable. The local politicians, police, city officials - those are the people who are most directly affecting our lives," said Audrey Cooper, San Francisco Chronicle editor in chief. "I think there is a lot of great journalism happening in the (Bay Area), including in Lamorinda. But people need to support it with their eyeballs, attention and money, because nothing else is going to keep our democracy strong."

Publishers have long complained that online platforms like Facebook and Google love the newspapers for their content, but the platforms contribute nothing to the cost of gathering the content. And while publishers agree that the platforms are necessary for content distribution, there is no way to meaningfully negotiate policies and practices to help local news organizations. "In this digital world, where content is being shared for free on social media while the platform makes a profit, it's only fair to let news organizations share in ad revenues," DeSaulnier said.

Not everyone believes the congressman's actions are purely altruistic. "Newspapers generally have lost the public trust. They did it all by themselves. They are a business like any other now," said Moraga attorney Larry Pines, who has been critical of this newspaper, especially its 2018 Moraga storm drain fee measure coverage, which he felt was biased in favor of the town's position in promoting its annual property tax measure. "The congressman's proposed special protection amounts to a waiver or exemption from well-established antitrust laws. It amounts to shameless pandering to the same biased protectorate that routinely feathers his bed in his local communities."

DeSaulnier responded by again stressing the need for strong local news. "America relies on a free and open press to serve as a watchdog for our communities and the country. Thanks to a robust press America learned Richard Nixon was a crook and that the Bush Administration failed to adequately respond after Hurricane Katrina," DeSaulnier said. "Local and national newspapers shine light on the truth and protect our democracy."

The congressman's bill - the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act - awaits a hearing in the House Judiciary Committee before advancing to the House Floor for a vote.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

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