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(Don't) stop the presses!

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THE shocking news about the bankruptcy filing by the company that owns the *Daily News* and *Inquirer* is just another installment in the drumbeat of reports about the layoffs and cutbacks at our major newspapers.

These reports, explaining the economics of increasing costs vs. profit and loss, and shareholder value, should really be front-page news.

To fight back, a few newspaper execs, including Brian Tierney of Philadelphia Newspapers, have started what they're calling the Newspaper Project to raise public awareness about the real value that newspapers bring us.

Using a Web site and paid ads, they're trying to show the real numbers behind the print media's contribution to hard news and citizen discourse and an optimistic note to not count them out . . . yet. While this is obviously somewhat self-serving, the loss of high-caliber journalists, including columnists and editorial writers, at many of our major metro papers should be considered the big and bad news of the day and be cause for public concern.

In 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government with newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them."

The virtues of reading a metropolitan daily newspaper are many, and, in my humble opinion, they provide the best single tool to enrich the teaching and learning process at any level of formal schooling. Many educators use, or should be using, print newspapers as part of their coursework. Reading a metro daily newspaper is a valuable habit of industry because it:

- * Provides personal empowerment, as information is power.
- * Provides global information.
- * Helps anticipate the trends and rapidly changing events of the day.

- * Stimulates political engagement and community activism.
- * Sharpens critical thinking.
- * Expands your vocabulary.
- * Prepares you to appreciate a variety of approaches to learning about our world.

It's tempting to dismiss newspapers' current plight as simply a down period in an industry's life cycle, or blame the publishers and senior managers for not moving fast enough to reformulate the print product to better meet the needs of today's readers and advertisers.

Regardless of your judgment about this, the fact that there are fewer working journalists in our cities isn't healthy. After a critical and honest evaluation of the quality and usefulness of today's many "alternative" news sources, it's fair to conclude that our major daily newspapers still provide us with the best link to reality. All other media pale in comparison and some "news sources" are better categorized as entertainment.

Over just the last year, there have been many examples of how we all benefit from good investigative journalism, comprehensive and balanced news reporting, and challenging commentaries from all viewpoints in greater Philadelphia, around the nation and across the globe.

News stories about corrupt local and state politicians, or poorly managed city social-service agencies, or those left out of our health-care system, to breaking events in the Middle East, the print media are still tops when it comes to reporting. Readers can sense the personal pain and physical devastation from the dispatches on the many recent natural disasters. Newspapers' in-depth follow-up on these crises exposed government weaknesses in keeping the promise of our social contract that includes ensuring domestic tranquility and promoting the general welfare.

So it's great to see newspapers fighting to preserve the Fourth Estate. The leaders are reminding us that the enterprise is much more than a business - it's a collection of activities that contributes to the public trust.

BUT WHERE are the public's efforts to preserve one of the most important tools of democracy? Let's get out the vote on this one, too. Let's see the bumper stickers, the colorful wristbands, the lawn signs. Let's get the economic think tanks to help save the catalyst that helped give us our own freedom. Let's try a reverse boycott - and go out and buy our daily newspapers.

We can agree or disagree with the reports and opinions of these tireless servants of the public interest, but without them, we'll surely be seriously less well-informed on what to think about the major issues of the day.