

Madison Literary Club

Paul Fanlund & John Nichols: The Business of Journalism in 2026 February 9, 2026

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The two speakers tonight probably need absolutely no introduction for most of you. And I'm tempted to just sit out, especially any of you who are associated in any way with the literary world. But for the one of one or two of you who may not know them, I get to introduce them.

I'll read a couple of short bios. I'm tempted to also ask for a show of hands for all those who have read columns or books by the one or two of you who had, so I get to first introduce Paul Falin. Paul is president and publisher of the Capital [00:07:00] Times native of Illinois. He's BA in Journalism from University and A A MA Communication and Politics from the American University in Washington, dc.

He was a reporter and editor at the Wisconsin State Journal and then later Vice President of Operations for the combined Madison Newspapers Incorporated before he joined the Cap Times in 2006. As Vice president, he oversaw building wide operations. Currently he oversees the Cap Times editorial and business operations.

It's a weekly call and chairs the board meetings of the Capital Times Company and the foundation company's chair of the law. The, that foundation recently gave a very generous excuse to the friends here later, um, John Nichols will be joining us. He has another obligation, I guess, Howard, oh, probably 20, 30 minutes.

Okay. John, many, you, you [00:08:00] know that name is the associate editor of the Capital Times and the executive editor of the Nation Magazine. He's the author or co-author of more than a dozen books on media democracy, including most recently, it's okay to be Angry about Capitalism. A New York Times bestseller, the he wrote with Senator Bernie Sanders, native of rural Wisconsin.

He has lived, worked and reported from around the world, Iceland, South Africa during, during the transition from apart. Palestine, numerous African celebration sexual Americans and conservative, please vote.

Thanks so much. This is such an intimate crowd. Um, I hope you don't mind. I've got a bit of a knee thing going on. It's okay if I sit, Nancy. Okay, thank you. Yeah, John's gonna join us, um, in a few [00:09:00] minutes. Um, so I'll just tell you kind of where I thought we'd go tonight. I thought I'd talked a little bit about the past, present and future, um, cap times in newspaper in general.

A bit more about my background. Um, and then I wanna talk, uh, Nick asked me to talk about the newspaper business generally, and I can talk to that as well. And then my colorful colleague, John Nichols, be joining us. Uh, and we'll talk more about the two newspapers here in Madison. And, uh, and take it from there.

And please be, feel free to. This is, this is just having a conversation and if you wanna read your next question, that's great. I decided the last minute to, uh, pull out a three minute video we produced on our hundredth anniversary. Now it's almost 10 years ago. Um, some of the rest of the staff has changed.

You'll see, um, uh, media in it and John John's a little greater. Now. I'm wearing the same hair style. Um, and uh, so this just takes three minutes, but it gives you a sense of how we present ourselves with the community[00:10:00]

sound bite in alternative facts. It might feel like the truth has never been monitor defined, but what it really comes down to is in the way where to look instead the guidance spirit of will. That place has

been the gap times for more than 100 years. E founded the Cat Times in 1970, the months after the US entered the first war.

Frustrated by attacks against the founder of the progressive fighting, Bob E was determined to create a paper that champion ordinary people and challenged powerful business agents. A paper that spoke out for those whose lives and livelihood were perceived. The power that would work with those that served and foster the progressive spirit no matter the [00:11:00] obstacles of matter of God over over the years, they could have times has stood against racist extremes and challenge og opposed to unjust work around it.

Spoke out that Ideals Mpromise, although is no longer with us. Spirit lives on. We are proud to be voice for those societies left behind and to champion causes many of you, us, to him to tackle perspective. Opinion rights have never shyed away from physical studies. As with Mr from the topic, the more convenient speaking of, but the great place he had left at that times was to finding and reporting the unvarnished truth.

We still knew our exceptional staff of innovative, [00:12:00] enterprising reporters dedicated true tellers convey to smart, fair, and thorough investigative reporting, no matter the topic, the audience, or the challenges they facing. Disseminating true and team of exceptional professionals with only one agenda.

Excellence, although we're committed to journalism, is decidedly. Our approach to media is sitting. We've worked hard to be at the forefront of innovation. Embrace the interactive realtime benefits of the latest channels, delivering insights our leaders depend on. Last, but certainly not least, is the cap times commit to philanthropy.

The Interview Foundation is given more than \$56 million to the people and causes Mr. Eew supported throughout his life. The foundation has made a critical difference to the people whose stories made otherwise without untold and [00:13:00] helped ensure that some of Madison's most enduring landmarks are all they are to today.

William TF you started the Cat Times with the radical notion that it make Madison in Wisconsin a better place by letting people have the truth and the freedom to discuss it 100 years later, that vision is as relevant, so. The count times remains as always, Madison, as it gets

this age pretty well. Um, for the last nine years or so, um, I, uh, got a couple things in there. We've now proudly having foundation, we've now given more than \$75 million back to the community at a pace of suddenly more than \$2 million a year. Um, and, uh, it's a source of great pride for those of us on the board.

We, we, uh, [00:14:00] a lot of the causes that I think a lot of people in this room are, uh, pulled dearly. We support, um, and that's really a fun thing to be part of what people don't understand. We talk about difficult economics, is that when Mr. E died in 1970. Uh, uh, he and Zillow, his spouse, a guy that have children and could imagine a day what newspaper industry would be if it where it is 2026.

So he created the ING Foundation. Uh, and that's a completely different, uh, uh, allotment of money. Uh, that's, that we can, uh, give to charities of, of nonprofits, of various kinds. We also have the, uh, uh, kids fund, and those are smaller grants, but, uh, that's all. We're not getting money much from the community.

That's just our money we're getting. That's a source of great pride for me. Um, a summary thing I'd say is in my 50 years, pretty much in the business, most of it in Madison, [00:15:00] I've been, uh, at the center of the pizza time, newspaper industry, and now wartime newspaper industry. It's remarkably, um, different these days.

Nick, uh, mentioned some of my background. I grew up. It was a baby boomer in a, in a working class neighborhood in Rockford, uh, about 60 miles south of here. Uh, everybody's parents were, his father fought in World War II, it seemed like, and in the heart of the heart of the baby boom, I fell in love with newspaper and as a high school student, went to Drake, um, worked at the Des Moines Register when the Sunday circulation was a half a million, imagine half million papers across, um, Iowa.

I moved to Washington DC arrived there the same month that, uh, Richard Nixon, uh, flew, uh, away from the ellips, August of 74. And it was fascinating to be in Washington during that period. Being in Washington, we all kinds of fascinating visitors, [00:16:00] uh, speakers. I, I attended to market style in person couple times.

I, uh, there was a guy at American University who started their, um, broadcast, uh, uh, program there. His name was Ed Bliss. He was one of Edward r Murrow's, um, boys, one of his original boys, incredibly. And he was Walter Cronkite's first managing editor on the CBS evening news. And in fact, handed in the, uh, uh, note that, uh, PF Taylor died on November 22nd, 1963.

Um, and so that, that really kind of opened my role to thinking differently about journalism. I had the great teachers there. Um, we, I, I took a brief stop. Um, my first reporting job was, was a political report for the biggest paver. This is what you really call being a, a big fish in a small pond in South Dakota, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

And I got to know Kel pretty well. Mm-hmm. Um, and, uh, but a gentle [00:17:00] fatherly figure. He was, he's also close to the Capital Times and I reconnected with him shortly before his death. And I don't know, probably some of you in this room know that his daughter, um, Theresa died in Madison, uh, of alcohol and mental health issues and treatment centers here, name for her.

But he was, um, an incredible guy. I also spent some time in South Dakota, one-on-one with Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter, uh, because it was that there was a South Dakota primary and I was the biggest political reporter, most important political reporter in that state. Um, and both of them were incredibly kind and earnest people.

Uh, you know, just looking at some political, the political surround the day, it really is unrecognizable. Anyway, in 1978, my wife Larry, uh, and I moved here. I became a reporter as, except for Kansas State Journal. I moved through seven different jobs in the state journal. Um, you, I came in as county government called City Hall, the legislature, and I was the top political [00:18:00] reporter of the Sunday editor.

Eventually became an assistant managing editor. Uh, when I first got here, I was covering the, our hippie Mayor Paul Sling. Paul still has me on speed dial. I call pretty regularly as as I do. Um, great. Uh, uh, uh, mayor, former mayor, just LVI and citizen brother. Um, that's one thing about being in the media here for as long as I have.

I think I looked it up once and I think I've known every US senator from the state back to McCarthy. So I'm, uh, I'm not in age. Who was, uh, my colleague who was hired by, I believe TW in 1962, but I'm closing in it. Um. So, uh, I bet a lot of you remember some of the biggest stories there. I was in the state journal, the barnell tornado in 84 19 were killed.

Um, in, in 88, I, uh, managed the coverage of the shooting rampage of the city, Tommy building that killed two, um, [00:19:00] by a troubled young man named Aaron Lind. And I was thinking about that recently, thinking how shocking that was then. And now the thought of gun violence is unfortunately not as shocking. It is shocking, but, you know, in a different way.

Um, in, uh, I, I like though this anecdote in 2000, I, I oversaw what we thought was a big investigator report, nor as the shoe by scandal that was not submitted. It was guys, athletes were taking, um, improper discounts on shoes, resulted in NCA sanctions and, and messages to me saying, why don't you rename the paper, the Michigan State Journal?

'cause you're helping. Um, but I think how silly that seems now era of, um, name, image, and lightness and statements just shows how long, how long I've been around. Anyway, uh, as Nick mentioned in 2001, I, I went over and became, um, vice president of the, uh, Madison newspapers, which is, I'll explain [00:20:00] as the joint organization.

And I oversaw, um, circulation production and the internet department, such human resources, marketing and niche publications. At that point, that was an organization about 550 people. That's a fraction of Vietnam. Uh, in 2006, I was asked to, um. By, by the cap times border to join the Capitol Times and lead into the turbulent waters ahead.

Um, John, and I'll talk when he gets here in depth about the cap times. So I kind of changed my order here so we can talk about that. Um, but let me talk about the business. So as Title I draws the business of newspaper and there isn't a lot of good news in it, but I, but, but there was some things you may not have realized or thought about, so I'll just dive in.

Um, before the internet, we were fat and happy. We were, we were, we were a business that not only had high margins, we had high revenue out of mc making and a large revenues and, and most newspapers were real profitable. [00:21:00] Um, you, we, uh, you need, uh, advertisers needed us because there weren't a lot of options for, um, reaching mass audiences other than the, uh, other than the newspapers.

Um, the first casualty. Uh, of this, uh, new era was our classified advertising classified. Those classified ads where you'd sell, uh, your Chevy or try to hire someone were enormously profitable 'cause they were just these tiny little ads that we were able to charge a lot for them. And, uh, kind, uh, and then came Craigslist, which was, uh, a shot across the bow of free alternative to that the next major casualty was the, what we call display ads, which are the ads for department stores or, uh, groceries or whatever computer throughout the, the newspaper.

Um, and then we had a fast decline in what we call the Preprint preprint business. Um, you guys, [00:22:00] you'll probably all remember, um, know newspapers were a lot bigger and thicker. And the preprints, we were those inserts that, uh, uh, for feet farm or wherever. And, um, and I, I can recall when I was vice president, we'd have two jacket of jackets or the things that you put the preprints in and there's these machines, these preprints in.

And, uh, we'd have to have two jackets of preprints for Thanksgiving Day because those papers were sold, um, wonderfully, uh, profitable for us and filled with all this, all the holiday as before the internet. Anyway, while this was all happening, uh, people found their way to news information, accurate or otherwise, via the internet.

Our circulation fell. And, um, uh, there's an old adage, excuse my French here, but, uh, you don't wanna get in a pissing match with somebody who buys the zinc by the barrel or is paper by the box, uh, mode. Um, [00:23:00] and that used to be true, but that's not true. Um, uh, which brings me to what I think this is, this is my view.

One of the biggest mistakes we made as an industry was undercharging for, for our product. And you're gonna go, Hmm. Really have, I looked at what we're, we're charging these days, but in 1974, um, to my apartment in Alexandria, Virginia, I think of, uh, the Washington Post deliver seven days a week to my apartment door for \$5 a month.

And, uh, not, uh, and you know, when I became vice president and got familiar with all the economics, that didn't even cover the income paper. Um, the game and the newspaper business was always penetration. In the 1950s and sixties, the, um, daily newspaper penetration exceeded a hundred percent, which meant for every household that got no newspaper, um, there was more than that.

Who got more than one. Mm-hmm. [00:24:00] So the newspaper penetration was like 110%. It was just remarkable. Um, and, uh, I recall the date that I was managing the, uh, director of circulation at the newspaper company are much more focused on what we call units rather than revenue, because

it be to get the we, if we could be everywhere in front of everybody, that allowed us to, to drive the revenue in different ways so people got accustomed to not, you know, they're, they're going to pay X or Y for spectrum, or direct TV or Netflix or whatever, if you're kind of used to it.

Um, not to say that some of the behaviors haven't been aggressive on pricing, but, um, you know, journalism, professional journalism are expensive to produce. And so people kind of recoiled from it today and also think they can get, uh, some semblance of, uh, news, um, elsewhere. Good enough elsewhere on the internet, even if it's not particularly, uh, professional.

Uh, we all know younger [00:25:00] people. When's the last time you saw a young person, uh, you know, reading a, a print daily newspaper? We do. We have success with our, with our Tablo. Our weekly tabloid has a high pickup rate, and we're in a lot of our lot of urban ca uh, coffee shops on campus. And it does get picked up, but you don't see the, uh, younger people reading a paper like it used to.

Social platforms also have been a problem in that they drive more traffic, Google and Facebook, uh, to get up to our content, but they suck up the advertising revenue much, their advertising revenue. It should go to the creators of the content, right? They're just intermediaries. So where does that put us?

Um, today looking at it, the top of the industry is the New York Times. And, um, the Times is unique. It's not only indispensable for an elite audience. Hello, John.

John Nichols: Hey, uh,

Audience: so late do. Yeah, you're just, thank you. Perfect. Uh, [00:26:00] well I'll, I'll bring you up when I finish some of this. So, New York Times is you, they have, I, I, I looked it up.

They have 12 million subscribers, 11 million of whom are digital only. Uh, one of the reasons that's, that the New York Times is prospered in this year is they diversified. So they have, uh, a cooking arm, they have games, they have the Athletic, which is a, a sports site. They acquired a wire cut, which is sort of a version consumer report.

And, you know, I'd be remiss if I didn't then pivot to the Washington Post, which, um, which, uh, did quite well in the early years of, um. Jeff Bezos is ownership. Uh, John Will member. We have Marty Baron, the then editor post surprise, wedding editor of the Washington Post to our first Idea Fest. Um, and, uh, and, and he was, uh, incredibly impressive.

We have had a lot of Washington Post post to Idea Fest over the years. Um, but, uh, there was a [00:27:00] tremendous interest in reading about, uh, during Trump's first term. Uh, the post, uh, uh, circulation, uh, skyrocketed. And then, uh, and then it fell, uh, during the Biden years. Uh, and then of course, we all know that, uh, Bezos society needed to cur favor with Trump, um, and drove a lot of folks away starting with, uh, non endorsing, uh, Kamala Harris one, the editorial that he'd written.

And, uh, and, and this last week laying off 300 journalists. Um, and it's, it's just a mess. My, um, John's and my friend David Marus, who's Intel. Father was editor of the Cap Times who grew up not to Madison West here, who's a mainstay of Idea Fest, used the F word last week to, to describe in the, in the, uh, new Yorker how much Jeff Bezos cares about journalists not giving a f.

Um, so, uh, we can talk more about, as we get to the QA section, we can [00:28:00] talk more about that smaller daily newspapers than the, those, those national goliath are, are, continue to try to replace print revenue, um, with digital revenue. Uh, but, uh, neither readers nor, um, advertisers are willing to pay as much. And it's, uh, it's a, it's a, the fight as, as as print revenues decline, try to build digital revenues.

One technique, um, and I'm pretty far into the business side of things now as publisher is to try to sell advertisers on the notion of our, our. Us being an agency for them so we can sell them, uh, exposure through our products, sorry, John products, you know, um, through our products. And, uh, but we can also sell, um, uh, radio, tv, billboards, anything.

Uh, trying to try to be in that position to try to, um, uh, fortify our, our, our revenues, um, to have some, some [00:29:00] success. The long-term feature of the state journal and other chain daily newspapers appears to be people's willingness to pay for, for content. Um, I haven't talked at all yet about non-profit models.

Uh, Tom Wiley friend of mine who was, uh, four, three or four or five years ago was publisher of the Stature. And, uh, he, he promised me he was buying property on Lake, uh, ganza and he's gonna be here a long time. So introduced him to, um, Judy Faulkner and, uh, other people, like he's always gonna be here. And then Lee, uh, uh, Warren Buffet sold the Buffalo News to Lee Enterprises and they tap Tom on the shoulder and Buffalo.

And last year he left the Buffalo become the CEO of the National Trust for Local News, which is a longwinded way of saying that's a, that's a model for nonprofit because they, they, they acquire small newspapers and, and aren't so, uh, focused on large margins. So not, there is some promise in [00:30:00] nonprofit, but I'm not talking about, uh, that primarily to my, um, let me, uh, turn to Madison.

Um, John, you wanna come up and join your shirt real quick? Uh, I, your chair? Yeah. He's, he's young. Spry, if you wanna stand, I,

John Nichols: I'm not that young. Oh. I'll bring you on the chair. Yeah, I, Keith. Hi. Think I. Oh, here. Okay.

Audience: So anyway, in, in 2008, John was involved in this. Um, but I was sort, sort of in the forefront of the controversial decision to cease afternoon print, um, uh, public, uh, printing.

And it was early. We were early in the process, uh, early in what would've become a wave so early that I got interviewed by the, uh, New York Times, Chicago Tribune, even dare spiel in German Union Magazine. Interview me about, uh, this, this controversial decision, um, would, would've happened [00:31:00] later anyway, uh, uh, three or three years ago, I split my job.

So I'm no longer editor of the Capital Times, which is. If you think about it, you can't really be a publisher and have these business relationships and still have the kind of separation you need to be. An editor hired a, a guy named Mark Renan Group in the top editor at Green, green Bay Dick Press cassette, and Mark's done a great job of hired some, some really good people.

Um, so let me, let me go deeper into Madison and Jeff can jump in at any point here. Um, but the State Journal was founded in 19 18 39 as the Madison expressed the Capital Times famously in 1917 when, and Evie left the State Journal, um, outrage by the State Journal's position of, uh, became World War I, of World War I.

Um, so, uh, but people don't understand it really very well. Madison Newspapers, what we gotta call ourselves, Madison Media Partners is co-owned [00:32:00] by the Capital Times Company. Where I'm now chairing the Board of Directors and Lee Enterprises. So the, the mass newspapers is co-owned. We, it doesn't dictate to us, it doesn't control us at all.

It's just somebody to be at 50 50 say it. So this was created in 1948 when, um, uh, the state journal Cat Times vigorous competitors. Vigorous, yeah. Very. Uh, I formed, uh, uh, news manage newspapers, thinking, business efficiencies, sharing, manage editorial functions, crucially, uh, sharing profits. Uh, now, um, John knows this story better than I having written book, but, uh, the, uh, the, the, what you wanted in that era was the afternoon mark, people getting outta the factories coming home.

And so he bargained to get the afternoon and gave the state journal Morning Sunday,

John Nichols: [00:33:00] which

Audience: turned out to be him. Sub

John Nichols: Madison became less of a, of, uh, of the mixed town. I dunno how many of you, how many of you're from Madison? What?

Audience: Yeah,

John Nichols: I was 40 now. Yeah.

Audience: No,

John Nichols: not that there's anything Madison frogs because you're here. But the, the reality is that, that until about 19, about 65, think seven, seven probably when, when Lou Z started to really build up the universities, um, Matson was well divided between a working class, east side and, uh, factories. It smell, you know what I mean?

If you drive through Gary, Indiana. It smells snow worse than that east side of Madison did when Oscar Myers was in

Audience: Sure.

John Nichols: In full production. Right. So that was the east side [00:34:00] working class, uh, unionized immigrant, uh, west side was, you know,

Audience: university.

John Nichols: Yeah. That was people war suits and you know, like they had the old line, those people who showered before they went to work.

I know East Side showered when he came home and, and each side had a paper. It's truth than this. And uh, state journal was much more for the west side, uh, cap times much more for the east side. My grandmother and your hair place got both and a lot of people did. That was a very, very ly thing. And uh, but that was the dynamic of it, that, um, we had different newspapers and they had different purposes and to have used view.

We believe that the working class. He was absolutely as smart as anybody at the university. In fact, he ev he would argued probably a little bit smart. And, uh, he just believed that they'd have [00:35:00] breaks in life that got him to a university, right? And so he gave him a favor that spoke to them as intelligently, sometimes more intelligently than the other big part count, right?

And believed that, that that would work just fine. And it did. The, the bottom line reality was. And so, um, there was this burge, you know, of what we talk about here, but putting these two together. But the thing to understand about it was F's loyalty to the basic idea of being a paper for the great mass of people.

The great working class, um, prevented him from seeing the future, right? And so at that point, he made the bet that he would stay with the working class, right? He would stay with that. And, and remember we also had Frank Lloyd Wright writing weekly column for us. And, uh, and Max and everybody, you know, I mean, basically every intellectual in town was associated with the cap times.

But that didn't [00:36:00] detract from our audience being cookie class, the, uh, the business people, the, the elite. They were speaker, so he put it together. Right. And, uh, then times changed. We didn't have the, Sunday, Sunday became the, the incredibly powerful institution. What was the highest circulation for the state journal?

175,000. Sunday, Sunday, 175.

Audience: Sunday. You,

John Nichols: you, you're well aware you would claim that you gave a few papers away, but, but the kept times were never near that. Right. And we kept relatively even on the morning, afternoon for a long time. Oh, you're ahead. I fifties. Fifties. For sure. And then, but, but the afternoon started to tick down.

Sunday started to become a much more dominant reality, packed with all those coupons and everything. And, um, and so that became the reality, right? That we couldn't, we in the [00:37:00] afternoon got down to about, was it 17,000? 17,000, yeah. So we got down to 17,000 versus 117, 70,000. I don't have a good math, but that seems like about one 10.

And, and so choices had to be made. And the funny thing about it was, would've loved this. He would've just, this would've made, he would've had the biggest smile in the world, in the space because the, all the smart people at the enterprises that, that Iowa newspaper that they publish, all the Iowa, all of the state journal folks, they.

They had all their things going for 'em. They tried civic journalism, which was neither civic nor journalism and, and all these different gimmicks and things like that. It was the cap times, figured out the future, right? And ceased to print on a daily basis, which I hate. I despise, I wish the Cap Times came out in print every day and know I [00:38:00] literally go once a year to my grandmother's grave up in Manona and apologized.

Um, and then twice a year to, to Evie's grave. And, but, but when we ceased the print on most days and then went to the once a week, uh, edition, we embraced what we've embraced beyond in the future. And the interesting thing about it is, I will tell you, I will suggest to you, and I know there are friends at State Journal, is what's their circulation now?

Not good. Yeah. It's, uh, it, you know, not good. Let's just say they're, they're competing now with the old cap time circuit. The old numbers. Yeah. And, and we're read by more people because that free weekly that goes out. I see the stats go down and you know all over. Right. People grab it. I am not naive. I don't think that they, you know, they have to have something to take to the bathroom [00:39:00] or with their coffee or whatever, but the fact is that we, we are unfortunately where the future is State journal clean to the past.

This is not to beat up on 'em. 'cause they have wonderful people that work there and I, I hope they survive. 'cause I don't wanna see any newspaper go down. But where the cap times is now is where a newspaper is gonna have to be going forward because, um, it's. The, I still want the print paper. My daughter, who's 22, doesn't read anything in print except the books they make her buy at the university.

You know what I mean? But you understand it's, she, she started to read books a little bit now, but that is, that makes her weird. Um, this is something we need to understand. We have a generation rising and AI and everything that's coming, which we [00:40:00] should talk about a couple minutes. AI is making it worse.

And I, and I say worse, I'm not casual about this. The, where we are headed is a place where, um, we will be digitally inclined and yet where we are inclined for will not be reliable.

Audience: Mm-hmm.

John Nichols: And so we're in a very difficult place. Future journalism is not easy. It's complex. Bob Che and I wrote a pile of books about it and, you know, we kept front of warn, but they didn't listen.

Um, and so now we're at this place where I will tell you that I think the cap times will be the last paper standing in America.

Audience: Mm-hmm.

John Nichols: And I don't, and you think that, you think that's just a parade or something like that. I think there's a very good chance, uh, I don't mean that really, 'cause there's gonna be a lot of other newspapers and there is a future for paper, but we'll make it through and we'll make it through because of the decisions that very controversial decision, uh, some decades ago to, to seize a lot of the print to go to [00:41:00] once a week.

Audience: Thanks Jeff. I'll, I'll, I'm gonna bring my part of this in for landing and we can have a kind conversation go forward. You know, there, there's some good news for Mass and I think in that, in that, uh, if you look at the two newsrooms, seldom are almost nowhere do you find two newsrooms in a city our size, uh, as professional and, and, uh, well run as these are.

So you still have combined, you have more journalists than you do in a lot of bigger cities.

John Nichols: Oh,

Audience: um,

John Nichols: cities like Cleveland.

Audience: Yeah. We

John Nichols: don't have as many as we have

Audience: here. Um, so, uh, I'm gonna tell you just a, a couple of minutes about our strategic plan. Uh, so journalistically, the state journal is doing what it's always done, which is via paper, uh, which is cover everything of interest to everyone and so forth.

Um, and uh, a couple of years ago we decided the Capital Times to do a, a strategic plan to position [00:42:00] us for the future. So frankly, I can turn my attention to the financial side of what's happening with the partnership and so forth and get kind of everything in order. John's been an important part of that.

We hired a guy named Nick Meley, who, uh, headed the Hornstein Center on Media, politics and Public Policy at the Kennedy, Harvard, on Harvard's Kennedy School. He's also deputy publisher of the La Thomas, and he came into town. Talk to everyone. Talk to about everyone. Talked to a lot of people in town, talked to the staff, uh, looked at the national terrain.

That's what we really I wanted was, uh, to get outside of our bubble here in Madison and look at the national terrain. And we're in the process of implementing that strategic plan. Now. We decided we couldn't be everything to everybody. I had this in a column recently, but we're really focused on five, uh, pillars of our coverage.

And they are a changing city. The city and county are evolving with emphasis on development, planning and transportation. Our education system, we have two reporters [00:43:00] focused on, uh, kindergarten through high school and on higher education and on the achievement gap and so forth, our economy and workplace issues.

Um, there's a just a, I don't know what the exact percentage is, but if there's just an incredible percentage of employment in Bank County connected to healthcare at think with this 13,000, just a big part of that. It's, uh, something I think is undercover. Our local politics and government, which is a, the mainstay of, of the Capital Times, uh, in our cultural scene.

Uh, we have Lindsey Christians, and we are, we're very, very strong in that area, and I'll continue to maintain, uh, we of the traditional mainstream media who pays the most attention to racial and social justice issues. Uh, not only in our opinions, um, but in our story of science. Uh, we're also hiring an opinion editor to join, um, and Dave Weal, uh, and, and I, were at a column and we had an interview today with a young person.

We, we decided [00:44:00] through this process, we really need to reach, um, a new Madison that, um, I've, I've talked about this to folks from time to time. It seemed like before the pandemic, and I was editor and not publisher. I knew pretty much all the local decision. Pretty, most of the local decision makers, John still does John networks a lot more than I do.

Um, but that somehow out of the pandemic, that cease to be the case. And, uh, there's just a need for more really well-informed, careful listening, granular opinion journalism in Madison about where this, what, what's going on in the city and so forth. We're interviewing for that, uh, position right now. We're really excited about it.

Um, as has come up in this discussion, we don't have a paywall. Uh, our bus, our model is built on, um, pay voluntary membership. We have 2000 and some members, uh, making, uh, donations, uh, uh, [00:45:00] advertising of course, and, uh, event revenue. Um, you know, our, our goal is always through the strategic plan to make our members feel a special kinship to us.

And we, a lot of events is an important part of that. Three years ago we started. Business, which is a little bit out of character for us, but we thought it was an opportunity, a business event in which a CEO from around the state comes and talks to a group at the, uh, Edgewater about power where business leader speak and, uh, uh, led the most recent one was, uh, uh, um, I forget her first name.

T Yancy, um, to anyway, the president of, of, uh, American Family Insurance. Fascinating. Uh, t please say Yancy. Um, African American woman. Wonderful story outside of Chicago. Great story. Anyway, that's been good. We did, um, cooking with the Cap times, which is a [00:46:00] fun event and, and, and engages our people. Our marquee event, of course is cap times DFS.

John's a, a crucial part. Thank you. Um, we'll be presenting our 10th. This 10th, uh, annual event. This September starts September 20th, uh, at the Memorial Union. It's become, um, big and popular. I don't know about if I've mentioned, I've forgotten already if I've mentioned Elliot Marris tonight, but Elliot, I'm told, we said today was a member of this organization, half a century.

John Nichols: Any of you remember Mr. Say? Oh, he got a nod. It's great.

Audience: Wow. Um,

John Nichols: so remarkable guy.

Audience: So his son, his son David, uh, wrote a, a book, written many books, uh, Washington Post, the one two poet for the Washington Post, and is on his 14th book. He's writing now on Jack Johnson, the Boxer. He just, his last book was on, um, Jim Thorpe at the [00:47:00] Olympian.

But, uh, David wrote a, went Madison West, um, and still summers here, and wrote a book about how, uh, at halftime saved his family during the part of the year. Elliot was blacklisted. Yes. And, um, uh, and David came here and, uh, yeah. And David continued to very close communicate with him every day or two, uh, as we, um, bring together top flight speakers in the world of politics, business, education, arts, and more.

And, and just, I, I, I, I got this two paragraphs and names I was, uh, pitching, um, a, a very famous national speakers representative. You know, it helps to show the people we've had before I put, I put this together. So we featured Nancy Pelosi, Tim Walls, JB Pritzker, Stacey Abrams, Heather Cox Richardson, Doris Burns Goodwin, Bernie Sanders, Adam Inger, this Cheney, Amy Klobuchar, Jamie RAs m Ron Johnson, [00:48:00] an earlier version,

uh, David, among others journalists. We've had included, uh, uh, mostly included Marty Bar Post, Bob Woodward, Carl Bernstein, Karen Alte, Dan Balls, Carol Lennick, Peter Baker, York Times White House, Susan Glasser, Eugene Robinson, Judy Whitter, AAL Hunt, George Packer, Jean Mayer, E Osnos, Jennifer Rubin, Marine Dow.

So it's been, um, kind of took off beyond my thanks, my, our, our wildest imagination this early John, as a tremendous national context through his senior leadership role operation. Marus helps us. Ben ler, chairman for ex-chairman of the State Party has, uh, phenomenal connections. I have some connections, so, so I'm gonna, I'm gonna land my remarks here and then we Calvin up and take where you find, um, so yeah, there's [00:49:00] no kid, there's no missing the point that legacy, uh, newspapers are under enormous pressure, particularly if they're, uh, stockholder pressure.

We do not have that. The Capital Times, capital Times has, um, has, it has, uh, no debt and has quite a, quite a high level of assets. Part of part of it comes from, uh, have you created the first commercially successful radio station in the state, WIBA and uh, and, and we always say how he's spinning in his grave, or, uh, yeah.

Fair.

John Nichols: Barely set

Audience: what we can. But, um, uh, we sold it and then, uh, in sixties, fifties or sixties took the money and invested it. And that's a long time ago with a lot of, a lot of time horizon for investments. So we're, we're in, in pretty good position there. Interesting. Uh, and maybe in the book may have read it in the book, I would pitch John's book if you're John and Dave wrote this wonderful book you don't have with You.

I [00:50:00] did. I

John Nichols: should write a copy

Audience: of Make Fine

John Nichols: Holiday

Audience: Reid. Yeah. So wonderful Madison Center book in Capitol Times. But, uh, my understanding is that that e view was en route to get a television stage. Yes. And Joe McCarthy hated him stuff, right?

John Nichols: And kind of argues against principles of doing the right thing.

Uh, but yes, uh, we, you know, I mean this is the, the distinction. You know, I can tease a little bit about State, state Journals a good paper and I hope you read it. I hope you get good. And, and it's got a bunch of great people who work for it. Uh, people I, many of whom, you know, I'd love to employ 'cause they, they do just a great job.

But, um, you should understand in 19 1950s, 1940s, 1950s, um, this place divided, this whole state provided me on a very simple moral level with Joe McCarthy, where he gets [00:51:00] it. State journal sounds familiar. State, state journal. The, not against the current leadership there, but they endorsed him right in back and, uh, and, and, but then the voters of Wisconsin back twice.

So if we should, you know, understand that politics and understand that dynamic, have you, it is fair to say that on most things, ev you didn't care right? And you didn't care whether it was gonna cost of it, didn't care whether there was gonna be trouble. Um, he had a, a burden set of principles and that set of principles turned against McCarthy.

Not when McCarthy started doing the Red Scare. The first Cap times investigative story on McCarthy was in 1944. It was before McCarthy with the US Center. Uh, he was running for stuff and K Times was going down for net. We thought he was a crook. We thought he was evil. We thought he was, you know, a bad player.

Um, you know, that he was fraudulent, that he lied, had [00:52:00] trouble with his taxes. You know, Trump told, I think so. He, but the bottom line was that, that, that, that deep divide, um, it did cost the count hunts. There's no question. It, it was not, there were no gifts. There were no gifts for being right. At the end of it.

At the end of it. Because institutional power, you know, daily newspapers said, in fact McCartney, they survived the ones that opposed them and the handful that did, they hopefully survived as well. But you know, as a country, we tend to put things behind us. Fourth thing to remember for the moment that we are right, this is a reality that we talk, we then think, oh, we just went through something really bad.

Let's forget about it. Now I'm saying, do you remember COVID? Right. It's not discussed anymore, even though it was a fundamental reality in our lives. Um, and, and what I'll tell you is [00:53:00] that, that the greatest source of pride for the Capital Times is having taken that risk, having done that thing in the 1950s.

And I think Abby would've said, that's without a question. And the interesting thing about AB is that he refused to let his staff members. Contests for newspaper reports, right? Um, you couldn't be, no matter what you wrote, you could contests. The reason was he thought that you'd have to lower yourself to the standards of American journals, right?

You have to, you know, be in that zone of where newspapers were. And the thing is, epi started his bio autobiography with about 30 pages of ripping on pretty much every other paper. Uh, and except he got a handful ofs and things around that he'd liked. But, but the weird thing about this is you can dislike it, right?

Say, oh, that's pretty, that's a little bit ous, or [00:54:00] that's a little bit this or that, but it was a deeply principled stance. He felt that most media in America bow to commercial pressure, right? That it, it was more inclined to align with wealth and power than it was to align with the great mass people. And.

He was right. We know that because we've seen it play out in the current moment, right? You know, where we see major TV networks, even bowing to Trump. Why do they bow? Because they're owned by multinational companies who have, they have other interests, right? So suddenly you've gotta, you know, worry about that.

Why does Bezos, where Bezos said it's because, you know, he's, he's got so much wealth and power in other places that this little Washington Post, that's just an afterthought. Right? If he's gotta toss it aside in order to carry favor with wealth and power, he will do that. [00:55:00] Even one of the wealthiest men in the world.

And, and so if we put this into perspective, um, and you set a model for journalism that was different than virtually any place else, it was a unique model. I'm the only one yet allies and full of people in other papers, St. Louis. Post Sp Love was supposed to Washington Post for a long time, very close to, but the truth is that he wouldn't let staffers at contest.

So 19 50, 51, um, John Pat Country who was, you know, an epic member of the cap confines, uh, John Patrick Hunter got the assignment to work. He was, he was a, he'd been hired late, late in the game. You know, a lot of other people had been hired before and he was, uh, he had to work on the July 4th, so he had to do something on that day to get a story for the pit.

So he is sitting around the office and he said, I'll go down to the square because there's, uh, [00:56:00] a bunch of people down there for parties and celebrations. And he didn't know what he was gonna do. And he says he was walking out. There was a copy of the Constitution on the wall. Right. So John Patrick copied down all sorts of things from the Constitution and he took a couple lines from the Declarations of Independence and he put 'em on, like typed them up on a, on a petition.

And he walked around the square and asked people to sign his petition. And this was in the midst of McCarthy's and it was at its peak. So he'd go up to people every, he'd sign this petition, 110 people looked at it and said, oh, not me. Walked away, wouldn't sign it. The hundred 11th, who I believe was an insurance man, um, said, oh, I'll sign the Bill of Rights.

You know, and did John Paton wrote this story up? It revolutionized the whole discussion in the country. Harry Truman mentioned it in the White House. It was mentioned on if [00:57:00] TV stations talked about it, other newspapers talked about it. 'cause they said, wow, it looks like things could be pretty bad here if we may have let things get a little out of control.

As regards civil liberties and, and things of that nature. And if there was ever a story maybe in history, I'll give Woodward and Bird either too. But if there ever was a story that that should have won the Pulitzer surprise, that was probably it. But John Patrick couldn't enter it, the contest because they have this rule.

And the bottom line is that that's the cap times at best. That's what the cap times has been and what it will continue to be, which is a newspaper that that is willing to go out and ask that very difficult question and do take that difficult stance when other papers don't. The cap times was opposed to the Vietnam War when most people didn't even know there was a Vietnam.

Right. And the cap times was opposed [00:58:00] to the war in Iraq, the first one and the second one. And we were the, we were the newspaper that after nine 11, that horrific. Terrible event. Said we had to find diplomatic solutions. Let's not get ourselves involved in Afghanistan for 20 years. We're pretty much always right.

Um, and we imposed the, the Patriot Act with Russ Barn, you know, not a lonely stance along the way. Um, and civil rights, gay rights, host of other issues, um, out ahead of the curve. And one time, one of my favorite things was that when the gay rights, the marriage equality movement started going right, people started to get very excited about, uh, you started to see people come on board, supported some newspapers, started to endorse it, things like that.

And, and they didn't know if, you know, cap times could mentioned much at that point, right? Because cap times had come out for decades before, [00:59:00] and, and that was often the case that Thek Cap Times has taken stands on issues. Long before it became the popular or easy thing to do. And so when we criticize Donald Trump today, um, we noticed a lot of other institutions are starting to do so as well.

Um, and at the end of the day, uh, may not, we may not get the credit for, for being the first to propose, but I can tell you that on most issues and most of the things that have come up, we have been, and it isn't because of me and it isn't because of Paul. It's because have you now gone since 1970 watching over us going You got it.

Do the right thing. The guy's got a question.

Yeah. Um, just to segway on that topic, I've been a long time observer of what I think about as the local Overton window.

Audience: Yeah.

Things that are acceptable, discuss and a credit to the cap times - Mike Ivey wrote an article about Tammy and Judy [01:00:00] Faulkner's role in the \$38 billion backdoor medical record subsidy.

And if you track the timing of that, you know, when they were a thousand people to 13,000 today, I find it incredibly ironic that that federal taxpayer splurge has led to a lot of things you Paul have written about on transportation changes and density, all this kind of stuff. So that's sort of one thing.

And the second thing I wanna applaud you about is Daniel and Mark's article on teacher sexual misconduct, now referred to misconduct, by the way, by the DPA not sexual misconduct.

Audience: Yeah.

Uh, on that topic. And I would say, I hope you continue to expand that because the fact that we now have almost 9,000, 43% of Madison School District 4K to third graders reading below the 25th percentile nationals, almost 9,000 kids

That's a disaster. And it's all our fault.

Audience: Yeah.

But I would argue that you guys. Should be diving much deeper into that sort of grant industrial complex where the funds [01:01:00] come, however they come and they drive policy that affects a lot of locals. That's a huge change. In my 25 years in Madison, you could see that money just changing everything.

And we haven't voted on it. It happened through lobbying. Tammy defends it. I think it was wrong.

John Nichols: Let me, this is why we do things like this.

John Nichols: Right. If a good question is a question that makes the person up front feel uncomfortable.

Audience: Yeah.

John Nichols: Right. Right. A question that they should say. Well, thank you.

Right. Uh, right. And, and, and one of the things about being out in the community to talk to folks is you do hear things that people are upset about. And that has always, you know, it, it's historically what makes any journalism, not just the captains. Mm-hmm. Any journalism group is if you hear things and you go and you keep digging into it.

Right. And what I'll tell you is that. In the contemporary moment. Uh, I'm trained right now the university, which I, [01:02:00] my family's been going to university since the 1880s. Mm-hmm. And, um, my daughter's there now, and there's a whole bunch of things to say they're nice about the university, but they're diving into AI right now.

Totally.

John Nichols: Yeah. Look, just dive and Right in, um, without the critical, uh, questioning and skepticism that I think they should. Mm-hmm. And that's, that's a, something that we should, we should be writing about, um, data centers and all these things as well. And 10 years ago, uh, Bob and Chesney and I wrote a book about machine learning and, and all this.

And, and it was clear then where we were going, right? AI could cure cancer, so give it that, but it's also a giant grift, it's a scheme that's gonna take. Massive amounts of money and put it into the hands of the very wealthiest people and make them wealthier. I mean, this [01:03:00] don't, don't, don't miss this point.

Elon Musk will become a trillionaire by the end of this year.

Mm-hmm.

John Nichols: Right?

Yeah,

John Nichols: totally. And then Bezos and these others will go right into that trillion status. And you have to ask yourself, a technology that's supposed to make your life better, somehow makes a smaller number of people dramatically richer.

Right. Is that really making your life better? Is it just simply a scheme where they're gonna, they're gonna get more and more power and more and more control? So what we can, there's so many things that we can be looking at right now. University's approach to ai huge should be a huge investigative.

Investigative and, and structural.

But in that, that's a great example. In that case, you know, the politicians have given. Google was backed by the CIA, by the way In-Q-Tel (<https://www.iqt.org/>). they funded. They have the right [01:04:00] to scrape everything. Right? So the stuff you write is scraped and feeds the AI bots.

John Nichols: Oh, yeah.

So that was a political legal thing and yeah. So it would be better if people got compensated for that work. Don't question

John Nichols: the concept. It wouldn't be better also if, if you didn't see the natural payout of it. Yeah. But that it's gonna go into nursing homes. Mm-hmm. Right. And you're gonna give people a screen, right?

Mm-hmm. They're gonna say, this is a great deal. Your mom's here at the nursing home, and she's gonna look at this screen every day and she's gonna have an AI friend.

Oh, totally. It's already They're dogs already. Yeah. Don't, yeah, yeah.

John Nichols: No. Business and how it will come into healthcare. Right. And it would be, well, if you're wealthy enough, you'd probably be able to have a nurse with a name.

Um, and so everything about how we live will be impacted by ai. It's huge. And it's, again, it can cure your cancer. It probably will. The way that the algorithm, the way that it works, the way it keeps digging and [01:05:00] going deeper is that it can get to answers that we haven't been able to get to. That's wonderful.

May also provoke a nuclear war that, um, so it's taking both. Yes.

Audience: This may be more for fall. I don't know. Um, should we be concerned about this other Florida billionaire, uh, Hoffman buying a controlling share in Lee Enterprises, what will, what impact would that have on the state journal? What impact would that have on the cap times?

That's, that's a great question. It, it's better. Three or four years ago, there was a truly a vulture fund, uh, trying to acquire Lee, which would've acquired Lee and sold it for parts. Mm-hmm. Um, just, which, just notes it for a year or two of profit sold. One pressured us to try to sell our, our property, um, and so forth.

Hoffman, I don't know how much you, you've read about it. I, we have a new, uh, a met guy today who's the new designee to be our leading, uh, revenue person. [01:06:00] And I'm, I'm pretty close. So we're close to, uh, St. Louis Post Dispatch publish. Vice president who have responsibility for Madison from, from the Lee side.

I don't know how to read him yet. I was concerned though that I saw something about he thinks the, uh, uh, Post-Dispatch is, needs to go further to the right, which is always a isn't that I run, which is, there you go. It's just always a, uh, uh, a red flag. And I'll talk to, because I know the publisher, this, this advertising VP or not, they come to the BDFS and they're, they like the alumni in there.

They're not, but it's not even, it's a centrist newspaper now. Uh, and that's the biggest lead property. Um, I, so, so it's way too early to know. He, he desperately wanted in, uh, by, uh, because Lee had such. Crippling debt from acquisitions of 20 years ago that they needed, they basically forced me, ma make him, [01:07:00] uh, let him be chairman of the board.

And I just don't think we know yet what, what exactly he wants. He, he says things like, uh, um, gee, I see there are four copy machines in the same office. Couldn't you buy with one? So, you know, things like that. I, I don't, I, so I'm, I'm watching carefully. He bought, um, the Napa, California newspaper from Lee, uh, two or three years ago.

I saw the term sheet on it. He's run, it didn't, hasn't come in and interfered at all, you know, producers. So I, I mean, I think there could have been worse outcomes is what I'm saying, but I guess we don't know yet. I'm kind of wondering. We had 70 some newspapers, um, used to be when, when I was young. It was the, the biggest market was Madison at one point.

Uh, and then, um, management got, um. Kind of over at skis and decided they was gonna buy these bigger properties, including St. Louis and, uh, Omaha, and went, bought it from, uh, [01:08:00] buffet, Buffalo and so forth. Um, and, uh, so I, I really don't know, uh, where this is going to, what, anyway, my point was going to be only two of all of these properties have partners.

One is in, um, in, uh, Tucson, where there's just a kind of a silent partner in Madison where, uh, you have a 50 50 partner. So they can't, they can't do anything but the cap times. Uh, and they, they, they, they just can't do anything. We, we own 50% of everything. So it's, it would be, it would be a board decision. I just don't know yet whether, how long it's gonna be before he notices he has a partner like Madison and wants to, wants talk.

Let me ask you just a, a follow up then. Uh, if he were to, uh. You know, impact the state journal side. Mm-hmm. What, what kind of repercussions could that have for the cap times operations? Well, if he, if he comes [01:09:00] in and cuts staff further and raises prices and, you know, it, it messes up, uh, an already, uh, beleaguer business model of, of profitability.

Um, but, um, uh, you know, there was a, there were, when I was in the state journal, you know, we were kind of the big brother Now that, now that that's not the case at all. And in fact, um, I'm sure Lee would like to sell us the state journal if, if we were of mind to buy it. Now I can't, I can't imagine why that would be a scenario given the, uh, circulation, print circulation decline.

Um, but, uh, it's a big question mark right now, but it could have been worse than outcomes. I'm forgetting the name of those. You remember the name of the venture capital? Don Jack up to one thing. One, yeah. It wasn't Alden, was it? Yeah, it was Alden.

John Nichols: It's Alden.

Audience: Alden. Yeah. Alden and Alden just,

John Nichols: yeah. About the trip.

They just destroy them, them wherever.

Audience: Yeah. They just destroy these.

John Nichols: It's the one thing, one thing I'll suggest to you is that, that there's a lot of people who [01:10:00] still live in a fantasy that maybe a rich guy will come along and buy something. Mm-hmm. Right? Mm-hmm. And Bezos should cure you of that. Yeah.

Audience: The

John Nichols: the reality is that there aren't, and I know I've never said this before, there are not enough rich guys right.

To save every paper, you know, or, you know what I mean? Who have it, like a vanity project that they want

Audience: sports team.

John Nichols: Right? Exactly. And even when they do the LA times, they, they, they lose interest. They, well, they, they take it to the right or exactly. Butcher. So bottom line is there aren't enough rich guys first.

And when they do come. They turn out to be. It's an odd thing. They're either you can be a rich guy or a newspaper publisher. They choose to be rich guys. And so at the end of the day that, that overwhelms an awful lot of instincts. It's not the solution for journalism.

Audience: Right.

John Nichols: The only thing worse than a rich guy, um, would be a venture capital fund.

And [01:11:00] it happens at this point. Those are the two ones that are playing a lot. Right. So am I glad that the state journal has a rich guy? Um, yeah. On balance. 'cause it's not a venture capital

fund. Do I think that's the way that journalism's gonna be saved? Probably not. You know, I'm not inclined in that direction.

We take this to a lower level. Mm-hmm. I know I follow the railroad industry in a lot of small one off railroads. You get these conglomerates that buy these up because they can in effect, save money. Right. By putting the business side of the C owner. They do actually, well, they're not the rich guys.

They're not the big tape. Yeah. So to what extent does that happening, that the potential at least help save some of the really small, little tiny newspapers, any of that stuff going on? Well, yeah. Hope in that,

Audience: uh,

John Nichols: you mean a coor, you know, a consortium?

Audience: There's some, I had a dinner with a guy who, [01:12:00] something valley who's doing some of that.

One of the interesting experiments is a guy I know, um, named s uh, Sage Wheel, who followed his, uh, he made a couple hundred million dollars in 10 Okay. In, uh, California, and followed his, uh, surgeon in wife. CW Hospital here, and he created something called Civic Media and he's, he's purchased 30 radio stations around the state.

Wow. Um, uh, and I, I see him pretty regular common bone too, even years ago. His notion is not to run, uh, right left wing talk to opposed the right link down and but to, to have local stations that are kind of like a weekly newspaper used to be. But the farm report and what the county council did and local ads, which a local community are as good, are as interesting to people as news content probably.[01:13:00]

And, and I had lunch before Christmas, we talking about possible collaborations and things that he sees that as a way then to, as an entry into a web version of a newspaper instead of coin from print. It's coming from the radio signal too than the website. So that's a different kind of model. So there is, there is some of that.

Just some new newspapers owns a couple of Yeah, we, well we all know

John Nichols: publication times in those

Audience: Yeah, yeah. We tried.

John Nichols: Is that sort that papers of Yeah, we

Audience: tried that a long time ago. We started our own series of suburban papers and

John Nichols: didn't go that well.

Audience: No.

John Nichols: Um, but here's the bottom line. A good local paper is open locally.

Right. That's just reality. Um, and, and I take that, uh, you know, my whole, my whole life. I grew up in a little tiny town, union Grove, and my grandmother lived in Madison, so I'd come up [01:14:00] here.

So I've lived in Madison as long as used to, uh, and, but, uh, but what I would tell you is that, um, uh, in that little town, they had two local goats owned by two local guys who hated each other.

Uh, and, and the the, we don't have two local papers anywhere except here. It's a rare entity and we're losing left and right and the notion of consortium to save them it while, while worth exploring, probably not the answer, the the ultimate answer is that, um, the print newspaper, by and large may disappear.

Although the weekly has a potential, if it's of quality to, to maybe last longer. I see the occasional weekly that does. Um, what we've gotta figure out as a business model for journalism, [01:15:00] it isn't for a paper. Um, it is for a newsroom. The idea that you can save a newsroom with 20 people who go out and, you know, feel responsibility every day.

Remember the most important purpose of a newspaper is to cover that, which is boring. Right? Absolutely. Right. It's, they cover that, which is interesting. Everybody's, you're gonna get that from all sorts of places. Mm-hmm. A newspaper's job is to speak, to find that, which most people don't wanna cover. Right.

But yet has profound impact on your lives. And so do you cover the county board? Yes, you should, because that has profound impact. Even though it can, those meetings can go over any long and the average person says, you know, I'd much rather be sitting at the Unitarian meeting house listening to Paul than go into the county board.

And, uh, and so the end result is that, that that newsroom is what sends somebody out [01:16:00] and says, you gotta cover that thing, or you've gotta cover this and that. Then that's becoming increasingly uncommon. That's what we wanna save. We wanna save the newsroom because if you save the newsroom and it goes out and covers things, we had a series this year, right?

Uh, we've had a couple series that are incredibly important, but one of the schools and, uh, on people that get dismissed as teachers and, uh, and many of our very liberal friends didn't like it, right? 'cause they, it cast aspersions on how the DPI runs some things. But it was important to do, and that's my point, is that wasn't nobody would've said, oh wow, you should, you know, that's what I'm thinking about today.

It was something that was off the radar. And if you send somebody up to do it, and you give 'em enough time to do it, they may save a lot of people. Life may get a whole lot better. And that's, so that's my bottom line. And it's, it's, it's saving [01:17:00] newsrooms, developing newsrooms, getting the resources to them.

Other countries have different models on this. Um, the most interesting ones are in Scandinavia where they actually do, um, create models where you can essentially subsidize the press that you want you by, by subscribing to something and getting a circulation out, then gets a broader government support.

And it's like you're

Audience: voting for

John Nichols: yes. Effect effectively.

Audience: Huh.

John Nichols: Ger Germany's model is fascinating because, uh, they have seven na seven national television networks, but they're run regionally and go nationally, right? They're public and the model,

there's, I say German TV is a perfect or anything like that, but they wanted to have competing networks that were controlled by, you know, not by big corporations.

And um, and then it was crazy, the German model, right? So kind of anti-corporate and publicly [01:18:00] oriented, um, was not come up, but Germans didn't come up with it. The people who developed it, uh, was the American occupying force after World War ii. And it's one of the reasons they worked with very Smart Room is to develop it is 'cause they didn't wanna see the rise of fascism.

And they thought that if you allow media to be controlled, the concentrated control by big economically and politically powerful institutions, he might go back the way he came. And so the weird part about it is we've written about, like late colleague Bob Ches wrote a lot of books about this. Um, the United States after World War II developed some of the best media systems in the world.

Country with the highest circulation newspapers, even now is Japan, right? We, we need to spend some time there as well. And if you go back and look at the history of how the Japanese media system was developed and built out after World War ii, the United States was hugely [01:19:00] involved in it. Right. The weird part was though they didn't let Eisenhower or McCarthy bring the ideas for MacArthur, bring the ideas back home.

So you wanna see a good media system. Look where we look, where we were in others places. And I, not by the way, arguing for the occupation of other countries that I'm just telling you that, that we've had some good ideas. This is not to say these are the ideas that are gonna solve our problems, but what it is to say is that there are ideas out there, right?

There are creative ways close in the middle of developing some of the most creative ideas that you have. The membership model, the event model, things like this, the drawing in revenue, um, and thus sustain the journalism. And, and so, uh, it's happening everywhere. I'm not depressed about the future of journalism.

I'm depressed about the past that lingers. Right. I want a future [01:20:00] for journalism that is about building out those newsrooms in every town and in every place. And it's going to, it, it is not something we've got the solution to right now. It is something we're working at. And the fact that you, this group of people is here, which by the way is plenty fine group of people to start solving any problems.

Um, the fact that this group of people is here tonight. 'cause you were interested in this. You wanna talk about this, this is the, this is our hope, right? 'cause if the people wanna save journalism and wanna have and know that it relates to democracy, we gotta way out this, we don't know our way yet, but we know.

So we're the most of that future one

Audience: leads right into the question I was gonna ask the membership model mm-hmm. Which we're members. Thank you. And I, I wondered from time to time, why are we, why are we members of what? And now I'm glad that that, but, but my question is, is that are people coming to you? Is that something that might [01:21:00] spread, is something that might work, it might be scalable and not Yeah.

A little, little more granular on it. So what we did through this, uh, was, um, our, our, our consultant thinks that the idea is to develop deep context, deep de-identification with our members. So we were talking before tonight about possibly using Unitarian meeting House for more, uh, member only sessions, John, with on both hands, John with Tammy Bald, uh, you know, close.

John Nichols: We had a great best findel. So

Audience: we did a great full, full house here with Feal to. Folks feel that the Capitol Times, they know us, they see us, they feel more, more than just the newspaper. Uh, but the, but the, but the model we're doing right now, we just, if you haven't looked at it, give it a try. We do a daily newsletter and, and, and Nickel says it our, our newest version.

It's kind of like the newspaper hitting the driveway in the old days. It's, it's carefully written. It's, it's colorful, [01:22:00] it's informative, it's different, it's high, it's a high effort kind of thing. And we're trying to bring more people into the Cat times, fold that way. Get them familiar with our, our content, and then, then maybe try us, uh, as a, as a member, uh, as a voluntary member without a gum to their head, you know, or anything.

Just, just, just join us and then have opportunities to interact with us. Uh. We've got a core of really good new reporters we've had in the last year, year and a half. Um, and you know, something that's no publisher editor

John Nichols: Eric can say,

Audience: uh,

John Nichols: it's very rare to say we've got a core of we've got a bunch of new great reporters.

Audience: Yeah,

John Nichols: that's, I shouldn't say done, but that's a very rare thing to be able to say. Mm-hmm. And you're part of what makes that possible. Know, and we really, really do appreciate the members are, are really vital and so do the people that come to Id fest and so are, you know what I mean? It, there's a lot of things that feed into this.

So is the person who picks up the, the weekly [01:23:00] paper and makes it something that an advertiser wants to be in, because advertising is still a sustaining reality for a lot of,

Audience: but just demonstrate, press that one a little bit. Yeah.

John Nichols: Is

Audience: it, is it, is it a model that's being starting to be

John Nichols: other places?

Audience: Yeah.

Third places are trying it, but uh, uh, there's still mostly paywalls and uh.

John Nichols: We're just better at it.

Audience: We're, uh, well, yeah, I mean, I, uh, this is, I'm trying to think of a way to specific myself. I love writing my column and I love being at events like this. And I love, uh, what comes with the notoriety of being in my position is being able to write.

The most important thing that I think I'm doing now are not thinking about tomorrow or next week or next month, but it's gonna look like in three to five years and, and, and being the person who's dealings with Lee Enterprises and whatever happens there. Continue to think about new models. I

mean, I mentioned maintenance before you back, you have, after that, you know, we're interviewing a new, uh, [01:24:00] additional opinion.

Person is, is somebody's going to be really important for us to connect with, uh, with, uh, your children. Um, uh, our children, you know, are, are the next generation, so they get to know the capital Times and get familiar with it. So that's really where my head's at, you know, in terms of going forward, strategic plan.

Um, and, uh, so we got a couple more questions here. Why don't we go to you and then we'll come up this way. You right? Yes. That me. Uh, so I was just curious, how many members do you have? A little over two. More than 2000.

That's, are you happy with that and how No, we, we'd like to have a, a much, a much larger group and you know, at some point we'd like to have, um, what we call VU members who give a higher level, kinda like call television or radius. Um, and we'd like to have far more. But, uh, we think we've only been added, I don't know, a handful of years and [01:25:00] it's voluntary, so we're, we're, you know, we're hardened by the direction of it.

Um, but again, it's, it's part of a package of, of making people feel part of the cat times a kinship with it going to events, um, having other sorts of,

John Nichols: it's not, and the, the thing to understand about it is, it's not about making a profit off that, right. Become a member that's just, that helps more journalists to get hired, right?

It's a pretty, and, and more, more events to be held, more things to be done. It's a pretty cool mind. And, and it's a little bit like public television or people do understand with 2000, it's a very, in the game of this, around the country, that's a pretty significant number. That's for the size of the community and what you're trying to do.

Um, you asked about, you know, what kind of like where you might wanna go. I, I, I really, I don't think greedy, I wouldn't say maybe a hundred, 150,000, uh, but [01:26:00] that, that would great. Um, but on the, on the, on the modest, uh, mod circumstance that we're in doing pretty good and the more people that become part of that, the better.

And the fact of the matter is that's closer to where the cap times historically was. Um, because you know when, when Ebey started the cap times right? Back in 1917, um, he was so mad at the state journal and so mad at the other papers in the state. 'cause they were attacking the poll for his opposition.

World War I, world War i's a really bad war, sorry.

Audience: Mm-hmm.

John Nichols: Um, and so he got in his car and he went around the county and he would drive up to farms and he would say to the farmer, Bob, Val, and Trump. Can you give me five bucks to buy a printing press? Right. And, you know, they got a little, gave a piece of paper that some of 'em still have.

It's called [01:27:00] stock. It's called stock. That it wasn't really, you know, barely, barely achieved that. But bottom, bottom line was he would come home with his, you know, little bag of money. Eventually they bought a price and that, you know what I mean? This was, this was an institution that was created by people effectively betting on it.

Right. You know, saying, I wanna be a part of this as a, basically a member, uh, a long, long time ago. And the weird thing about it was, is it at at, at his coolest act? Right. This is 1917 into the 1970s. He

had a little rule. If you were one of those people that gave him, you know, a little bit to get it started, right?

You got old bit on the front page and so we were doing barbers and couple people who were sea seamstress down on state streets. You got over, you know, because as far as ICU was concerned, those are really important people. So, and I know if we can promise that for the, [01:28:00] yeah,

Audience: let me just say that we format is usually 10 by nine o'clock, but we will, you can stay from beyond that.

John Nichols: Got it. We, we, this woman,

Audience: we have a couple more questions. Okay, great.

John Nichols: Now we're out of here. Okay.

Yes.

Audience: So you've made the point really by talking about the idiosyncrasies of the heritage of the capital times, which is. So spectacular, so special. So the genealogy of this paper is so particular that somebody of my persuasion who happens to live on the east side, who happens to have a 42-year-old autistic daughter who delivered until the last day, aw, half a route of the cap times and could not believe that it stopped publishing, but would climb over [01:29:00] embankments of snow and ice when her job coach wouldn't come with her because people needed their information and needed those favors.

And the job coach would be at the high school, stay warm. And my daughter, I think how hard to reproduce is that other places. How could we not want to be part of a story like that? Because by being a member. You are joining a story that goes all the way back to something like, have you, I mean, that's so remarkable.

Well,

thank you.

John Nichols: Um,

single, what's your

Audience: daughter's name?

John Nichols: Kristen. Well, thank you for that. And I say it strongly because I, I really wish that we still had, you know, paper [01:30:00] boys and paper girls and that, that the whole thing and, and I, I'm born that, that isn't something that we do because that's part ways a lot of kids learn about.

Making a living and it very special thing

Audience: when papers with a membership model don't have that spectacular story that makes you wanna be a member, right? I mean, all of us are gonna become members. There's no question you're make I that idea special. You're going become a member because a speaker B, the speakers are fabulous and it's, anyway,

John Nichols: you're very, you're super lines.

Audience: No,

John Nichols: I super, you're super right, of course. But, but the challenge, this is, can you recreate it everywhere? Maybe, maybe not. And history is hard to recreate all of these things. And could you create it for a cons, a principled, conservative newspaper. [01:31:00] I say yes,

Audience: I think so,

John Nichols: yes. I, I would think that is great. Why not?

Audience: As long as the information is real,

John Nichols: it's accurate and, and true. And there's some sense,

Audience: it's the product information is real.

John Nichols: And, and, and, and so here's the interesting twist of this in the AI moment, the great question that we'll have is, is there a desperation for authenticity? Right now, we haven't gotten there yet.

We, we wish we were there, but is there a desperation for authenticity? If there is, that might well be the point. And I guarantee that might well be the point where we recreate many of the, you know what I mean? The principal model of actually trying to get people information with a set of informed opinions.

Um, and, and you come to that because you are so horrified by everything around you. You know what I mean? So many faiths and all this, you saw the, the, the assistant DA down in Kenosha. This week [01:32:00] they got in trouble because submitted a, like some major legal brief, some brief in trial that was full of ai.

And the judge threw out, threw out all the charges, just said, I'm sorry, that's it. He gave to me with this AI stuff and I'm just not gonna, we're not gonna go forward with this. It's a great story. What's that? A little bit. Every person's gonna have to figure on their own

reality. I think surviving is gonna say, thank you for that, for reading the book. And, um, but this is the bottom line is we may come to that point where the desire for authenticity takes us into that next stage. Can we recreate, can we give every institution history? No, you can't. Can you start making history?

Yes, you can. And so, um, I, and I think the Trump era the same way, right? You know, you look at your moments that you're in and you ask yourself, are these. All bad, or are [01:33:00] there opportunities that come of this? I'd say the moment right now, all bad, but, um, ultimately opportunities may come and this is the critical thing about journalism.

Journalism in America has evolved and changed a hundred times, you know, and it, it's been very, very different. It will evolve and change. If we're lucky, it will evolve and change another hundred times. And calf times is a part of that arc of history. We are so lucky to be stewards of that arc. Right. And I, and I can just tell you that, that I once wrote an article for a, a journal about editorial page editors and stuff like that, and everybody's writing about, you know, how you form your opinions.

And, and the, the title of mine about slightly different was basically you, our, our publisher, um, rules from the. Um, and it was about, was just saying that [01:34:00] we, we've got a set of principles that we were founded on, and at our best, we will stick to them, not clawing backwards to just be, you know, hang on to something for the past.

But it's those principles themselves that tell you to go forward. Um, but rooted in a certain set of ideas about how you do, how you do a newsroom, how you do a newspaper, where you go on this. It is very challenging, but I'll tell you tonight, you've listened to a guy who has committed himself to the hard of, is the hard part is not going out.

Write an opinion, right? The hard part is figuring out how to keep that going, keep that machine running. And so he shouldn't have the last word. We,

Audience: I would maybe I'll tell one last and some small anecdote thanks to, uh. Kinds of things John was just saying, but you know, I hear a lot about the state journal. Um, I calls get to my [01:35:00] phone from very frustrating people who can't in the building to talk about circulation and so forth. This is sort of a, sort of symbolizes the way that the Capital Times works.

So we don't sell very many mail. Uh, we don't have very many mail subscribers to our weekly tab. We can do it as a favor. We don't do it at billing for revenue. But a, a woman called and she was so somewhat confused and had really missed her last two, um, capital Times As and um, uh, uh, and I sent it over to a guy named Mike Cornman, who joined me, uh, joined us five or six, seven years ago.

I've known him a long time. He's the Chief Revenue Officer of the Capital Times. I sent her. Note over you follow up. She calls me the next day and said, Mike had, um, delivered the last two editions to her house and, uh, included a, a capital times pad and some pens.[01:36:00]

That's the capital. That's the, that's, uh, totally, yeah. Both times totally. When I think about,

John Nichols: can't do better than that,

Audience: John. Good. Lucky. We have been very lucky. Yeah. Thank you.

We have a little bit more time and spend. That's fine. Oh, hey. Thanks. Inviting us.

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