Communities across America are suffering through a crisis that could leave a dramatically diminished version of democracy in its wake. It is not the economic meltdown, although the crisis is related to the broader day of reckoning that appears to have arrived. The crisis of which we speak involves more than mere economics. Journalism is collapsing, and with it comes the most serious threat in our lifetimes to self-government and the rule of law as it has been understood here in the United States.

After years of neglecting signs of trouble, elite opinion-makers have begun in recent months to recognize that things have gone horribly awry. Journals ranging from Time, The New Yorker, The Atlantic and The New Republic to the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times concur on the diagnosis: newspapers, as we have known them, are disintegrating and are possibly on the verge of extinction. Time's Walter Isaacson describes the situation as having "reached meltdown proportions" and concludes, "It is now possible to contemplate a time in the near future when major towns will no longer have a newspaper and when magazines and network news operations will employ no more than a handful of reporters." A newspaper industry that still employs roughly 50,000 journalists – the vast majority of the remaining practitioners of the craft – is teetering on the brink.

Blame has been laid first and foremost on the Internet, for luring away advertisers and readers, and on the economic meltdown, which has demolished revenues and hammered debt-laden media firms. But for all the ink spilled addressing the dire circumstance of the ink-stained wretch, the understanding of what we can do about the crisis has been woefully inadequate. Unless we rethink alternatives and reforms, the media will continue to flail until journalism is all but extinguished.

Let's begin with the crisis. In a nutshell, media corporations, after running journalism into the ground, have determined that news gathering and reporting are not profit-making propositions. So they're jumping ship. The country's great regional dailies – the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, the Minneapolis Star Tribune, the Philadelphia Inquirer – are in bankruptcy. Denver's Rocky Mountain News recently closed down, ending daily newspaper competition in that city. The owners of the San Francisco Chronicle, reportedly losing $1 million a week, are threatening to shutter the paper, leaving a major city without a major daily newspaper. Big dailies in Seattle (the Times), Chicago (the Sun-Times) and Newark (the Star-Ledger) are reportedly near the point of folding, and smaller dailies like the Baltimore Examiner have already closed. The 101-year-old Christian Science Monitor, in recent years an essential source of international news and analysis, is folding its daily print edition. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer is scuttling its print edition and downsizing from a news staff of 165 to about twenty for its online-only incarnation. Whole newspaper chains – such as Lee Enterprises, the owner of large and medium-size publications that for decades have defined debates in Montana, Iowa and Wisconsin – are struggling as the value of stock shares falls below the price of a single daily paper. And the New York Times needed an emergency injection of hundreds of millions of dollars by Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim in order to stay afloat.

Those are the headlines. Arguably uglier is the death-by-small-cuts of newspapers that are still functioning. Layoffs of reporters and closings of bureaus mean that even if newspapers survive, they have precious few resources for actually doing journalism. Job cuts during the first months of this year – 300 at the Los Angeles Times, 205 at the Miami Herald, 156 at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 150 at the Kansas City Star, 128 at the Sacramento Bee, 100 at the Providence Journal, 100 at the Hartford Courant, ninety at the San Diego Union-Tribune, thirty at the Wall Street Journal and on and on – suggest that this year will see far more positions eliminated than in 2008, when almost 16,000 were lost. Even Doonesbury's Rick Redfern has been laid off from his job at the Washington Post.

The toll is daunting. As former Washington Post executive editor Leonard Downie Jr. and Post associate editor Robert Kaiser have observed, "A great news organization is difficult to build and tragically easy to disassemble." That disassembling is now in full swing. As journalists are laid off and newspapers cut back or shut down, whole
sectors of our civic life go dark. Newspapers that long ago closed their foreign bureaus and eliminated their
-crack investigative operations are shuttering at warp speed what remains of city hall, statehouse and
Washington bureaus. The Cox chain, publisher of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the Austin American-
Statesman and fifteen other papers, will padlock its DC bureau on April 1 – a move that follows the closures of
the respected Washington bureaus of Advance Publications (the Newark Star-Ledger, the Cleveland Plain Dealer
and others); Copley Newspapers and its flagship San Diego Union-Tribune; as well as those of the once great
regional dailies of Des Moines, Hartford, Houston, Pittsburgh, Salt Lake City, San Francisco and Toledo.

Mired in debt and facing massive losses, the managers of corporate newspaper firms seek to right the sinking
ship by cutting costs, leading remaining newspaper readers to ask why they are bothering to pay for
publications that are pale shadows of themselves. It is the daily newspaper death dance-cum- funeral march.

But it is not just newspapers that are in crisis; it is the institution of journalism itself. By any measure,
journalism is missing from most commercial radio. TV news operations have become celebrity- and weather-
obsessed “profit centers” rather than the journalistic icons of the Murrow and Cronkite eras. Cable channels “fill
the gap” with numberless pundits and “business reporters,” who got everything about the last decade wrong
but now complain that the government doesn’t know how to set things right. Cable news is defensible only
because of the occasional newspaper reporter moonlighting as a talking head. But what happens when the last
reporter stops collecting a newspaper paycheck and goes into PR or lobbying? She’ll leave cable an empty
vessel and take the public’s right to know anything more than a rhetorical flourish with her.

The Internet and blogosphere, too, depend in large part on “old media” to do original journalism. Web links still
refer readers mostly to stories that first appeared in print. Even in more optimistic scenarios, no one has a
business model to sustain digital journalism beyond a small number of self-supporting services. The attempts of
newspapers to shift their operations online have been commercial failures, as they trade old media dollars for
new media pennies. We are enthusiastic about Wikipedia and the potential for collaborative efforts on the web;
they can help democratize our media and politics. But they do not replace skilled journalists on the ground
covering the events of the day and doing investigative reporting. Indeed, the Internet cannot achieve its
revolutionary potential as a citizens’ forum without such journalism.

So this is where we stand: much of local and state government, whole federal departments and agencies,
American activities around the world, the world itself – vast areas of great public concern – are either neglected
or on the verge of neglect. Politicians and administrators will work increasingly without independent scrutiny
and without public accountability. We are entering historically uncharted territory in America, a country that
from its founding has valued the press not merely as a watchdog but as the essential nurturer of an informed
citizenry. The collapse of journalism and the democratic infrastructure it sustains is not a development that
anyone, except perhaps corrupt politicians and the interests they serve, looks forward to. Such a crisis demands
solutions equal to the task. So what are they?

Regrettably the loud discussion of the collapse of journalism has been far stronger in describing the symptoms
than in providing remedies. With the frank acknowledgment that the old commercial system has failed and will
not return, there has been a flurry of modest proposals to address the immodest crisis. These range from
schemes to further consolidate news gathering at the local level to pleas for donations from news consumers
and hopes that hard-pressed philanthropists and foundations will decide to go into the news business. And they
range from ineffectual to improbable to undesirable. Walter Isaacson has proposed that newspapers come up
with a plan to charge readers “micropayments” for online content. Even if such a system were practically
possible, the last thing we should do is erect electronic walls that block the openness and democratic genius of
the Internet.

Don’t get us wrong. We are enthusiastic about many of the efforts to promote original journalism online, such
as ProPublica, Talking Points Memo and the Huffington Post. We cheer on exciting local endeavors, such as
MinnPost in the Twin Cities – a nonprofit, five-day-a-week online journal that covers Minnesota politics with
support from major foundations, wealthy families and roughly 900 member-donors contributing $10 to $10,000.
But even our friends at MinnPost acknowledge that their project is not filling the void in a metro area that still
has two large, if struggling, daily newspapers. Just about every serious journalist involved in an online project
will readily concede that even if these ventures pan out, we will still have a dreadfully undernourished journalism system with considerably less news gathering and reporting, especially at the local level.

For all their merits and flaws, these fixes are mere triage strategies. They are not cures; in fact, if there is a risk in them, it is that they might briefly discourage the needed reshaping of ownership models that are destined to fail.

The place to begin crafting solutions is with the understanding that the economic downturn did not cause the crisis in journalism; nor did the Internet. The economic collapse and Internet have greatly accentuated and accelerated a process that can be traced back to the 1970s, when corporate ownership and consolidation of newspapers took off. It was then that managers began to balance their books and to satisfy the demand from investors for ever-increasing returns by cutting journalists and shutting news bureaus. Go back and read a daily newspaper published in a medium-size American city in the 1960s, and you will be awed by the rich mix of international, national and local news coverage and by the frequency with which “outsiders” – civil rights campaigners, antiwar activists and consumer advocates like Ralph Nader – ended up on the front page.

As long ago as the late 1980s and early 1990s, prominent journalists and editors like Jim Squires were quitting the field in disgust at the contempt corporate management displayed toward journalism. Print advertising, which still accounts for the lion's share of newspaper revenue, declined gently as a percentage of all ad spending from 1950 to '90, as television grew in importance. Starting in 1990, well before the rise of the web as a competitor for ad dollars, newspaper ad revenues went into a sharp decline, from 26 percent of all media advertising that year to what will likely be around 10 percent this year.

Even before that decline, newspaper owners were choosing short-term profits over long-term viability. As far back as 1983, legendary reporter Ben Bagdikian warned publishers that if they continued to water down their journalism and replace it with (less expensive) fluff, they would undermine their raison d'être and fail to cultivate younger readers. But corporate newspaper owners abandoned any responsibility to maintain the franchise. When the Internet came along, newspapers were already heading due south.

We do not mean to suggest that '60s journalism was perfect or that we should aim to return there. Even then journalism suffered from a generally agreed-upon professional code that relied far too heavily on official sources to set the news agenda and decide the range of debate in our political culture. That weakness of journalism has been magnified in the era of corporate control, leaving us with a situation most commentators are loath to acknowledge: the quality of journalism in the United States today is dreadful.

Of course, there are still tremendous journalists doing outstanding work, but they battle a system increasingly pushing in the opposite direction. (That is why some of the most powerful statements about our current circumstances come in the form of books, like Naomi Klein’s The Shock Doctrine; or documentaries, like Michael Moore’s “Bowling for Columbine;” or beat reporting in magazines, like that of Jane Mayer and Seymour Hersh at The New Yorker.) The news media blew the coverage of the Iraq invasion, spoon-feeding us lies masquerading as fact-checked verities. They missed the past decade of corporate scandals. They cheered on the housing bubble and genuflected before the financial sector (and Gilded Age levels of wealth and inequality) as it blasted debt and speculation far beyond what the real economy could sustain. Today they do almost no investigation into where the trillions of public dollars being spent by the Federal Reserve and Treasury are going but spare not a moment to update us on the “Octomom.” They trade in trivia and reduce everything to spin, even matters of life and death.

No wonder young people find mainstream journalism uninviting; it would almost be more frightening if they embraced what passes for news today. Older Americans have been giving up on old media too, if not as rapidly and thoroughly as the young. If we are going to address the crisis in journalism, we have to come up with solutions that provide us with hard-hitting reporting that monitors people in power, that engages all our people, not just the classes attractive to advertisers, and that seeks to draw all Americans into public life. Going backward is not an option; nor is it desirable. The old corporate media system choked on its own excess. We should not seek to restore or re-create it. We have to move forward to a system that creates a journalism far superior to that of the recent past.
We can do exactly that – but only if we recognize and embrace the necessity of government intervention. Only government can implement policies and subsidies to provide an institutional framework for quality journalism. We understand that this is a controversial position. When French President Nicolas Sarkozy recently engineered a $765 million bailout of French newspapers, free marketeers rushed to the barricades to declare, “No, no, not in the land of the free press.” Conventional wisdom says that the founders intended the press to be entirely independent of the state, to preserve the integrity of the press. Bree Nordenson notes that when she informed famed journalist Tom Rosenstiel that her visionary 2007 Columbia Journalism Review article concerned the ways government could support the press, Rosenstiel “responded brusquely, ‘Well, I’m not a big fan of government support.’ I explained that I just wanted to put the possibility on the table. ‘Well, I’d take it off the table,’ he said.”

We are sympathetic to that position. As writers, we have been routinely critical of government – Democratic and Republican – over the past three decades and antagonistic to those in power. Policies that would allow politicians to exercise even the slightest control over the news are, in our view, not only frightening but unacceptable. Fortunately, the rude calculus that says government intervention equals government control is inaccurate and does not reflect our past or present, or what enlightened policies and subsidies could entail.

Our founders never thought that freedom of the press would belong only to those who could afford a press. They would have been horrified at the notion that journalism should be regarded as the private preserve of the Rupert Murdochs and John Malones. The founders would not have entertained, let alone accepted, the current equation that seems to say that if rich people determine there is no good money to be made in the news, then society cannot have news. Let’s find a king and call it a day.

The founders regarded the establishment of a press system, the Fourth Estate, as the first duty of the state. Jefferson and Madison devoted considerable energy to explaining the necessity of the press to a vibrant democracy. The government implemented extraordinary postal subsidies for the distribution of newspapers. It also instituted massive newspaper subsidies through printing contracts and the paid publication of government notices, all with the intent of expanding the number and variety of newspapers. When Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s he was struck by the quantity and quality of newspapers and periodicals compared with France, Canada and Britain. It was not an accident. It had little to do with “free markets.” It was the result of public policy.

Moreover, when the Supreme Court has taken up matters of freedom of the press, its majority opinions have argued strongly for the necessity of the press as the essential underpinning of our constitutional republic. First Amendment absolutist Hugo Black wrote that the “Amendment rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public, that a free press is a condition of a free society.” Black argued for the right and necessity of the government to counteract private monopolistic control over the media. More recently Justice Anthony Kennedy, a Reagan appointee, argued that “assuring the public has access to a multiplicity of information sources is a governmental purpose of the highest order.”

But government support for the press is not merely a matter of history or legal interpretation. Complaints about a government role in fostering journalism invariably overlook the fact that our contemporary media system is anything but an independent “free market” institution. The government subsidies established by the founders did not end in the eighteenth – or even the nineteenth – century. Today the government doles out tens of billions of dollars in direct and indirect subsidies, including free and essentially permanent monopoly broadcast licenses, monopoly cable and satellite privileges, copyright protection and postal subsidies. (Indeed, this magazine has been working for the past few years with journals of the left and right to assure that those subsidies are available to all publications.) Because the subsidies mostly benefit the wealthy and powerful, they are rarely mentioned in the fictional account of an independent and feisty Fourth Estate. Both the rise and decline of commercial journalism can be attributed in part to government policies, which scrapped the regulations and ownership rules that had encouraged local broadcast journalism and allowed for lax regulation as well as tax deductions for advertising – policies that greatly increased news media revenues.

The truth is that government policies and subsidies already define our press system. The only question is whether they will be enlightened and democratic, as in the early Republic, or corrupt and corrosive to
democracy, as has been the case in recent decades. The answer will be determined in coming years as part of what is certain to be a bruising battle: media companies and their lobbying groups will argue against the “heavy hand of government” while defending existing subsidies. They will propose more deregulation, hoping to capitalize on the crisis to remove the last barriers to print, broadcast and digital consolidation in local markets – creating media “company towns,” where competition is eliminated, along with journalism jobs, in pursuit of better returns for investors. Enlightened elected officials, media unions and public interest and community groups that recognize the role of robust journalism are going to have to step up to argue for a real fix.

Fortunately, an increasing number of veteran journalists, scholars and activists are beginning to grasp the historical significance of the present moment and the central role of public policy. It was the late James Carey, decorated University of Illinois and Columbia journalism professor and no fan of government power, who saw this before almost anyone else, writing in 2002: “Alas, the press may have to rely upon a democratic state to create the conditions necessary for a democratic press to flourish and for journalists to be restored to their proper role as orchestrators of the conversation of a democratic culture.”

We have to ask where we want to end up, after the reforms have been implemented. In our view we need to have competing independent newsrooms of well-paid journalists in every state and in every major community. This is not about newspapers or even broadcast media; it entails all media and accepts that we may be headed into an era when nearly all of our communication will be digital. Ideally this will be a pluralistic system, where there will be different institutional structures. Varieties of nonprofit media will have to play a much larger role, though not a monopolistic one.

We recognize and embrace the need for a system in which there will be a range of perspectives from left to right, alongside some media more intent on maintaining a less explicitly ideological stance. We must have a system that prohibits state censorship and that minimizes commercial control over journalistic values and pursuits. The right of any person to start his or her own medium, commercial or nonprofit, at any time is inviolable. From this foundation we can envision a thriving, digital citizen’s journalism complementing and probably merging with professional journalism. What will the mix be? It would vary, with more not-for-profit and subsidized media in rural and low-income areas, more for-profit media in wealthier ones. The first order of any government intervention would be to assure that no state or region would be without quality local, state, national or international journalism.

We begin with the notion that journalism is a public good, that it has broad social benefits far beyond that between buyer and seller. Like all public goods, we need the resources to get it produced. This is the role of the state and public policy. It will require a subsidy and should be regarded as similar to the education system or the military in that regard. Only a nihilist would consider it sufficient to rely on profit-seeking commercial interests or philanthropy to educate our youth or defend the nation from attack. With the collapse of the commercial news system, the same logic applies. Just as there came a moment when policy-makers recognized the necessity of investing tax dollars to create a public education system to teach our children, so a moment has arrived at which we must recognize the need to invest tax dollars to create and maintain news gathering, reporting and writing with the purpose of informing all our citizens.

So, if we can accept the need for government intervention to save American journalism, what form should it take? In the near term, we need to think about an immediate journalism economic stimulus, to be revisited after three years, and we need to think big. Let’s eliminate postal rates for periodicals that garner less than 20 percent of their revenues from advertising. This keeps alive all sorts of magazines and journals of opinion that are being devastated by distribution costs. It is these publications that often do investigative, cutting-edge, politically provocative journalism.

What to do about newspapers? Let’s give all Americans an annual tax credit for the first $200 they spend on daily newspapers. The newspapers would have to publish at least five times per week and maintain a substantial “news hole,” say at least twenty-four broad pages each day, with less than 50 percent advertising. In effect, this means the government will pay for every citizen who so desires to get a free daily newspaper subscription, but the taxpayer gets to pick the newspaper – this is an indirect subsidy, because the government does not control who gets the money. This will buy time for our old media newsrooms – and for us citizens – to
develop a plan to establish journalism in the digital era. We could see this evolving into a system to provide tax credits for online subscriptions as well.

None of these proposed subsidies favor or censor any particular viewpoint. The primary condition on media recipients of this stimulus subsidy would be a mild one: that they make at least 90 percent of their content immediately available free online. In this way, the subsidies would benefit citizens and taxpayers, expanding the public domain and providing the Internet with a rich vein of material available to all.

What should be done about the disconnect between young people and journalism? Have the government allocate funds so every middle school, high school and college has a well-funded student newspaper and a low-power FM radio station, all of them with substantial websites. We need to get young people accustomed to producing journalism and to appreciating what differentiates good journalism from the other stuff.

The essential component for the immediate stimulus should be an exponential expansion of funding for public and community broadcasting, with the requirement that most of the funds be used for journalism, especially at the local level, and that all programming be available for free online. Other democracies outspend the United States by whopping margins per capita on public media: Canada sixteen times more; Germany twenty times more; Japan forty-three times more; Britain sixty times more; Finland and Denmark seventy-five times more. These investments have produced dramatically more detailed and incisive international reporting, as well as programming to serve young people, women, linguistic and ethnic minorities and regions that might otherwise be neglected by for-profit media.

Perhaps in the past the paucity of public media in the United States could be justified by the enormous corporate media presence. But as the corporate sector shrivels we need something to replace it, and fast. Public and community broadcasters are in a position to be just that, and to keep alive the practice of news gathering in countless communities across the nation. Indeed, if a regional daily like the San Francisco Chronicle fails this year, why not try a federally funded experiment: maintain the newsroom as a digital extension of the local public broadcasting system?

Currently the government spends less than $450 million annually on public media. (To put matters in perspective, it spends several times that much on Pentagon public relations designed, among other things, to encourage favorable press coverage of the wars that the vast majority of Americans oppose.) Based on what other highly democratic and free countries do, the allocation from the government should be closer to $10 billion. All totaled, the suggestions we make here for subscription subsidies, postal reforms, youth media and investment in public broadcasting have a price tag in the range of $60 billion over the next three years.

This is a substantial amount of money. In normal times it might be too much to ask. But in a time of national crisis, when an informed and engaged citizenry is America's best hope, $20 billion a year is chicken feed for building what would essentially be a bridge across which journalism might pass from dying old media to the promise of something new. Think of it as a free press “infrastructure project” that is necessary to maintain an informed citizenry, and democracy itself. It would keep the press system alive. And it has the added benefit of providing an economic stimulus. If these journalists (and the tens of thousands of production and distribution workers associated with newspapers) are not put to work through the programs we propose, their knowledge and expertise will be lost. They will be unemployed, and their unemployment will contribute to further stagnation and economic decline – especially in big cities where newspapers are major employers.

These proposals are a good start, but then the really hard work begins. We have to come up with a plan to convert failing newspapers into journalistic entities with the express purpose of assuring that fully staffed, functioning and, ideally, competing newsrooms continue to operate in communities across the country. The only way to do this is by using tax policies, credit policies and explicit subsidies to convert the remains of old media into independent, stable institutions that are ready to compete and communicate in the decades to come. To get from here to there, and especially to make possible multiple competing newsrooms in larger communities, policy-makers should be open to commercial ownership, municipal ownership, staff ownership or independent nonprofit ownership. Ideally the next media system will have a combination of the above; and the government should be prepared to rewrite rules and regulations and to use its largesse to aid a variety of sound initiatives.
We confess that we do not have all the answers. Neither, we have discovered, does anyone else. The fatal flaw in so many sincere but doomed responses to the current crisis is that they try to do the impossible, to create a system using varying doses of foundation grants, do-gooner capitalism, citizen donations, volunteer labor, the anticipation of a miraculous increase in advertising manna and/or a sudden – and in our view unimaginable – reversal on the part of Americans who have thus far shown no inclination to pay for online content. At best, these are piecemeal proposals when we are in dire need of building an entire edifice. The money from these sources is insufficient to address the crisis in journalism.

We have to open the door to enlightened public policies and subsidies. We need our members of Congress and our leading scholars to approach this matter with the same urgency with which they would approach the threat of terrorism, pandemic, financial collapse or climate change. We need an organized citizenry demanding the institutions that make self-government possible. Only then can we, like our founders, build a free press. The technologies and the economic challenges are, of course, more complex than in the 1790s, but the answer is the same: the democratic state, the government, must create the conditions for sustaining the journalism that can provide the people with the information they need to be their own governors.