

Saving the dinosaur press is apparently a bipartisan effort -- and blather from both sides of the aisle doesn't give a bad idea a patina of credibility.

Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, a Republican, is part of a new marketing campaign, sponsored by the Hoosier State Press Association, for newspapers in his state.

In the ads, Gov. Daniels says, apparently without irony, that newspapers are the "only medium equipped to play watchdog across all levels of government."

Future ads by the Hoosier State Press Association are scheduled to include senators Richard Lugar, a Republican, and Evan Bayh, a Democrat.

Politicians shilling for newspapers are a bad idea whether it comes from Republicans or Democrats because it undercuts the independence of the press. Daniels, or any politician, can't seriously endorse newspapers as a business and then tout their role as an independent watchdog of government.

It's not hard to imagine the state's radio and TV stations asking, "What about us?"

US Senator Ben Cardin, a Democrat from Maryland, has introduced Senate Bill 673, called the Newspaper Revitalization Act, which would provide tax breaks to newspapers that restructure as 501(c)(3) corporations, as non-profits. Senator Barbara Mikulski, Cardin's colleague from Maryland, is a co-sponsor.

The danger: Daniels's heartfelt effort and Cardin's bill could evolve into industrial policy for the news media, enabling the government -- not the free market -- to determine winners and losers. That would value political connections over small details like the public's need to know what their elected officials are up to.

It's unlikely that newspapers will bite the hand that keeps them alive, turning what's left of the independent press into slobbering lapdogs. In any case, the bill makes no business sense because reorganizing as a non-profit won't solve the basic problems of the newspaper industry: crashing ad revenue and declining circulation.

A.J. Liebling, a press critic for *New Yorker* magazine, who died in 1963, said it best: "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one." Daniels's action and Cardin's bill give government a de facto stake in newspapers.

Patrons support the ballet, opera, and symphony because they love the art and each is part of our cultural heritage. But who loves newspapers? Apparently not readers, who continue to cancel their subscriptions and get their news elsewhere. Other than taxpayers, who will support newspapers as non-profits?

Political support for the struggling newspaper industry plays out against the recent closure of the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, which dropped its print edition and now publishes on the Internet.

Major newspaper chains, including **McClatchy** (MNI), **Gannett** (GCI) and **E.W. Scripps** (SSP) have been hit hard in the economic downturn. Top newspapers, including The **Washington Post** (WPO) and **The New York Times**, (NYT) have cut staff.

The withering of newspapers is sad for any newshound, but the public has many alternative outlets. In an odd twist, the Internet may foster the revival of the partisan press that flourished in the US through the Civil War.

[Politico](#) covers Capitol Hill the way small-town newspapers used to cover city hall -- wall-to-wall. Blogs such as [kausfiles](#) assume readers know the news and offer their take on it. The letters to the editor function of newspapers is admirably fulfilled by [Daily Kos](#) on the left and [Free Republic](#) on the right. There are [lists](#) of the top 100 conservative and liberal websites.

[Gawker](#) can out-snark any newspaper written and edited by fuddy-duddies. Readers can fulfill their need for in-depth analysis at the [Cato Institute](#) or the [Brookings Institution](#). Sports fans can click to their team's website or websites run by any of the major sports such as [MLB.com](#), [NFL.com](#) or [NHL.com](#). [Craigslis](#)t gutted classified advertising, once a major source of income for newspapers. And, of course, there's [weather.com](#).

With key information a few clicks away, free and updated frequently, who needs newspapers?



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