Remarks
Of
Jay T. Harris
At
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Good evening.

It is a both a pleasure and an honor to be with you this evening.

I would like to thank Alex Jones of the Shorenstein Center for the invitation to talk with you tonight about matters of significant importance to journalists – but even greater importance, I hope to convince you, to the American people.

It is the happy irony of my current situation that my thoughts on American journalism – its purposes, its prospects and its place in our society – have become matters of some interest since I resigned as publisher of the San Jose Mercury News.

And since I have learned over the years that you take and enjoy life's fruits as and when they are offered, I partake of this spate of attention with no regrets. Indeed, I am pleased to do so because I believe the issues at hand are of enormous consequence and deserve the attention not only of journalists, who are most immediately affected, but also of the public whose stake is the largest.

This is the third and I expect the final speech I will give for a while on the issues raised by my resignation.

The first two were delivered to journalists and aspiring journalists, and reviewed some of the challenges currently facing our profession and the threat they represent to our ability to fulfill our professional responsibility to our communities and our nation. It would be fair to say that in both I was preaching for the most part to the choir.

And while there are many journalists here tonight, I want to direct my remarks this evening to the broader public and discuss how their needs and interests are being served.

These are matters that I hope will be engaged not only by the public, but also by academic and political leaders who understand what is at stake and can provide the sustained and high profile leaderships that the situation requires.

I come tonight not so much with a complaint as with a concern – for the current momentum has us headed in the wrong direction and that will continue unless it can be

offset by broad-based public interest and pressure. And I come tonight with questions that I hope you and your colleagues, here and across the country can help answer. For unless we find a way out of the complex trap that market pressures and expectations have created it is hard to see a good outcome for the public or the nation in the current situation.

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I have been a journalist for more than 30 years.

As a neophyte I was taught to never assume my audience knew the background of the story I was telling. So, if you'll bear with me, I'll try to summarize as briefly as possible the circumstances surrounding my resignation and then discuss what the issues my resignation highlighted may mean for journalism, for the public and, ultimately, for our nation.

For the last seven years I was publisher of the San Jose Mercury News – one of the nation's best newspapers.

I resigned that position in March.

My resignation followed a corporate budget meeting that had an unprecedented and myopic focus on making cuts to achieve a particular profit number. Little attention was paid to the damage the cuts would do to the Mercury News as a journalistic endeavor or to its ability to fulfill its responsibilities to the Silicon Valley community.

The meeting was held on a Friday. It ended without resolution. The discussions were scheduled to resume the following Monday.

Over the weekend I confronted the fact that for me to continue in the process was tantamount to slow and silent surrender to something I believed to be wrong – both in terms of our responsibilities to our community and my sense of our long-term responsibility to Knight Ridder shareholders.

I submitted my resignation on Monday.

It was the conviction that newspapers are a public trust that brought me to Knight Ridder in 1985.

I understood then and understand even better today that a good newspaper and a good business go hand in hand. Indeed, without a good business it would be impossible for a newspaper to do good journalism over the long haul.

But at some point one cannot avoid asking what is meant by a good business? What is good enough in terms of profitability and sustained year-to-year profit improvement? And how do you balance maintaining a strong business with your responsibilities as the

steward of a public trust? Maybe that is the most important question, because our business – if you approach it as a public trust as well as a business – is different from most businesses.

Most businesses can reduce expenses more or less proportionately with demand and revenue without doing irreparable damage to their core capabilities, their market position or their mission. Manufacturing businesses are a good example. When fewer items are bought fewer items need to be made and layoffs in various areas are possible, albeit at a terribly high cost to those who lose their jobs.

But newspapers are different. News and reader's interests do not contract with declining advertising. Nor does our responsibility to the public get smaller as revenue declines or newsprint becomes more expensive. That is where the balancing act comes in. It is in times such as these, when tough choices must be made, that a company's core values and priorities are evident; and character, courage and vision are required of leaders.

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The press is protected in the First Amendment to our national Constitution. It is the only business so protected because the Framers saw a free press as essential to the maintenance and health of our democracy.

The Constitution begins with the assertion that it was "establish[ed]" by "the people" to "secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."

And what did the Framers have in mind when they included freedom of the press in the First Amendment. What were they trying to accomplish?

Well, at the most obvious level, they sought to ensure that government could not move to inhibit free expression which they viewed as essential to a free society.

Thomas Jefferson was in Paris at the time the Constitution was written.

But I think he captured the thinking of many of those who convened in Philadelphia when he wrote from Paris in the wake of Shay's Rebellion of the need to give the people "full information of their affairs [through] the channel of the public papers…"

"The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people," Jefferson said, "the very first object should be to keep that right."

It is an enduring idea. No less important today than it was more than two centuries ago.

When I resigned, my underlying argument was that a resource so essential to our national democracy that it is protected in our Constitution should not be managed with the primary goal of satisfying the demands of the market, the "expectations" of Wall Street analysts, or the demands of major shareholders.

Not only should our social responsibility as journalists take reasonable priority over such pressures, but we should never accept the notion that unfettered market forces produce desirable results in any but the most narrow and shallow sense.

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So far, the current debate has, as I said, been primarily among and between journalists and the proprietors of enterprises that are in whole or in part in the business of journalism.

The current weak economy has forced cuts of varying levels on news organizations everywhere. So, on the surface at least, the current debate seems to be an argument about what and how to cut or spend on journalism.

At the recent annual meeting of Knight Ridder the statement was made that "top tier financial performance … is not incompatible with top tier journalism." And I would agree with the statement as it was offered. But probe deeper and you come to the heart of the matter. For if "top tier financial performance" is achieved not through growth but instead by cutting the means and organizational vitality that produce "top tier journalism" then they do become incompatible.

A legendary Silicon Valley company, Intel, has not reduced in any significant way its R&D budget despite the recent dive in its sales, revenue and operating profit because the company CEO Craig Barrett sees R&D as the heart of the enterprise and the key to its future success.

In journalism the heart of the enterprise is human capital – primarily journalists, but also and importantly their co-workers in every department without whom the newspaper could not long be published.

And yet in my former company we see planned cuts in some newsroom staffs of 10 or even 15% when you compare the end of last year to the projected end of this year. We see cuts in the amount of space in the newspaper set aside for news and information in some newspapers of 10% or more over the same period. And we see cuts in some non-salary newsroom operating budgets, which support things including reporters' travel, polling and computer analysis for investigative projects, of even larger percentages.

Are such cuts in a single year compatible with "top tier journalism?" I will leave that for you and others to judge.

To help you consider the matter let me give you a situation analogous to the one facing newspapers, and a hypothetical example.

Hospitals are important, and at times essential, to our health as individuals and, at times, the health of whole communities. Over the last ten-to-fifteen years our nation's health

care system has been ravaged by a variety of market forces and the drive for increased profitability. Today, shortages of nurses and even medicines are not uncommon in some hospitals. At times doctors don't have necessary equipment available or adequate support. HMOs can be more focused on their bottom lines than the health of their clients. In short, the quality of the nation's health care system has declined because of market forces and business imperatives and with it there has been a decline in the health care industry's ability to meet the nation's needs.

Would you be concerned if you learned that at your local hospital – because its parent company wanted to shore up profits – the medical staff was being cut in one year by 10% or more? Or that the space or time allotted for medical procedures was being trimmed by a like amount in order to improve the company's financial performance? Or that the funds available for doctors, nurses and technicians to have the tools available to do their best work was being trimmed for the same reason?

I think I can guess your answer.

And as you consider that hypothetical case you may come to have a deeper appreciation of what is expected, even required of the steward of a public trust.

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I have been asked repeatedly how my decision to resign and the continuing debate sparked by my resignation have affected me personally.

Well, first, I would be less than honest if I didn't tell you that I miss being publisher of the Mercury News terribly. I was working with a great team to build a great newspaper and had planned to continue in that role and pursuit until I retired.

Second, I must say I have been saddened and disappointed, but less and less surprised, by the selective and self-serving retelling of history by some of my former Knight Ridder colleagues who have been friends for many years. But ultimately that it is of little consequence in light of the larger issues as stake.

I *was* interested to read a column by Knight Ridder CEO Tony Ridder in the most recent issue of the industry newsletter Editor and Publisher about how Knight Ridder journalism has changed.

He said it now included "the investigations and public service projects that are at our core" and in addition "more local news," information that is "more useful and relevant" to readers' "daily activities" and "more listings, summaries, indexes and graphics to provide … 'information for life'."

"The combination," he concluded, "has made Knight Ridder newspapers stronger and more relevant than ever before, exactly as Jack Knight, Lee Hills, and Jim Batten would have wished it."

If that combination has made Knight Ridder newspapers stronger and more relevant Jack, Lee and Jim – three legends of American journalism – would no doubt be pleased.

But I think it is less certain how they would assess the significant cuts in a single year to newspapers they loved and gave their lives over to building up. I think they might be less than enthusiastic if the current cuts proved to be largely permanent – and not a passing aberration attributable to current economic weakness. Time will tell on that score – and the astute observer will keep watching.

And I'm fairly sure what Jack Knight would have to say about what has happened to his beloved Akron Beacon Journal newsroom. But Jack was a fairly salty fellow I am told and I doubt that his assessment could be appropriately imagined aloud before such an audience as genteel and distinguished as this.

So let me move on.

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It is a paradox of our times that these are good times and bad times for American journalism.

On the one hand, good journalism, even great journalism is still being done at newspapers and broadcast stations large and small around the country. You need look no farther than the winners of this year's Pulitzer and Peabody Awards to confirm that.

But on the other hand, the challenge before us, the threat if you want to call it that, is that market pressures are undermining support for such work.

In more and more companies the steady and significant commitment required to do serious journalism is given less and less priority. What this means – and the importance of this is not to be underestimated – is that the best and most important journalism, that being journalism in the public interest, is on average being done less well, less frequently and less consistently than was once the case. This trend is playing out in newsrooms and communities large and small across the nation, in publicly-owned companies and private ones as well.

There are exceptions to this of course. But they are a small fraction of American news organizations.

And the declining priority given serious journalism is by no means the only problem.

- In this Monday's New York Times, in a story headlined, "Newsweeklies Turn a Cold Shoulder to Hard News," it was reported that "in recent weeks, key changes at" Time, Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report, "suggest that

the days of the newsweekly magazines acting as hard news arbiters may have finally ground to a halt."

"[N]ewsweeklies have grown softer over the decades," the Times reported, "more likely to tackle lifestyle than life-and-death issues overseas."

- Delivering the annual Batten lecture at Davidson University, former New York Newsday publisher Steve Isenberg observed that, "The media, especially television, have become bloated with opinion, so often coarse and careless, sanctimonious at a boil, and surely not in Samuel Johnson's words the kind which seeks to raise opinion to knowledge."

- And I was quite frankly stunned to see this advertising claim this week: Rupert Murdoch's Fox News channel proclaimed itself, "THE WORLD'S FIRST FAIR & BALANCED NEWS NETWORK." Somehow, when I think of Mr. Murdoch and Fox News, names like Murrow, Friendly, Sevareid and Cronkite do not leap immediately to mind.

- And while the new Internet-based media have the potential for enormous good, used thoughtlessly they can do equal harm.

  It used to be that one had to invest relatively huge sums to have a significant voice in the mass media marketplace. Today, that is not the case. With entry to the Web as open as it is, anybody can play journalist, or masquerade as one. How can journalists maintain their credibility if it is increasingly hard for consumers to tell who is a journalist and who is not on the Web?

- Worrisomely, even support for First Amendment protections appear tenuous. A report last year by the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center reported that 51 percent of the American people say "the press in America has too much freedom to do what it wants."

  This decline in support for free press protections brings to mind Alexander Hamilton's warning in Federalist 84 that the "liberty of the press…must altogether depend on public opinion, and on the general spirit of the people."

- And maybe looming largest of all on this litany of concerns is the matter of concentration and its effects. The Tribune Company has purchased Times Mirror. Time Warner, which owns CNN, has merged with AOL. NBC which is owned by General Electric, partners with Microsoft to produce MSNBC. CBS and Viacom have been merged. ABC is owned by Disney.

  The increasing concentration of media ownership is worrisome on two levels.

  The first is what happens when the business interests of one of the big parent companies – say, for example, entry into the lucrative China market – is

> threatened by the editorial mission of their subsidiary news organization to cover, say, human rights violations in that nation.
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> And, second, as Sandra Rowe, editor of the Portland Oregonian noted while giving the Ruhl Lecture at the University of Oregon, "if the new media Goliaths ultimately define entertainment as more important than news in all their media, or if they think that broad but shallow information is good enough for the market, if quality is not essential to their business mission, then they won't invest in newsrooms at a sufficient level to support public interest journalism."
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> "As media organizations continue to merge and journalism becomes a relatively smaller piece of what they do and is no longer the reasons many of these companies were created in the first place," Rowe concluded, "then the fight to have the journalism values at the core of the company will be all the more challenging. It also could be determinant. The credibility, and the trust, the ethical force of the entire enterprise, may depend on it."

Which brings us back to the larger issue, the one in which the public and the Republic have such an enormous stake.

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In setting the foundation for my case tonight I have gone back to the earliest days of our nation and the clear-eyed view the Founders had of the necessity of a free press to our democracy.

It was to them an obvious and powerful need when the country was younger; at a time when the issues facing our people while new and profound were nevertheless relatively simple to describe, if not to solve.

And can it reasonably be argued that in our almost infinitely more complex world of today: driven at the speed of electrons by technology, complicated by an increasingly inter-connected global community and global economy, made raw by powerful competing interests, that the American people need to know less?

I think not.

So the issues that concern us today about press performance are not important issues because we are in bad times. They are important issues of our time and they are important without regard to the state of the economy or the state of the news industry. The tough economic times simply cause the problems and potential problems to stand out in bold relief.

On the surface the current debate, as I've said, seems to be an argument about what and how much to cut or spend on journalism. But that is not the really important argument.

For that which we can quantify speaks only to the *means* of journalism and it speaks primarily to journalists. The argument fails to highlight the more important *ends* of journalism in which the public has a powerful interest and stake.

The means of journalism are journalists, the information, news and opinion which they gather and create, and a method by which the work of the journalist is shared with the public. But the end of journalism, the goal of journalism, is an informed public – and an informed public is the linchpin of American democracy.

In his keynote address last summer to the Fourth Annual Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society, Peter Goldmark, chairman and CEO of the International Herald Tribune noted that "the bastions of the best journalism in our society today are commercially viable companies that have known shrewdly when to sacrifice short-term commercial profit for journalistic values, and how to profit commercially from the long-term practice of good journalism."

These are the role models other companies should emulate – but unfortunately do not for a variety of reasons.

Goldmark went on to say that the "contest of wills at the frontier of political and commercial power on one hand and independent journalism on the other never ends, it simply takes different forms in differing circumstances, and the centrality of that struggle to our system of self-government needs to be understood and celebrated and taught, because independence is easy to loose and heart-breakingly difficult to reclaim."

Let me underscore a key part of what Goldmark advised: *"the centrality of that struggle to our system of self-government needs to be understood and celebrated and taught…"*

Today, a distinguished group of current and former journalists are attempting to raise these issues and bring them to the attention of the public.

But in today's fast-paced, entertainment-oriented media environment, in which all but the most shallow or frivolous subjects have a short half-life, it is exceedingly difficult to persuade the news media to cover itself or in other ways draw the attention of the public to questions of press performance.

It is an old question, used in other circumstances but fairly applicable to this one: "Who will watch the watch dogs?"

If the cuts I described in my earlier hypothetical were happening at local hospitals it would be all the news, all the time. But the cuts, and maybe more importantly the waning of support and changing priorities, are occurring in the corporate offices of media companies. So how will the necessary inquiry be done? Who will tell the story? How will the public learn what Goldmark described as "the centrality of that struggle to our system of self-government (which) needs to be understood and celebrated and taught?"

Is there a model we can turn to as an alternative? Possibly.

A seminal document in the literature of American journalism is the 1947 report of the Commission on Freedom of the Press that was chaired by Robert M. Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, a report best known as the Hutchins Commission Report.

The Hutchins Commission report is an interesting model to consider.

It was an independent, "blue-ribbon" commission convened to consider the great Press issues of its day. Because of the broad respect for its authors and the insight of their conclusions, the report affected thinking about these issues for a generation or more.

The substance and focus of the report demonstrate that in key instances what we see today as pressing and important questions about the news media were regarded as such more than a half century ago. And while the specifics regarding those questions have evolved over time they are unchanged at their root.

"We have the impression that the American people do not realize what has happened to them," the Hutchins Commission report noted. "They are not aware that the communications revolution has taken place."

Much the same could be said today. And that is the situation that must be addressed.

Writing shortly after the release of the Commission report, Louis Lyons, then the curator of the Nieman Foundation here at Harvard, summarized one of the reports key conclusions in these words:

> "In answer to the question, 'Is the freedom the press in danger?'," the Commission offered, "a flat, 'Yes.'
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> "The Commission's reasons," in Lyons' summarization, were three:
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> First, "As the importance of communication has increased its control has come into fewer hands."
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> Second, "The few in control have failed to meet the needs of the people."
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> And, third, "Press practices at times have been so irresponsible that if continued society is bound to take control for its own protection."

"No democracy will indefinitely tolerate concentration of private power, irresponsible and strong enough to thwart the democratic aspirations of the people," the Commission asserted. "If these giant agencies of communication are irresponsible, not even the First Amendment will protect their freedom from government control. The Amendment will be amended."

And if that report sounds hyperbolic to today's ear, remember the Freedom Forum report I mentioned earlier that showed most Americans today say "the press in America has too much freedom to do what it wants."

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So, I suggest this evening that the possibility should be considered of establishing an independent, blue-ribbon panel to examine the important issues of press freedom and press responsibility in our day.

The panel would need to be headed by a person with a reputation for intelligence, impartiality and fairness. Persons such as former Senators Baker of Tennessee or Mitchell of Maine come to mind, or former Congressman Panetta of California. Certainly, there are several current and former presidents of our major universities who would satisfy the qualifications. The panel would need to include representatives from the news media – both journalists and business leaders – and a diverse group of public representatives.

The charge to the commission would be to seek answers to a few straightforward questions. Are the print and electronic news media meeting the needs of the American people? If not, where do they fall short and why? And if they fall short, what corrective steps should the media consider for voluntary adoption?

I make this tentative suggestion tonight because while I am innately optimistic about the future of American journalism I do not believe that the challenges and threats facing our free and responsible press will rectify themselves. I am not sanguine that news media organizations will cover themselves aggressively or persistently. Nor am I sanguine that an easy way can be found out of the current financial box these organizations find themselves in.

It may well be that others have better ideas. If so, they should be considered and pursued.

But we should not let the matter fade from our consciousness or our conscience. The stakes are too great.

America, as the world's only superpower and its leading cultural force, will play an important role in how the new global community develops.

This is a time, therefore, when Americans' need to know more and more about our increasingly interconnected global community. They will need to know this so they can effectively engage our political leaders over time on the role and direction our country takes in this unfolding new world. And news organizations that take news seriously, that attach a priority to telling important stories in all their dimensions, that are willing to commit the resources necessary to tell such stories, will determine whether at this crucial time in history, the American press fulfilled the role it was given the freedom and responsibility to perform.

In his recent Batten address at Davidson, Steve Isenberg had this to say about newspapers and the news.

“I see newspapers as the spinal column and central nervous system of our media world and our citizenship. I see newspapers illuminating our politics and government, our schools and universities … our military and our diplomacy, the dynamics of our working lives and activities, and worlds of business and trade, in their international and local dimensions. I see newspapers giving context and understanding to international relations, the lore and language and points of view that affect our obligations and opportunities, as well as the unique dangers and dilemmas in a world unyielding in its connections and complexities.

“When speed is king, and context and depth but handmaidens, and preoccupation with entertainment casts a long shadow, we rely on the best newspapers to help us sort things out by holding the world still for a moment.”

“And so in the great business of democracy, the informing of citizens and the exercising of their responsibilities and rights, newspapers do hold a special place.”

I could not agree more, for while all news media play an important role in our democracy, I think of the newspaper as the foundation for almost all the rest. They are ultimately the key to whether we have an informed and engaged citizenry or not.

And that, ultimately, is what is at stake.

Martin Luther King is generally viewed as a heroic civil rights figure, and a champion of peace and non-violence. He is less well known, but should be recognized, as an insightful observer of the American social fabric. Many years ago he offered this observation about our nation. It remains valid today and with it I will close.

“Gargantuan industry and government, woven into an intricate computerized mechanism, leave the person outside. The sense of participation is lost, the feeling that ordinary individuals influence important decisions vanishes, and man becomes separated and diminished.

“When an individual is no longer a true participant, when he no longer feels a sense of responsibility to his society, the content of democracy is emptied ... This process produces alienation – perhaps the most pervasive and insidious development in contemporary society.”

That sense of detachment and alienation among its people is what America most needs to avoid. And if the press does its job – which it has done nobly and excellently over the years – that is a fate our nation can avoid.

Thank you.