

Testimony of Ross Connelly before the Senate Government
Operations Committee — March 16, 2017

Sen. White, thank you and your committee members for granting me the opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Ross Connelly. I owned and published The Hardwick Gazette from 1986 until last month. During that time period, I also served on the boards and was a president of both the Vermont and New England press associations.

My understanding is S.97 seeks authority to allow legal notices to be published online in a newspaper of record and removes the requirement that they be published in a printed newspaper of record.

Many newspapers of record in Vermont have online editions. The publishers of those newspapers, if they choose, can publish any or all of the hardcopy content in their online editions, including advertising.

There are online news websites in Vermont. They are websites. Websites are not newspapers, let alone newspapers of record. We don't call radio news programs newspapers. We don't call television newscasts newspapers. Websites are not newspapers, either.

Is the intent of this proposal to allow the few online news websites that exist to be redefined as newspapers? Is the intent to allow these few websites to be called newspapers so they can receive legal advertising in lieu of placing legal's in existing printed newspapers of record?

Trying to define a newspaper is a tricky business. Since the advent of the internet, the Vermont Press Association grappled with this question for years as it sought to define categories of

membership. Many press associations around the country are in the same quandary.

All that said, I am no longer a newspaper publisher, having sold The Hardwick Gazette Feb. 17. My belief remains, however, in the importance of local, independent newspapers. I have additional thoughts on S.97.

Shortly after the death of my wife, Susan Jarzyna, in 2011, I stopped into the Hardwick post office to pick up mail. I ran into another town resident I knew slightly. She wished me well and asked what I intended to do, implying that she expected I would sell the Gazette and leave town. Not knowing what to say, I replied I was focused on getting out the next week's issue of the newspaper. She said, "We need you, the town needs you."

That meant a lot. Her words told me the Gazette was important to the community.

About two years ago, I decided I did need to sell the Gazette. As you may know, I held an essay contest last year trying to find a new owner. During the contest, and since, many people in town expressed interest in my efforts, and always said they hoped I found a new owner as they wanted the Gazette to continue.

Local newspapers such as The Hardwick Gazette are important to their readers and to their communities. Any newspaper, which is doing its job, is a mirror that takes parts and turns them into a whole. A newspaper reflects back to its readers — to citizens — the who, what, when, where and why in its coverage area.

A newspaper is civic media, not social media. The newspaper is available to all, on a newsstand, by subscription or in a library.

A newspaper has permanence, whether one seeks an issue from a week ago, last year, or decades ago.

A newspaper cannot provide coverage without ad revenue. As I am sure you are aware, ad revenue for all newspapers has been on a decline as advertisers shift to the internet and social media to get their messages to potential customers.

The Gazette receives legal advertising from various state agencies, courts, several towns, from supervisory unions and schools, ranging from employment advertising to warnings, to bids, tax sales, and other information of importance to taxpayers — to citizens. All of the ads generate income that is spent locally, to hire local residents, to pay local taxes, to meet expenses faced by most businesses, and to report the news.

Newspapers with online editions are already able to publish any advertising they choose in their online editions. If social media and online technology lead to a new definition of a newspaper, those platforms can chip away at the importance of a shared, visible citizenship and community as reported each day and each week in newspapers of record.

Our town, our state and our country need more independent, local newspapers, not less. Continuing the requirement that legal advertising be placed in newspapers of record will help ensure citizens' right to be informed about their communities and governments. Newspapers — civic media — help citizens to be aware they are part of a democracy, historically and currently.

I encourage you to consider the value of community, of informed citizens and access to local news as reported in newspapers of record as you assess the effect the bill will have.

Thank you.