



# THE NEWSGUILD – CWA

501 3rd Street, NW, 6th floor, Washington, DC 20001  
(202) 434-7177 Fax (202) 434-1472 newsguild.org

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January 25, 2023

Jonathan Kanter  
Assistant Attorney General  
Antitrust Division  
U. S. Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20530-0001

Dear Assistant Attorney General Kanter:

On January 4, 2023, Cars Holding, Inc., announced that it was purchasing the *Pittsburgh City Paper*.<sup>1</sup> Cars Holding is a subsidiary of Block Communications, Inc., which owns the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. The NewsGuild-CWA has deep concerns about this planned acquisition. It will harm the community by reducing points of view on key issues. It will also distort the local labor market for news workers by restricting the mobility of news employees.

This is a continuation of the *Post-Gazette's* decades long quest to consolidate and dominate the Pittsburgh news market. In 1960, the *Post-Gazette* bought the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* and closed it shortly thereafter. In 1992, the *Post-Gazette* purchased the *Pittsburgh Press* and shut it down as well. During the 1992 strike at the *Press* and the *Post-Gazette*, the *Tribune-Review* launched a Pittsburgh edition, the *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*, but the *Tribune-Review* ceased publication of the Pittsburgh edition in 2016. In 2019, the *Post-Gazette* ended daily print production and has reduced its print production to Sunday and Thursday.

Meanwhile, the market for weeklies has also shrunk. The *City Paper* purchased *In Pittsburgh Weekly* in 2001 and closed it. The alt-weekly *Pittsburgh Current* closed in 2019.

We acknowledge the existence of specialty newspapers in the Pittsburgh area: the *New Pittsburgh Courier* (African American community), *Pittsburgh Business Times*,<sup>2</sup> the *Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle*, and

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<sup>1</sup> Block Communications, Inc., "Block Communications, Inc. subsidiary purchases Pittsburgh City Paper," press release, Editor & Publisher, January 5, 2023: <https://www.editorandpublisher.com/stories/block-communications-inc-subsiidiary-purchases-pittsburgh-city-paper,241569>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bizjournals.com/pittsburgh/>

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the *Pitt News* (serving the University of Pittsburgh), among others. However, these news organizations do not have the broad reach of daily and weekly news organizations.

Likewise, online-only news organizations have recently developed in Pittsburgh. *Public Source* has a small newsroom and does some investigative reporting.<sup>3</sup> *Next Pittsburgh*<sup>4</sup> and the Incline<sup>5</sup> are aimed at millennials and provide a mixture of news and entertainment. Unfortunately, online publications do not serve populations without access to reliable and affordable broadband.

Alternative newspapers, such as *Pittsburgh City Paper*, serve different audiences. When they are available at little to no cost, they can be accessible to the entire public, and they can be expected to increase business for restaurants, arts venues, and musical events. The NewsGuild-CWA is particularly concerned that the *Post-Gazette* will limit printing of *City Paper* or will erect an online paywall, and thereby restrict audience access.

Alternative newspapers can also tackle issues that more mainstream news organizations cannot. For instance, the *Pittsburgh City Paper* wrote about the Block family, owners of Block Communications, and its support for the January 6, 2021, insurrection.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the *Pittsburgh City Paper* covered the alleged drunken tirade of *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* publisher John Block in 2019.<sup>7</sup> Those stories did not appear in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

The *Pittsburgh City Paper* has also given considerably more attention to the public reaction of police violence against Black communities. While *Post-Gazette* editors removed a Black reporter from covering Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 because of her alleged bias, *City Paper* editors ran stories about the *Post-Gazette's* decision<sup>8</sup> as well as about the protests themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.publicsource.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://nextpittsburgh.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://theincline.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Ryan Deto, "Block Communication family member supports insurrection online as BCI journalists allege management edited stories to "downplay" the events," *Pittsburgh City Paper*, January 7, 2021: <https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/block-communication-family-member-supports-insurrection-online-as-bci-journalists-allege-management-edited-stories-to-downplay-the-events/Content?oid=18696758>

<sup>7</sup> Ryan Deto, "Post-Gazette labor union officially files NLRB complaint against publisher John Block," *Pittsburgh City Paper*, February 13, 2019: <https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/post-gazette-labor-union-officially-files-nlr-complaint-against-publisher-john-block/Content?oid=13630675> and Lisa Cunningham, "Pittsburgh Post-Gazette union releases four eye-witness accounts of Block tirade," *Pittsburgh City Paper*, February 13, 2019: <https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/pittsburgh-post-gazette-union-releases-four-eye-witness-accounts/Content?oid=13627524>

<sup>8</sup> Ryan Deto, "Pittsburgh Post-Gazette removes a Black reporter from George Floyd protest coverage, says union," *Pittsburgh City Paper*, June 4, 2020: <https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/pittsburgh-post-gazette-removes-a-black-reporter-from-george-floyd-protest-coverage-says-union/Content?oid=17403485>

Alt-weeklies have historically been important because they have tackled issues not covered by the incumbent press. In a homage to disappearing alt-weeklies, reporter Paul Farhi noted in *The Washington Post* that alt-weeklies:

wrote about things that the mainstream media (before it was ever called that) was indifferent to or ignored. They covered nightlife, criticized the arts, hectored the newspapers and TV stations about their reporting. They wrote about politics from a subjective and unapologetically partisan perspective, almost always a lefty one. They sometimes exposed wrongdoing and malfeasance in their midst.<sup>9</sup>

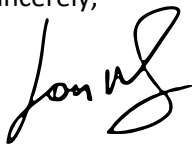
The existence of a rival news brand in a locality also fosters job mobility for journalists. According to TNG-CWA Local 38061 President Zack Tanner, several journalists have made their mark in the *City Paper* and then moved to the *Post-Gazette*. Such competition for employees tends to raise overall newsroom compensation levels and raise the overall quality of news production.

As we know, a healthy news ecosystem is critical to sustaining democratic culture. The existence of pesky, small news outlets, daily or weekly, that cover issues not normally covered by the incumbent media improves the overall quality of news production for the entire local market. That vibrancy, in turn, gives readers the information they need to make decisions in their personal and professional lives. It also leads to a more informed citizenry.

The NewsGuild-CWA urges the Department of Justice to investigate the competitive impact of this attempted consolidation of local news.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jon Schleuss". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized initial "J".

Jon Schleuss, President  
The NewsGuild-CWA

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Farhi, "What we're losing when we say goodbye to alt weeklies, the rebels of journalism," *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2017: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/what-were-losing-when-we-say-goodbye-to-alt-weeklies-the-rebels-of-journalism/2017/08/23/abc8e5f4-876d-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/what-were-losing-when-we-say-goodbye-to-alt-weeklies-the-rebels-of-journalism/2017/08/23/abc8e5f4-876d-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5_story.html)