

September 30th, 2020

Dear McClatchy Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Tony Hunter:

The company's proposal to tie our annual performance reviews and raises to our pageviews and other metrics deeply concerns the journalists of The Sacramento Bee. You told us we will always have a voice in this company, so we hope you'll take our concerns seriously.

As the Guild has shared with the company's bargaining team, the proposal would link our professional worth to arbitrary numbers influenced by variables outside our control. It would create incentives to pursue clickbait headlines over in-depth, accountable journalism that serves the community and forms the basis of a sustainable, subscriber-based business.

We recognize the challenges of making journalism work as a business model. We know that is your priority and we know metrics have a place in newsroom decision-making. But they aren't measures of journalistic achievement and shouldn't be a part of our annual reviews. Tying them to our compensation would negatively affect newsgathering, employee morale and The Bee's reputation. The idea alone has already impacted morale.

In bargaining, the company has neither justified the need for this seismic shift nor offered a methodology for setting pageview quotas. Based on what we know, we don't think it makes sense.

Our readers see value in journalism that holds power to account, reflects who they are and helps them navigate their lives. We see that over and over in the ways our audience reacts to our reporting. They demonstrated their support with a recent surge in subscriptions and a round of giving that helped stave off newsroom furloughs. They engage with us and they subscribe when they feel like we're on their side, fighting for accountability and giving them information they need.

Subscribers are proud when they see that work, a few examples of which are described later in this letter. They complain to us when they see headlines about things like new menu items at Taco Bell and Chipotle (real recent examples from McClatchy sites). Yet that is the direction the company's proposal would push us.

We, the reporters at The Bee, do our best work when we can pursue good stories with support from our editors and the organization. We relish breaking news and we want to beat our competitors. Years of covering devastating wildfires and months of non-stop reporting on the coronavirus pandemic are a testament to that commitment. We have landed big stories by publishing accountability pieces that generate new leads, developing sources, digging through documents and data and staying curious.

The company's proposal puts metrics first and treats those pursuits as luxuries to be pursued after quotas are met.

The metrics the company uses to gauge a story's performance change often. First it was pageviews, then subscriber pageviews and led-to-conversions. Direct conversions are a new focus. It's good to keep flexibility around those indicators and, as you have put it, pivot based on what we learn. The company's proposal would impede evolution by holding us to measures that quickly become outdated.

The proposal would impair The Bee's admirable, critical initiatives to expand the diversity of our audience. Stories on communities that The Bee has traditionally not covered well often don't perform as well as other stories online. This proposal would keep reporters' attention turned away from those groups that are key to our long-term sustainability and mission.

The company's bargaining team has said that adding metrics to reporters' reviews will provide stronger incentives for us to meet them. Maybe. But reporters don't control headlines, when stories post, whether a story is behind a hard paywall, the alerts they get and other factors. Sometimes we are assigned stories that don't perform well at all.

Consider the negative impacts on morale for reporters who work hard, make decisions with editors about which stories to pursue, write terrific pieces, and still often miss their monthly targets. Consider the impact on morale for reporters who could see talented, hard-working colleagues laid off if their missed targets weigh down their reviews.

The company is pushing this change while we risk our health and safety to report on a pandemic, protests, wildfires and an economic downturn. Adding to the sting is the company's decision to withhold last year's merit raises until the Guild agrees to the company's pay-for-clicks proposal.

Tony, as the new leader of our company, we urge you to withdraw the Compass proposal.

Few major news organizations -- and none of The Bee's competitors -- have adopted metrics proposals like the one McClatchy is offering. Not the Chicago Tribune, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Los Angeles Times, Politico Pro, CalMatters, the Baltimore Sun, the Arizona Republic, the Orlando Sentinel or many others.

The company's proposal, if implemented, would be troubling not just to us but to reporters around the country. It would hurt The Bee's ability to hire good reporters and would play a significant role in reporters' decisions about whether to leave for other publications.

None of us got into this business to get rich. We do the work, and we work hard, because we think it's important. The Compass system doesn't include any measures of how well we practice journalism. The company's insistence on using it sends a message that our priority is not change-making journalism, but turning a square in a spreadsheet from red to green.

Good journalism takes time and diligence.

Bee reporters Molly Sullivan and Ryan Sabalow worked for months to uncover a culture of hazing, binge-drinking and sexual misconduct at the UC Davis marching band, leading the university to suspend the program. The story won a state award for public service journalism.

Jason Pohl spent a year on his award-winning jails project, which changed policies and sparked conversation about often-ignored problems.

Marjie Lundstrom spent months tracking down how \$25 million in taxpayer money was being used to settle sexual harassment lawsuits in California state government. Her 2018 story led to reforms, and the state this year launched a government-wide tracker of harassment and discrimination.

The Bee must protect reporters' abilities to dig, report and craft compelling stories, and must not put up barriers to that work. We recognize the company is going through tough times. We are not asking for raises at the bargaining table this year. However we do ask that the company withdraw the Compass proposal.

Right now you have a capable and dedicated mix of reporters at The Bee, some with decades of experience in Sacramento and some who have built solid foundations after just a few years. Withdrawing the proposal would demonstrate goodwill to us and your commitment to the sustainable journalism our readers want.

As you noted, our work is at the core of democracy. Let us do the work we've practiced and been trained to do.

Thank you for your attention. We hope you'll respond by Monday, Oct. 5.

On behalf of the unified journalists of the Sacramento Bee,

Theresa Clift, Bee Guild chair  
Jason Pohl, Bee Guild vice-chair  
Darrell Smith, Bee Guild secretary  
Wes Venteicher, Bargaining committee

Co-signed in agreement and support by the following Guild units:

Jessica De Leon, Chair Bradenton Herald  
Bethany Clough, Chair Fresno Bee  
Michael Lycklama, Idaho Statesman

Joey Flechas, Co-Chair el Nuevo Herald and Miami Herald  
Mary Ellen Klas, Co-Chair el Nuevo Herald and Miami Herald  
Marijke Rowland, Chair Modesto Bee