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## NEWS RELEASE

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### **JOURNALISTS AND WATCHDOG GROUPS DENOUNCE BUSINESS LOBBYISTS FOR CREATING “NEWSPAPER” TO PUSH ANTI-JUSTICE AGENDA**

New York - The Center for Justice & Democracy released statements today from numerous scholars, journalists and media watchdog groups around the country denouncing the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s unprecedented decision to create a newspaper to push its “tort reform” agenda. According to a December 6, 2004, *Washington Post* article that first reported this story, the Chamber has established a Southern Illinois newspaper called *The Madison County Record*, presenting readers with biased accounts of cases and pro-tort reform commentary.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which has already spent \$40 million this year to further its tort reform legislative and political goals, is one of the nation’s chief lobby groups on these issues. The Bush administration has said that weakening the civil justice system, in line with the Chamber’s anti-consumer goals, is one of its top legislative priorities.

According to the *Post* article, the *Record*’s publisher, Brian Timpone, is refusing to tell readers in print about the paper’s connection to the Chamber because “I was afraid we’d be prejudged.” Professor Michael Hoyt at the Columbia School of Journalism said, “If this is an attempt to poach the legitimacy of independent reporting, to falsely fly under that flag, then it’s unethical.”

According to Steve Rendall, Senior Analyst for the media watchdog group FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting), “Legitimate newspapers disclose conflicts of interest. If the *Madison County Record* had any legitimacy as an independent paper, it would disclose its co-owner’s conflict when covering these issues. By refusing to disclose this conflict, the *Record* invites charges that this is little more than a propaganda arm for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.”

According to Suffolk University Law Professor Michael Rustad, “The *Record* is masquerading as a newspaper when, in fact, it has one object in mind – corroding the

civil justice system. The paper should be required to disclose on its masthead whether it is a newspaper or an advocacy publication.”

Duke University Law Professor Neil Vidmar said, “On the basis of past experience, with stories that the Chamber and other tort reform groups set forth, the actual facts of the case are very different than what is presented. It is not accurate reporting. In fact, it’s more often distorting the facts and therefore has to be classified as propaganda.”

The American Bar Foundation’s Stephen Daniels, author of *Civil Juries and the Politics of Reform*, said, “Surreptitiously buying a legal newspaper is different from what we’ve seen before, but it’s not that big a jump from the range of things that tort reform interests have been involved with for at least fifty years to influence the way people think about the civil justice system.”

Stephen C. Halpern, professor of political science at the State University of New York at Buffalo, said, “In the vast sums of money the Chamber of Commerce has spent attacking sitting judges in recent years and in its deceptive efforts to control the news by now buying newspapers, the Chamber has mounted a frontal assault on the independence of judges, jurors and the press. It is a disturbing development.”

William Haltom from the University of Puget Sound, author of *Dis-Torting the Law*, a 2004 book critical of media coverage of tort reform issues, adds, “This is typical of print journalists who have an agenda. They rely on the need for concision as an excuse to leave things out that provide context to the story.”

“If they can create a newspaper without people knowing where it comes from, that works for them,” comments Zachary Roth, reporter for the online daily *Columbia Journalism Review*. “If groups like the Chamber of Commerce want to use deceptive public relations tactics, as many people as possible need to know what’s going on.”

The Chamber says it is considering creating similar “newspapers” in other places around the country. For more information, contact the Center for Justice & Democracy, <http://centerjd.org>.

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