

Americans need robust local news outlets

Democracy is about membership in a local community. It can't flourish without local journalism.

From the Editors in the [June 30, 2021](#) issue



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Last month, Alden Global Capital bought Tribune Publishing, owner of the *Chicago Tribune* and seven other local newspapers of record. Shareholders allowed the sale over the protests of journalists, who expect the hedge fund to do what it's done elsewhere: gut the papers' budgets for short-term profits. A billionaire investor reportedly considered challenging Alden but backed down when his plan to make the *Tribune* compete with the *New York Times* proved unviable.

But the United States doesn't need another big national paper. It needs healthy news outlets—print, online, and broadcast—in local markets large and small. Many such outlets are now owned by Alden and other large companies, which typically downsize local newsrooms as they consolidate their coverage—and their profits—at the regional and national levels. Many other local papers have simply ceased

publication. More than 2,100 have been lost since 2004. Numerous US counties now have no paper at all.

Those that remain are desperate for funding. Subscriptions and print ads have long been in decline; more recently, Google and Facebook have hoovered up most of the digital advertising, too. Some news outlets are quietly allowing article subjects to buy favorable coverage; others purport to be journalistic but lack fealty even to basic factual accuracy. This unprofessional, unreliable work is filling a void left by disinvestment in legitimate local journalism.

Democracy can't flourish without public access to fair, reliable information. And the much-discussed American problem of media disinformation and epistemic chaos isn't just national—it's local. Attacks on voting rights are happening at state and local levels, buttressed by false allegations of state and local voting irregularities. It is not enough for Americans elsewhere to be alarmed from a distance. The solutions will have to be substantially local as well.

Democratic engagement, after all, is fundamentally about a sense of membership in a local community, and the public policies that affect Americans' lives are largely determined at state and local levels. All this requires local journalism—to inform people, to help anchor a community, and to hold government accountable.

What can be done to shore up local news? Some publishers are turning to antitrust law, bringing cases against big media mergers and Big Tech ad shares. Some papers have done well under wealthy, civic-minded local owners. The nonprofit model has attracted a few papers, along with sustaining a lot of public radio stations. New Jersey has led the way on state support for journalism, channeled through an independently managed nonprofit. Larger cities could follow New York's lead and require government ad buys to prioritize local media.

None of these is a singular, scalable solution, and each assumes something more fundamental: citizens who support local journalism. In surveys, Americans praise their local news outlets. But do they buy subscriptions and ads? Do they defend these outlets from attacks motivated by political animus or investor greed?

In March, a struggling paper in Kansas City ran a blank front page to make a point: Will you miss us when we're gone? People who answer yes need to do their part to try to save local news.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Towns without news.”