# Opinion

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oral sessions with C. Hamard

# Even $500 million isn’t enough to save local journalism By the [Editorial Board](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-posts-view/?itid=ai_top_editorial-board) September 22, 2023

# Books, op-eds, think pieces and conferences — many, many conferences: The plight of local journalism in the United States has received its share of attention. A large pile of cash is now sidling up to all the chatter. In an initiative announced this month, 22 donor organizations are teaming up to provide more than $500 million to boost local news over five years — [an undertaking called Press Forward](https://www.macfound.org/press/press-releases/press-forward-will-award-more-than-500-million-to-revitalize-local-news" \t "_blank).

The even bigger imperative, however, is to elevate local news on the philanthropic food chain so that national and hometown funders prioritize this pivotal American institution.

There’s no shortage of need. According to [2022 research by Penny Abernathy](https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/research/state-of-local-news/report/" \t "_blank), a visiting professor at Medill and a former executive at the New York Times and Wall Street Journal, newspapers are closing at an average rate of more than two per week; since 2005, more than one-quarter of U.S. newspapers have vanished. Digital-only start-ups haven’t plugged the gap, leaving too many communities without pressing information about themselves. The contraction has led to the proliferation of “news deserts”; there are 200 counties, home to 70 million people, with no newspaper. No surprise: It turns out that areas with thin and declining news coverage also have [lower voter turnout](https://moody.utexas.edu/sites/default/files/Strauss_Research_Newspaper_Decline_2019-11-Jennings.pdf" \t "_blank), less robust political competition and [declining civic engagement](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10584609.2012.762817" \l ".VMFGQy711gh" \t "_blank). Into the void have seeped misinformation and disinformation.

What’s more, local news stands as the industry’s front line against the erosion of public trust.

Who’s to blame? The internet, mostly. Whereas deep-pocketed advertisers formerly relied on newspapers to reach their customers, they took to the [audience-targeting capabilities of Facebook or Google](http://csweb.brookings.edu/content/research/essays/2014/bad-news.html" \t "_blank). Web-based marketplaces also siphoned newspapers’ once-robust revenue from classified ads.

One of the goals for Press Forward, accordingly, is building out the infrastructure — “[from legal support to membership programs](https://www.macfound.org/press/press-releases/press-forward-will-award-more-than-500-million-to-revitalize-local-news" \t "_blank)” — relied upon by local news providers to deliver their product.

So where to go from here? Local philanthropic interests across the country could take a cue from the Press Forward partners and invest in the news organizations down the street. A step in that direction is underway in Springfield, Ill., where the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln — a Press Forward partner — has established a permanent endowment fund for local news. “This is going to be a different way of looking at journalism,” says John Stremsterfer, the foundation’s chief executive, noting that many donors haven’t viewed it as a “basic philanthropic cause in America.”

That’s changing, however, because American democracy and American journalism both need help. Though funding journalism was formerly viewed as being outside the “democracy tent,” in Mr. Brady’s formulation, it’s now squarely inside, along with voting rights, civic education and other long-standing priorities of charitable organizations.

There it belongs, the better to watchdog local governments and businesses — and provide recaps of Friday night’s high school football games. Lighter fare mixes well with democracy, too. (467 words)