

Guest commentary: California legislature will take up the ‘Save Local Journalism Act’

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Opinion

The personal and economic toll of the pandemic is painfully clear. Tragically, we have lost more than 100,000 Americans, and many businesses have eliminated jobs. Local newspapers have kept citizens and consumers informed throughout the crisis, but these outlets also suffered due to COVID-19 and need support to continue to provide valuable information in these uncertain times.

Our collective response to the pandemic was shaped in-part by local news outlets. Over the last four months, newsrooms have worked around-the-clock to provide readers with up-to-date information on the spread of the virus and recommendations from health experts. News outlets lifted paywalls to ensure the greatest number of individuals access to information for free and sought to provide local context to national stories to help communities understand how to protect themselves and their loved ones.

As our country moves forward, community newspapers also will be critical to help rebuild local economies. They are the primary source of information that keeps consumers informed about issues that impact local business operations, such as re-openings, sales and discounts. They will inform local businesses about recovery grants loans and other programs to help them rebuild. They will provide people with information on job openings.

They will stay focused on this mission as long as they can — because their very existence is in peril.

Ten California newspapers have stopped publishing their print product since the beginning of the year — victims of revenue declines, exacerbated by massive drops in advertising due to COVID-19. Smaller specialized outlets, like community papers and the small publications that serve diverse ethnic communities, are at even greater risk.

This decline is not because newspapers are obsolete. In fact, online news platforms have gained considerable subscribers over the years. But print newspapers still provide the advertising revenue to support print and digital properties. When finances run dry, the newsroom staffs that support both options are at risk. And when there are no more cutbacks that can be made, the doors must close.

The Save Local Journalism Act, which will be considered this year by the California State Legislature, will help stabilize and preserve community news outlets. It prioritizes community news outlets for state-sponsored advertising on issues such as COVID-19 recovery and public health education campaigns.

The act also will extend newspapers' exemption from AB 5, a state law that would force newspapers to convert newspaper carriers from independent contractors to permanent employees. Delivery is the highest single cost at local newspapers. Newspapers face an average increase of up to 85 percent in distribution costs if the California Legislature does not extend its exemption granted last year in AB 170. These additional costs would present a fatal financial blow to many community papers.

News outlets are essential partners for keeping our community equipped and informed as we forge a new path to COVID-19 recovery. And just like any other company, newspapers must also keep the lights on and the doors open for business. Gov. Gavin Newsom and the California Legislature can help them do that — and help our communities rebuild — by supporting the Save Local Journalism Act.

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