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## We Need a Marshall Plan for Public Media



Photo by [Utsav Srestha](#)

America's media institutions have had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad start to 2024.

*The Messenger*, a well-funded, high-profile news site, dissolved after less than a year. Big newspapers from the *Los Angeles Times* to the *IndyStar* saw major layoffs. And *Sports Illustrated* fell into licensing limbo while sites like *BuzzFeed*, *Vice News*, or *Complex* found themselves at best on life support.

The over 500 media jobs eliminated so far this year reflect a broader, worrying trend. By this year's end, according to one recent estimate, America will have lost one third of all its newspapers — and two-thirds of all its newspaper staff — since 2005.

The losses have been particularly acute in poor and rural communities, leaving ever expanding news deserts all across the nation.

The collapse of news outlets, especially local papers, is robbing our communities of indispensable watch dogs. The disappearance of reporters from city council meetings and public safety hearings is creating oversight vacuums that leave citizens in the dark and enable shady dealings that let the wealthy exercise undue — and undetected — influence. How did a country once chock-full of influential newspapers morph into a land of news deserts?

One major factor, says University of Pennsylvania media studies scholar Victor Pickard, has been the disintegration of the advertising model. In short, search engines and social media sites are eating up revenue that once went to local papers.

Hence the rise of paywalls everywhere as more outlets resort to subscriptions. That works well for some, but subscriptions haven't been enough to replace ad funding in most cases — especially for larger publications or those that serve less wealthy audiences.

Other outlets have counted on the benevolence of billionaire buyers. But that creates real concerns about the influence of exorbitantly wealthy owners — who have been increasingly unwilling to foot the bill for quality journalism.

The *Washington Post* — owned by Jeff Bezos, who recently became the richest man alive again — offered buyouts to 240 employees this past fall. And *Los Angeles Times* owner Patrick Soon-Shiong's net worth of nearly \$6 billion didn't save the jobs of the 115 workers the paper laid off this January.

Is there an alternative to for-profit journalism? To be sure, we've seen some exciting developments in nonprofit and worker-owned journalism. But these proposals remain limited in scope.

Given all this, some experts are calling for a fundamental rethinking of how we value journalism.

“The information produced by journalism should always be — and should have always been — treated as a public good,” Victor Pickard told me. “And that, by its very nature, is not something that's easily monetized.”

Good reporting simply takes more resources to produce than it can easily recoup in digital ad dollars or fundraising. The answer? A real commitment to public media funding.

The United States does, of course, invest some money in public media.

Last year Congress allocated \$535 million to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the private nonprofit corporation tasked with investing in public radio and television. And

some promising experiments are taking place at the state level, with California, New Mexico, and Washington devoting public tax dollars for local news coverage.

But that funding is a drop in the bucket compared to what's needed.

A 2022 study comparing funding globally found the U.S. spends just \$3.16 per capita on public media, compared to \$142.42 per person in Germany and \$110.73 in Norway. Spending as much on journalism as the United Kingdom does on the *BBC* would mean \$35 billion a year going to sustaining coverage.

We need, as *The Nation's* John Nichols recently argued, a “Marshall Plan” for journalism — a robust new era of public funding. Our democracy deserves better than to rely on ad dollars that are rapidly drying up.

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