**What News Is Important Right Now?**

*By David Chavern, President and CEO, News Media Alliance*

Local news has long been a reliable, dependable source of information for communities across the country. But for years now, it has been taken for granted. National stories have too-often been grabbing people’s attention, and often seem exceedingly urgent. This focus on national news has, at times, come at the expense of local news and the valuable reporting being done by local journalists.

But it turns out that when we face a collective crisis and “things get real,” the most important information we all need is local information. How many COVID-19 cases are in my community? Where can I get tested? When will schools reopen? What is considered an “essential” business where I live? In this moment, local news publishers are delivering the news and information that is allowing community members across the country to survive, thrive and stay connected to one another.

Unfortunately, the business of local news publishing was in a fragile state before COVID-19, and the immediate and intense contraction in advertising in response to the pandemic (50-80 percent, depending upon the market) has imposed severe financial stress on local news publishers at exactly the moment when the public needs and wants their reporting more than ever.

As an industry, we take our role as independent watchdogs extremely seriously, and we don’t easily ask for government help, even in the midst of a global pandemic. But local journalism is at a turning point, and if we want it to survive this crisis – and to be available for the next one – we need Congress to step up and offer assistance immediately. The biggest asks for local news right now are:

* Direct current government advertising dollars to local news publishers and broadcasters, and establish a large, new government advertising campaign around health, education and economic development.
* Change the Small Business Administration’s (SBA) rules to allow more small publishers access to the same lending facilities that are available to other small businesses. The original SBA program, while providing welcome relief to some media outlets, restricts newspapers that are part of other newspaper groups or non-news business, unnecessarily penalizing thousands of local newspapers across the country. The SBA needs to treat local publishers that are part of larger groups as independent small businesses, which would grant them access to such aid as the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). On April 19, U.S. Senators Maria Cantwell (D-WA), John Kennedy (R-LA), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and John Boozman (R-AR) sent a bipartisan [letter](https://www.cantwell.senate.gov/news/press-releases/cantwell-kennedy-klobuchar-boozman-send-bipartisan-letter-urging-support-for-local-media-outlets-amidst-covid-19-pandemic-)to their Senate colleagues urging support for expanding SBA loan access to struggling local newspapers, which would correct this harmful exclusion.
* Thirty-three thousand newspaper employees have either been laid off, furloughed or seen their pay reduced. To address the layoffs and furloughs, Congress should consider additional means to support small publishers and maintain newsroom employment just when we need local journalists the most.
* Pass legislation that would support local journalism that is already teed-up in Congress, including small changes to recently enacted retirement security legislation (SECURE Act) that would provide relief to local, independently controlled newspapers that were left out of the previous bill that is now law.

We of course won’t lose sight of our long-term challenges to the industry. The[*Journalism Competition & Preservation Act*](https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hr2054/BILLS-116hr2054ih.pdf) is already teed-up and would allow publishers to band together to negotiate a better business deal from Google and Facebook.

Publishers don’t take these requests lightly, and many may view it as counterintuitive for news media companies to turn to the government for assistance, given the role the media plays in speaking truth to power. But the current situation has proven, unlike anything else, the essential nature of local news.

Local publishers don’t just keep the public informed about the actions of their leaders – they keep leaders informed about the realities their constituents are facing. Local news reporters have ties to their communities that make them experts on their governments, their leaders, their landscapes, and their neighbors. Unlike national journalists, local journalists are reporting on a community they’re living in and experiencing the same things as their audiences every day.

Social media isn’t going to give the public the information they need right now; local publishers and journalists are, and Congress needs to act to ensure that they don’t disappear just when we need them the most.

Politicians have complained about the media since the founding of the Republic. But the Founding Fathers also understood the value of the press for the American people and that it wasn’t the role of journalists to be liked by politicians. They wrote “freedom of the press” into the First Amendment because they knew it was important to have journalists be the eyes, ears and voice for the people. This is never clearer than in times of crisis.

If we want to have a press that’s available to inform and support our communities, now and in the future, we need our leaders to support the press. If we can’t come together now to save local journalism when it’s most essential, we may not get another chance.