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How Philanthropists Can Promote Democracy: Buy a Daily Newspaper



Erin Patrice O'Brien/Getty Images

By Pablo Eisenberg

When the *Times-Picayune* newspaper in New Orleans announced last month that it will publish a print edition just three times a week, the news shocked everyone who cares about strong communities. It sent a signal to nonprofit leaders and others that informing citizens about issues that matter, and holding local leaders accountable, is about to get a lot harder.

As many other newspaper owners follow the lead of the *Times-Picayune*, it's time for the nation's major philanthropists to step in and recognize that they must rescue a critical engine of democracy.

The Ford Foundation showed signs that it understands the urgency a few weeks ago by announcing a \$1-million grant to the *Los Angeles Times*. The newspaper plans to use the money to expand coverage of vital issues like the prison system and devote more attention to reporting on the city's immigrants.

Another of the nation's major philanthropists, Warren Buffett, also recognizes the importance of newspaper. He recently bought 63 daily newspapers, including *The Buffalo News*.

Herbert Sandler, who made his fortune in the banking business, deserves praise for giving big dollars to help the news business. He established Pro Publica, an independent journalism center that conducts investigative reporting, often in coordination with local newspapers.

However successful Pro Publica has been—it has now won two Pulitzer Prizes for its reporting—it is also clear such investigative centers are too limited to replace the news gathering and investigative work performed by the nation’s dailies.

Other alternative news organizations have also attracted modest support from wealthy donors and foundations, including California Watch, MinnPost, Pittsburgh’s Public Source, and the Texas Tribune. And a number of public radio stations are becoming involved in local journalism accountability projects. Working with newspapers and other partners, they have been successful in widening the [scope of newsgathering](#) in their areas.

However, because the IRS has thus far been reluctant to grant [charity status](#) to such centers, it is unlikely that local organizations like these can multiply sufficiently to make a real difference. So that makes it more important than ever that wealthy people step in and invest in struggling daily newspapers.

Why, for example, hasn’t George Soros, fervent champion of an open society, donated some of his vast fortune to preserve a free press on which an open society so depends? And how about all the other wealthy philanthropists—especially prominent community leaders like Eli Broad and Peter Lewis—who manage to make gifts to colleges, art museums, and hospitals? Philanthropy has many strong options to solve the problems confronting newspapers. Like the Ford Foundation, grant makers and donors could give newspapers money to cover their essential needs.

Rich donors could individually or collectively buy ailing newspapers to make certain that they continue their service as publicly minded information providers and watchdogs. Perhaps the most effective strategy might be for wealthy philanthropists to purchase the papers and convert them to nonprofit institutions supported by endowments that could ensure their sustainability, assuming that the IRS is likely to change its current position.

It’s not too late to turn back the tide of trouble that is sweeping away the nation’s daily newspapers. Of course, newspapers must adapt to the digital age and new technology, but that doesn’t mean they must jettison their print editions, many of which are still making profit.

A century ago, philanthropists like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, as well as some of the nation’s greatest publishers, like Adolph Ochs and Joseph Pulitzer, offered a vision about what was good and necessary for society and its citizens. They gave their money and energy to important priorities, to issues that affected urgent public needs. What could be more urgent today than

protecting the free flow of information in a country increasingly dominated by unaccountable institutions and corrupt politics?

Let's all urge today's billionaires to put their money on matters of the utmost national importance. Grants to arts institutions, to universities flush with endowments that are barely spent on their operations and to nonprofit hospitals and large health institutions that provide little charity care are legitimate and significant recipients of philanthropy. But they are not urgent needs. Saving daily newspapers is vital, and that's where millionaires and billionaires need to put their money.

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