**Op-Ed: Helping Newspapers Isn’t Expensive**

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*Date: March 19, 2016*

In the current hand wringing over the future of newspapers, a lot of commentators are simply throwing up their hands.

They acknowledge the crucial role of local journalism in keeping communities healthy, and then come to no real useful conclusions about how to preserve what newspapers do in the hundreds of communities they serve across Canada.

A recent paper released by the Public Policy Forum on how to preserve serious journalism in Canada suggested, among other bizarre conclusions, that part of the solution could lie in educating Canadians better on matters such as digital literacy and privacy protection. Don’t ask me to explain these ideas. I can’t.

What I can do is set out some very simple changes that could help out newspapers – not handouts, not public subsidies, but public policy changes that would support journalism in Canada.

They are:

**Put rules in place around the purchase of foreign media** Local journalism – in newspapers, TV and other outlets – used to be supported by local companies that wanted to advertise to local audiences. Those companies now increasingly use other media, such as Facebook and Google. Millions and millions are pouring out of communities across Canada and into the coffers of these American firms. Google and Facebook alone get two-thirds of digital ad dollars spent in Canada. They spend next to nothing here to support the communities that they take the money from. There are rules and measures in place to support all sorts of Canadian enterprises doing business in Canada, from dairy farmers to the aerospace industry. Why not news media?

**Return a share of existing government advertising to newspapers.** Federal government spending on newspapers has fallen to almost nothing – $357,000 in 2014-15 – from 50 per cent of the ad budget a decade ago, or about $20 million. The reach of Canadian newspapers – four out of five Canadians read them at least once a week – hasn’t changed, but they’re not the fashion of the day any more at ad agencies. If Ottawa spent 50 per cent of its current annual ad budget on papers, it would be more than $40 million.

**Change tax laws to encourage newspaper ownership.** At many small and large newspapers, the company pays no dividends to owners or shareholders; no one is taking any profit. As long as newspaper revenues are more than expenses, publications are forced to pay income tax. That’s money we can’t use to pay off our debt or reinvest in the business. How about a law that only taxes newspaper earnings when they are actually paid out to shareholders?

**Strengthen copyrights laws so that original work is protected for longer**. Newspapers spend a lot on original journalism, and then watch helplessly as the information is shared, reused and rewritten by others for their own purposes. If we got compensated for this, it would be a significant boost to our revenues.

So that’s it. Nothing expensive. No special funds. Newspapers operating in print and on digital platforms can be effective, efficient purveyors of great local journalism for a long time to come – but we could use a little help.