# OP-ED: It’s time to save news

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It’s time to save news.

You may well ask: What on earth is he talking about? Isn’t there an endless supply of information flooding us daily, hitting us every time we look at a phone, turn on a computer, get lost in the 1,000-channel TV universe or, as many still do, pick up a newspaper?

This is true, but increasingly, it is like being in a lifeboat on an ocean – water, water, everywhere, but not a drop to drink.

You can read Donald Trump’s latest Tweet, or see what one of your Facebook friends did at the gym.

But there is less and less information about the things that matter most to the lives of people in communities across Canada – coverage of what local governments are doing, what crimes have occurred in our midst, or what subjects are being taught in our schools.

Newspapers have provided this news coverage throughout the 150-year history of Canada, fueling our great and stable democracy with real facts, carefully gathered and responsibly presented.

We have told the story of Canada faithfully, and want to continue doing so. But it is not easy.

Canadians still depend on newspapers on the many platforms where we publish. Nine out of 10 adults read our content weekly, according to the most recent survey by Vividata, which collects information on the media use of Canadians.

But the digital age has decimated the business models that supported newspapers – and the journalism we do. We are adapting. We are developing new ways to deliver news, using many different digital channels. But that is not paying the bills to support our newsrooms. Most of the billions of dollars pouring into digital ads are going to Google and Facebook, which are not creating local news content.

We have cut costs. There have been layoffs and closures. Newsrooms have shrunk, been combined and, in some cases, disappeared.

This situation was highlighted this week by the federal Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, which recommends that the federal government implement measures to support the existence of free and independent media and local news reporting.

This mirrors a proposal by newspaper operators. This traditionally stubbornly independent bunch who rarely agree on anything has come together to ask the federal government for a support program for news organizations. We represent virtually every general interest, mass circulation newspaper in Canada – big and small, French and English, dailies and weeklies, from Victoria to St. John’s.

The Heritage Committee recommends that an existing fund, which currently helps mostly magazines and some paid-subscription community newspapers, be expanded to support all general interest newspapers – dailies and free papers, in print and digital form.

Newspaper operators are proposing that this fund could pay some editorial costs for non-regulated news organizations in print and/or digital that regularly and significantly provide original Canadian civic reporting on a range of topics. Civic reporting is defined as reporting on elected officials and public institutions, courts, city halls, school boards, and current events that help communities know about themselves.

This is not a public bailout of poorly run, big newspaper companies. Money would not go to pay executive bonuses or dividends to owners and shareholders.

Help would be tied to the number of journalists employed – keeping feet on the street to tell Canadians about themselves. We have recommended a subsidy of 35% of the total of all journalists’ salaries, with a cap on the maximum subsidy per journalist of about $30,000. Money would go to support reporting on digital platforms as well, so a wide variety of news organizations would qualify.

The fund would also increase the amount the federal government makes available to fund innovation in the rapidly changing news media world.

Overall, the program would not be cheap. Its cost would go to about $350 million a year from $75 million today.

But a bit of perspective is needed on this. Newspapers are not the first news media to seek help. In fact, we may well be the last.

Much of the non-newspaper Canadian news business is propped up by subsidies and direct and indirect taxes on consumers.

It is a little known fact that there would be virtually no Canadian magazines without federal subsidies. TV stations lose money on local news every year – so much so that the CRTC will introduce a $90-million fund to support local news programming as of September 1st. The money comes from cable subscribers.

The federal government pays $1.2 billion to underwrite the CBC each year, and the public broadcaster gets an additional $135 million in cable subscriber fees. The Canada Media Fund, funded in part by $134 million from Ottawa, doles out $317 million to Canadian television and digital projects. Much of the Canadian film and video industry is supported by tax credits and other breaks, to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

It has long been recognized that news media in Canada need help to continue being, as the Heritage Committee put it, “a pillar of our democracy.”

We have a proven ability to inform Canada and Canadians about themselves and keep them connected and engaged. That is something worth saving.