

Not Just Another Post

*Brief on the Future of Community Newspapers, Journalism,
Canada Post, and Communications in Canada*

To:

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&

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Government of Canada

From:

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At issue

- The cost of government services in communicating with the public
- The viability of Canada Post
- Trust and security in a Canadian communications network
- Professional journalism in Canada
- The survival of community newspapers

The focus

- The Government of Canada's relationship with community newspapers
- Government advertising in local news media
- Canada Post's relationship with community newspapers
- The delivery of news and mail to Canadians, especially in rural regions

Executive summary

The Government of Canada can secure and strengthen a national communications network by communicating more often and more cost effectively with Canadians through their community newspapers and through a more collaborative relationship between Canada Post and its newspaper customers. Community newspapers across Canada are struggling for their lives, with many failing, and yet are an essential and effective way to communicate with and among Canadians. Their current economic prospects could be improved significantly with a Buy Canadian approach by the Government of Canada and preferential treatment by Canada Post.

Key recommendations

- Favour government advertising in newspapers to complement or replace subsidy programs.
- Choose Canadian media, including print newspapers, before foreign owned and controlled platforms.
- Consider a more direct, and cost-effective, purchasing relationship between the Government of Canada and newspapers.
- Establish a privileged category of Canada Post customer for newspapers, with preferential rates and treatment.
- Consider community newspapers and rural post offices as essential communication channels for a secure Canadian network.

Government communications with Canadians

The Government of Canada currently invests in the protection of Canadian journalism through multiple subsidy programs, such as the Department of Canadian Heritage's Aid to Publishers and the Local Journalism Initiative. These are much needed but costly for community newspapers to qualify, apply, and manage such funding, and undoubtedly costly to administer by the Government. While the public support is appreciated in the current context of survival for newspapers and journalism in Canada, the funding programs in part distract publishers and editors from their core mission of producing professional news content for Canadians.

That core mission includes publishing paid content for advertisers and organizations such as the Government of Canada. Community newspaper publishers offer governments the opportunity to communicate directly with Canadians in news media that belongs to Canadians and is a fundamental part of Canada's core network of public communications. Locally owned newspapers are part of what makes our communities and societies thrive.

Paid advertising is the main source of income for newspapers—the revenue that enables us to hire journalists and publish professionally produced and edited news. By purchasing more space in newspapers, the Government of Canada can communicate its messages more directly to Canadians, promote a better informed citizenry, and support Canadian journalism—with fewer costly funding programs.

How?

The federal and provincial governments currently hire expensive advertising agencies to manage their purchase of space in community newspapers, across Quebec at least. Much of those investments therefore go to companies that are not actually producing and publishing the precious news content now in jeopardy in Canada. The agencies are hired for their expertise in developing and placing the content, and yet this is very much the expertise of newspaper publishers, who are organized in associations such as *Hebdos Québec*, the Quebec Community Newspapers Association, and the Association des médias écrits communautaires du Québec, one or several of which may be interested in handling the development and placement of government advertising for the benefit of its newspaper members and government clients.

The new system of eligibility as Qualified Journalism Organizations is a positive step in this direction of improving the Government of Canada's relationship with community newspapers. It should continue to be refined to ensure even small organizations like *Le Haut-Saint-François* are recognized as effective communicators for the Government of Canada to reach Canadians even in more isolated regions.

The alternatives

For some years now, Canadians and their governments have herded onto the information highway, Destination Social Media, like Friday traffic rushing to the country to get away from it all for the weekend. Joining in the parade may have seemed like a good idea for governments. In fact, advertising and communicating in that traffic rush is undermining Canada's own network of communications, journalism, communities, and governments.

First, it draws people away from trusted, reliable, and locally owned news media in favour of foreign owned and controlled platforms. Canadians are now encouraged by their own governments to receive government information through sources that are less trustworthy and that often undermine our

democratic sovereignty. Revenues that once supported professional Canadian journalism now take away from and threaten it.

Relying too heavily on one channel of communications with the public—the Internet—also becomes a security problem on several levels for Canadians and their governments. Who controls the flow of information on the Internet? Who influences the content and type of information there? What if the Internet infrastructure fails? Will we have gutted Canadian channels of communication, such as community newspapers and Canada Post, so much that we lose control of our own public communications network?

Effective advertising and communications

Newspaper publishers encourage their advertising clients to promote their messages on at least three different platforms, to be effective, such as the local paper, radio, and television. The Internet is inevitably one of those choices, but it is not effective as the one, main choice. The Government of Canada should instead be giving priority to Canadian-owned channels of communication that are not entirely Internet-based.

Many Canadians are in fact quite uncomfortable with new technologies, be they smartphones, social media, or online banking. New technologies are expensive to purchase and maintain, and some Canadians do not have the means to access them. During the pandemic, residents in our region had to ask neighbours to make vaccine appointments for them through the computers, technology, and know-how they lacked. Perhaps rural post offices can help serve this role in the future.

Forcing citizens to communicate with technologies and platforms they don't have or are uncomfortable with is like forcing French-speaking Quebecers to communicate with their federal government in English only. Using foreign-owned media to communicate with Canadians encourages our citizens to turn away from Canadian local media, leading to the threats and survival issues we face today.

On the other hand, when the Government of Canada chooses Canadian media to communicate with the public, it strengthens Canada's own channels of communication, encourages professional journalism, improves the Government's relationship with citizens, ensures the reliable and effective communication of its messages, and secures our system of government and democracy.

Canada Post's role

A reliable system of paper and electronic communications among Canadians and between citizens and their governments is an essential part of that secure Canadian network of sharing information.

Canada is made possible as a nation by its system of government, its transportation network, and its communications network, including our postal service and news media, from local papers to the CBC.

The relationship between Canada Post and community newspapers should be one of close, mutually beneficial partnership. It is unfortunately now one of competition and tension.

A major opportunity to build that healthy partnership was missed when the Publisac distribution system closed last year. Canada Post responded by taking the business of delivering community newspapers at more than twice the price—in some cases multiple times the price—and by taking the flyer business away from its newspaper customers. Its labour troubles are now bringing many of those newspapers to

the brink of failure, and the classification of its unaddressed newspaper clients as flyers is further threatening both our viability and Canada Post's.

About one-third of Hebdo Québec's 137 member newspapers use Canada Post for their distribution. This represents an estimated \$5 million of business for Canada Post annually. With the closure of the Publisac network last year, two-thirds of those members chose not to use Canada Post, representing a loss of revenue of an estimated \$10 million annually. Now, with the strike action, many of us are considering building an alternative distribution system, which means Canada Post may lose another \$5 million of business, for a total potential loss of \$15 million annually, and turn its community newspaper customers into true competitors.

Building a healthy partnership between Canada Post and community newspapers

Newspapers are not flyers. They publish professional journalism, which is now threatened in Canada and yet is so crucial to our lives as Canadians and to our governments. Those of us paying for blanket deliveries in given geographic markets may be classified as unaddressed mail, but a separate category for newspapers, both unaddressed and addressed, would serve all Canadians' interests.

Le Haut-Saint-François was paying Publisac \$17,000 a year for our distribution. We are now paying Canada Post about \$40,000, at a rate of about \$0.14 per copy. In Gatineau, in Greg Fergus's riding, the *Aylmer Bulletin* was paying \$0.04 per copy to Publisac. It is not using Canada Post now, but is anxiously hoping to do so for its advertising to compete effectively with foreign-owned social media.

Community newspapers are therefore a major customer for Canada Post, but they require a special category and special rates to be able to remain customers. With those changes, a strong partnership can be built between community newspapers and Canada Post, securing an essential communications network among Canadians and their governments.

Rural service

Rural post offices and meaningful rural delivery are a major part of that network, in communities where economic activities are fundamental to the Canadian economy, including agriculture, forestry, and mining. In communities like Chartierville, La Patrie, and Scotstown, rural post offices are akin to local newspapers: they are central institutions where people meet, share information, get their mail and messages from other Canadians and their governments, and chat with neighbours.

In many communities, the post office is the only obvious presence of the Government of Canada.

Community mailboxes may be a necessary alternative to door-to-door delivery, but they should be as close to citizens as possible and, if they are necessary, implemented slowly. Anti-government sentiment fuelled by social media is widespread in regions like ours, and community mailboxes could be easy targets. They are quite different from a neighbour's own mailbox at the end of their driveway.

Those community mailboxes also limit Canadians' ability to communicate by paper with one another separately, since private individual mailboxes would be abandoned. The community mailboxes must therefore include ways for individuals—and community newspapers—to deliver messages to one another without having to rely on a Crown corporation subject to labour action or other problems. For example, this would have helped local and regional municipalities communicate essential election information to citizens in Quebec last month when door-to-door delivery was unavailable due to the strike.

Communications are as fundamental to our lives as our food, financial, and transportation systems. In this new era of rapid technological change and control by large foreign interests, we hope that by working together on these structural issues, community newspapers, Canada Post, and the Government of Canada can strengthen the service we all provide to Canadians.