

Life-saving news needs a stimulus

NewsGuild-CWA Executive Council

News-gathering operations are essential for a well-functioning society, especially in times of crisis.

However, many newsrooms have been reduced to skeletal staffs and some have disappeared altogether.

Declining advertising revenue, leveraged corporate consolidations, and asset stripping by vulture capitalists have put this industry under financial duress. Now the physical distancing designed to slow the spread of COVID-19 is triggering business slowdowns and further eroding advertising revenues.

The NewsGuild Executive Council unanimously passed a resolution calling for federal, state, provincial, and local governments to provide public funds to sustain news operations.

Public stimulus funds are quite possibly the only way to ensure long-term viability for these vital news-gathering operations.

Any plan must include:

1. Acknowledgement that accurate, reliable local, regional and national journalism is an essential service that provides life-saving information in this crisis.

2. Any employer taking public funds must:

- Remain independent from partisan influence
- Demonstrate financial need and report on how they used the funding later on.
- Be prohibited from using public money for executive bonuses, dividends or stock buybacks for five years. Any company taking public funds may not allow executive bonuses, stock options, or golden parachutes for five years. Executive compensation should be capped at twice that of the editor in chief.
- Be prohibited for five years from engaging in mergers and acquisition activity or leveraged buyouts that result in job losses or pay reductions.
- Adhere to the terms of public financing or be subject to a claw back of any public funds, including interest and penalties.

3. No layoffs, no furloughs, no buyouts or pay cuts

In this crisis it's essential that we invest in and retain journalists and other media workers, especially in local communities where Americans need to know when schools and businesses are open, where testing centers are and what the current case and death totals are. The financialization of the industry has reduced the number of journalists available to share life-saving information during this crisis. This cannot be allowed to continue.

4. Workers' rights must be recognized and supported

Any employer taking public funds must not interfere with union organizing campaigns and should be prohibited from hiring anti-union consultants for the purposes of quashing worker

organizing drives. These employers should be barred from forcing employees to attend mandatory anti-union meetings on work time. Employers should be required to accept third-party voluntary recognition if a majority of the bargaining unit signs authorization cards.

Any employer taking public funds should be required to agree to interest arbitration for first contracts for newly organized units.

Further, any employer taking public funds (and any successors) will not abrogate existing collective bargaining agreements, as well as tentative agreements and expired CBAs, in whole or in part, for at least five years after receiving public funding, or two years after completing repayment of any loan. Any employer negotiating a first or successor collective bargaining agreement shall remain committed to bargaining in good faith to quickly reach an agreement.

5. Promote diversity and equity

In the interest of supporting and advancing diversity, any employer taking public funds should be required to implement plans intended to advance diversity across their staff and report their annual diversity statistics.

6. Board seats for employees

Any employer owned by public corporations or private equity firms taking public funds should be required to designate one quarter of Board seats to be held by non-management employees, who will be selected by mutual agreement between labor and management.

7. Public financing for journalism

The federal government should establish a publicly financed fund to support newsrooms and media workers to prevent layoffs.

Such a fund would also serve to promote journalism in news deserts in all 50 states and territories to supplement or fund additional positions in private-sector news organizations, but not be used to replace existing employees. This fund would also support independent reporting in partnership with other news organizations.

The fund should be regulated to ensure news organizations remain independent and workers should be involved in any such public funding mechanism.

8. Loans for non-profit startups

The Small Business Administration should make available an indefinite program of no-interest loans for the creation of news start-ups, including nonprofits and employee-owned co-ops.

9. Any plan must further assist the news industry by:

- Making tax-deductible the cost of subscriptions for any news product.
- Providing incentives for local ownership to encourage chains to sell to local owners and community interests.
- Establishing a nationwide advertising purchasing program to promote public health, participation in the federal census and other topics of national interest.