

OTHER VIEWS

Newspapers should be included in stimulus efforts

As the world has been divided into essential and nonessential businesses, local newspapers providing credible information in this public health crisis fall firmly into the essential camp.

The industry is facing an unusual paradox, however. Some essential businesses, such as grocery stores, telecommuting software companies and manufacturers of medical masks have seen



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increased revenues as demand for their products spikes. But while the appetite for local news is at a high, newspapers across the country have been forced to lay off a significant percentage of their staff and cut salaries, or in some cases close altogether.

From a revenue standpoint, it doesn't matter how many thousands more people are viewing a story on a newspaper's website if the newspaper is removing the paywall from stories with important public health information about COVID-19, and no one is willing to buy advertising to go with it. In a time of canceled events, closed businesses and economic uncertainty, advertising is one of the first line items organizations cut from their budget.

This confluence of the need for credible local news and plunging revenues for the companies reporting that news means Congress must make sure newspapers are included in stimulus efforts. The Paycheck Protection Program, which has gotten a refill, allows chain restaurants to count each individual restaurant as its own "small businesses" for the purpose of qualifying for a forgivable loan to cover payroll, rent and utilities. With the fund replenished, Congress should provide affiliation waivers for newspapers, allowing local newspapers owned by larger parent companies such as Gannett/Gatehouse to qualify as a "small business" too. Those newspapers may have a larger parent company, but they are still expected to support themselves through local advertising and subscription revenue.

Community members are getting information about COVID-19 testing, local cases, closures, cancellations, resources for the newly unemployed, grants available for businesses, opportunities for free internet access for students, food giveaways and other crucial updates from news outlets, which often have a far greater reach into peoples' homes than a government agency's website. That's a vital public service that needs to continue.

In addition to affiliation waivers, Congress should look at other grant options that will help newspapers weather this storm. Federal, state and local governments also need to set aside advertising dollars to put out public service announcements through newspapers and other local outlets. If the State of Oregon can pay Facebook and Twitter to put sponsored "Stay Home, Save Lives" posts into your newsfeed, they can pay Oregon businesses that are helping give Oregonians the specific local and state-wide information they need to stay safe.

News outlets were already doing "more with less," and now they're being forced to do with even less. That hurts everyone. Call or email your federal and state elected officials and ask them to provide the rule change, grants and advertising dollars necessary to protect a vital public service.

About the Author: Dean Ridings is CEO of America's Newspapers, an alliance of newspaper establishments and advocate for First Amendment rights and the protection of the free press.



OUR VIEW

Criminal Justice Commission should follow law

Oregon's Criminal Justice Commission does important work to analyze and try to improve the state's criminal justice system. And it's actually not been following the state law for two years.

Too many Democrats are on the commission's board, according to *Willamette Week*. Gov. Kate Brown and the commission need to ensure that gets fixed. But that's not the only problem the commission's board has, either. What happens at its meeting needs to be readily available to the public. It is not.

The commission's website is a great source of statistics about Oregon's criminal justice system. Want to know about recidivism rates? Want to know if there are disparities by demographics or race in police stops? Those are the types of issues the commission analyzes.

It's important information for the public and policymakers.

The commission's board was established by law to help insulate the commission's work from partisan influence. For instance, of the governor's appointments to the board "not more than four members may belong to the same political party." Five of Brown's seven appointments since 2018 have been Democrats, as *Willamette Week* reported. The governor's office said it was a mistake and is working to correct it.

The commission has backed



AP Photo/Andrew Selsky, File

Gov. Kate Brown of Oregon denounces a walkout by Republicans in the state Senate that prevented a quorum Feb. 24, in Salem. A panel responsible for formulating Oregon's criminal justice policy has been operating in violation of state law for the past two years.

reforms of the justice system designed to reduce the number of prisoners in Oregon. Does the composition of the board undermine the reforms?

Not necessarily. But it does call into question the decisions the commission's board has made to direct the work of the commission, what the commission studies can direct, and influence changes in the criminal justice system.

Another issue for the commission's board is openness. Many state and local government boards in Oregon make a real commitment to disclose to the public what they are doing. They put online complete agendas with staff reports and minutes of

previous meetings.

Nothing like that is available online for the commission's board that we could locate on its website.

There is just a cursory agenda with a list of items that may be discussed. No minutes are posted of previous meetings. If there are more complete background staff reports sent to commissioners before meetings, they are not available.

We have no evidence the commission's board is intentionally hiding anything. But while Oregon law states that governments actions — the public's business — is supposed to be open and available to the public, far too often it is not.

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THE OBSERVER

An independent newspaper founded in 1896

(USPS 299-260)

Periodicals postage paid at Pendleton, Oregon 97801. Published Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays (except Dec. 25) by EO Media Group, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande, OR 97850 (USPS 299-260)

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POSTMASTER
Send address changes to:
The Observer,
911 Jefferson Ave.,
La Grande, OR 97850

Periodicals postage paid at:
Pendleton, Oregon 97801

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