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Unlock regional publishers funds now to keep newspapers alive

The Federal Government must immediately unlock \$40 million in funding to keep regional and rural newspapers alive during the coronavirus crisis, says the union for Australia's media workers.

The money has already been allocated to a Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package, but must be repurposed into a survival fund to prevent local publishers from closing their doors, says the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance.

MEAA has today written to Communications Minister Paul Fletcher urging him to release the money to regional publishers.

The Federal Government should also provide additional funds as needed to support this essential service, which has suffered a devastating advertising downturn since the introduction of public health restrictions on activities such as eating out and entertainment.

Federal and state governments can also help to make up for some of the lost revenue by placing public health advertising with regional and small publishers.

"This is a time when the public needs accurate and factual information about what is happening, and people naturally turn to local, national and international media expecting this," said MEAA Media Federal President Marcus Strom.

"Local publications in particular are lifelines for their communities; they know them intimately. We are concerned about what will fill the void left by their closure. In such a vacuum, misinformation and 'fake news' can flourish.

"While most of the rest of us are locked in our homes, many journalists will still be out risking their health to inform the community.

"This is an essential service, and governments should be doing all they can to ensure that it can continue.

"But newspaper proprietors must also do their part. They must explore alternative avenues to keep their communities informed rather than take the drastic and unacceptable step of shutting down publications, as has begun happening in regional Victoria.

"We understand the financial pressures publishers are experiencing and offer our help to negotiate ways of easing this burden, but closing the doors at this time would be a betrayal of their workforce and a betrayal of their communities."

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