



## Governments have fallen madly in love with digital

JORDAN TWISS / SHELLBROOK CHRONICLE  
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In recent years, the federal government has often been criticized for what's seen by the opposition and the general public as a brazen and shameless use of public money to promote its own policies.

Given the price tag associated with the omnipresent "Economic Action Plan" campaign — \$21 million in 2011-12, and a further \$14.9 million in 2013-14, according to annual reports from the department of Public Works and Government Services — it's easy to see where these critics are coming from.

"The government is moving away from advertising what they do and offer, to this kind of broad brush branding that 'Canada is great,'" said John Hinds, president and CEO of Newspapers Canada. "An example of this is the Canada's Economic Action Plan [campaign]. It was this idea that government is good and government is there."

In 2013-14 alone, the same government ad spend report shows the Government of Canada spent more than \$56.8 million on advertising (excluding production and commissions, which bring the total up to \$75.2 million).

Meanwhile, the total ad spend figure over the past five years (thanks in part to a massive post-recession \$114 million ad blitz in 2009-10) is closer to the \$500 million mark.

Apart from funding the federal government's "Economic Action Plan" campaign, Canadian taxpayers foot the bill for an \$8.2 million "Responsible Resource Development" campaign, in which the government promoted its improvements to environmental regulations. The feds also spent about \$7 million touting their own tax cuts, and urging Canadians to take advantage of them.

Perhaps this is why Canadians and the media were incredulous when Prime Minister Stephen Harper used taxpayer savings as a justification for launching the 2015 federal election in August, making it one of the longest election campaigns in Canadian history.

Whether or not they were aware Canadians pay for the majority of campaign advertising, or that a longer campaign meant increased spending limits for the parties, Canadians remained skeptical of a prime minister who has been so liberal with taxpayer dollars when it comes to self-congratulation and attack ads.

But aside from questioning what the federal government has been advertising, the latest federal government ad spend report from Newspapers Canada calls into question its means of advertising — in particular, the lack of advertising dollars being directed towards community newspapers.

Questions about media use, like those about the Conservatives' "excessive" spending on advertising, are nothing new for a prime minister who is also often accused of attempting to "control the message."

According to the government's breakdown of its federal ad spending, only \$4.3 million of the \$56.8 million spent on advertising in 2013-2014 was directed towards newspapers. This represents 7.6 per cent of all media spending.

Breaking this down further, daily newspaper advertising totaled \$2.2 million, while \$1.2 million was spent on weekly official language publications, ethnic publications and aboriginal publications.

Lastly, a paltry \$867,153 went to community newspapers. With about 850 community newspapers being published across Canada, this means the federal government spent, on average, only \$1,021 in each of Canada's local community newspapers in 2013-14.

"At a time when newspapers are facing big challenges, [the federal] government has gone and spent a bunch of money in places like California ... with limited results," said Hinds. "We talk about disengaged citizenry and voters. But it's really easy to further disengagement when citizens don't know what [government is] doing on a day-to-day level."

Though the government's overall TV spend was down in the 2013-14 fiscal year, advertising on TV still totalled \$26.7 million, accounting for 46 per cent of all media spending. Elsewhere, radio and Internet saw significant increases in spending, with the former receiving an 82 per cent increase to total \$6.8 million and the latter seeing a 30 per cent jump in spending to total \$15.5 million.

According to Newspapers Canada's report, Internet spending has gone from less than one per cent in the 2002-03 fiscal year to 27 per cent in 2013-2014, and these increases have been primarily at the expense of advertising in newspapers.

Hinds says that this growing trend is indicative of a government that has "fallen madly in love with digital." He adds that, on the surface, digital makes sense because, unlike automobile companies, the government can't quantify returns on its investments in advertising.

### The Shifting Winds

But it's not just that the federal government's preferred media has changed. There has also been a dramatic shift in its strategy for disseminating important information through paid public notices and this change is being imitated by some provincial governments.

Rather than paying for ad space in newspapers, governments have sharply increased the number of press releases they issue. This is reflected in a two per cent decrease in federal spending on public notices in newspapers, as total spending for 2013-14 fell to \$3.4 million.

According to Newspapers Canada, many of these press releases, like those that followed the launch of the federal government's income splitting and enhanced childcare benefit policies, are public notices masquerading as news items. Furthermore, many of these releases remain paid public notices on other media, leaving community newspapers to bear the brunt of the federal government's attempts to reduce their ad spend.

In its report, Newspapers Canada also notes a growing push from some levels of government to reduce advertising costs by eliminating the legal requirement that public notices be published in printed newspapers. Instead, these notices would be published only online.

While this might translate to a financial savings, Hinds argues it comes at the cost of having the public notice serve its purpose, which is to inform citizens of the local issues that matter to them.

"In many cases, they are the most vulnerable populations, or the populations that the government is trying to reach," he said. "In terms of reaching citizens in a local community, the newspaper is by far the best bet. In many communities, it's the only bet."

### The Case For Print

Those who follow the media industry with any interest would perhaps see justification for the government's growing investment in digital advertising. After all, the rise of the Internet has had media gurus sounding the death knell for the print industry for years.

Despite some declines in ad revenue and circulation, research done by Totum Research on behalf of Newspapers Canada, and by Newspaper Audience Databank Inc. (NADBank), suggest newspapers remain strong when it comes to readership.

Using data collected in 2014, both firms found that more than 70 per cent of Canadian adults, and more than 75 per cent of women, continue to read community newspapers. In rural communities with limited access to other media, this number is likely even higher.

Additionally, NADbank found that, through print and digital, newspapers are reaching about 70 per cent of Canadians aged 18 to 34, dispelling the common belief newspapers are only of interest to older Canadians.

But it's not just a matter of readership levels and demographic reach. The effectiveness of newspapers is reflected in the attitudes of their readers.

For instance, Totum's online survey data shows nearly 60 per cent of Canadians feel community newspapers are the most appropriate advertising medium for information about federal government programs and service, while more than 50 per cent said they rely on community newspapers for this information.

Moreover, in the 2013 Connecting to Canadians with Community Newspapers survey, advertisements, flyers and inserts were the second most common respondents gave for reading their community newspapers.

"There's really linkage to show that a strong community newspaper is indicative of strong trading communities," said Hinds. "Newspapers are the real catalyst for that. If you lose a newspaper, you really lose an economic community."

Hinds adds there are also reasons to question the notion that media like television and the Internet automatically generate the most reach.

"It's great to talk about online, but 20 to 30 per cent of Canadians aren't online. There's whole groups of people that don't watch TV, listen to radio, or go online," he said.

Totum's research supports this argument. In a fall 2014 survey, Totum found more than 25 per cent of Canadians don't use social media, a tool that has become increasingly popular for governments. Additionally, those who do use it are far more interested in communicating with others and sharing pictures or videos, than they are in looking at ads.

"The newspaper is not just a fleeting glimpse. You can clip it, you can phone or you can go online," said Hinds. "Nobody's saying that government shouldn't be carrying out its business online. But newspapers are the most effective vehicle to drive people online."

Looking forward, Hinds says that Newspapers Canada isn't looking for special treatment for the print industry, or a handout from the federal government. Rather, he's more interested in seeing the federal government reverse its trend of focusing on brand building and return to advertising its products and services.

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