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May 13, 2020

Marla Kaplowitz
President and Chief Executive Officer
American Association of Advertising Agencies
1065 Avenue of the Americas, 16th Floor
New York, NY 10018

Dear Ms. Kaplowitz:

I hope this letter finds you and your family well. As Americans confront the coronavirus pandemic and the enormous economic disruption it has caused, I write to bring to your attention my concern about reports that online advertisers are taking actions that are exacerbating the impact of the virus on struggling news outlets.

Specifically, multiple reports have indicated that many online advertisers, including many of your members, have adopted policies preventing their online ads from being displayed next to coronavirus-related content. In combination with the drastic reduction in online advertising budgets as a result of the economic slowdown, these policies are reducing revenues for newspapers and online media outlets at a time of immense vulnerability.

At this moment in our nation's history, access to timely information has perhaps never been more critical and millions of Americans are turning to both local and national news outlets in record numbers for information about health, the economy, and much more. However, despite record traffic to news websites, ad revenue to these sites has fallen precipitously, reportedly by 50 percent or more in some instances. As a result, at least 36,000 news media staff have been furloughed, laid off, or received pay cuts.

If online advertisers block terms like "coronavirus" and "pandemic" across advertising channels, publishers are unable to turn increased clicks and reporting into dollars, thus hampering their ability to provide vital health-related reporting to the American public when they need it most.

The devastating impact of this crisis on journalism is deeply concerning. A thriving free press is a critical ingredient to democracy, and the current interest in high-quality reporting makes it clear that Americans are seeking high-quality information. With many local news outlets already hanging by a thread, we risk losing many of the journalistic outlets that Americans look to for truthful information about their communities and the world at large.

Ultimately, advertisers will make their own decisions regarding whether advertising next to coronavirus-related content represents a reputational risk or otherwise, but I urge all advertisers to take a longer view. If the combination of restrictions on advertising placement and reduced online spending leads to a massive loss in high-quality online news outlets, it will ultimately be to the detriment of the entire online ecosystem, as well as our nation.

I understand that some advertisers and others in the ecosystem, including this association, have begun to take action on this issue and work with online platforms to develop best practices. By encouraging advertisers to advertise in stories focusing on the coronavirus and the pandemic, rather than blocking them, you can help ensure that news media companies stay in business to keep the population informed and safe. Doing so could mean the difference between extending a life-line and closing shop for some media. Thank you for your consideration and your support for our struggling media outlets.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Adam B. Schiff". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Adam" and last name "Schiff" clearly legible.

Adam B. Schiff
MEMBER OF CONGRESS