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The hearing on "Fanning the Flames: Disinformation and Extremism in The Media"

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Chairman Doyle, Ranking Member Latta, and distinguished members of the subcommittee,

thank you for inviting me here today to speak about disinformation and extremism in the media.

In 2020 and 2021 the United States of America experienced two grave threats to its people and

its democratic institutions. One, the global Covid-19 pandemic, and the other, the refusal by a

sitting President to recognize the results of a free and fair election. Both events, though

markedly different, share a common thread in that widespread misinformation caused serious

real-world consequences, including the loss of lives.

One of the challenges for reporters, researchers and policy experts tackling the subject of public

trust and information, is that effective action requires a detailed understanding of the

interdependencies of a complex media system often without adequate access to data. That I am

able to draw on so much of the work of colleagues in the field today is a testament to their

ingenuity and application.

This Committee hearing is focusing on the role partisan media played in creating and

propagating misinformation, and "Fanning the Flames of Extremism" during 2020. Whilst I will

use examples in my evidence that focus more on some outlets than others, it is important to note that the root issues here should not be seen as partisan. The formula for the creation, circulation and amplification of misinformation is seen across different geographies, and across the political spectrum.

In this testimony I will seek to:

- Describe how the current commercial and regulatory environment for news media in America plays a part in creating the conditions for misinformation to spread unchecked.
- Present evidence for how polarization and a lack of trust in news media can create real world consequences and hamper mitigation strategies.
- Draw conclusions about the events of 2020 in terms of potential preventative and mitigating strategies

The commercial and regulatory environment for US news media: How we got here

For the past 25 years, the broadcast and print industries have been disrupted by the rise of new platforms which democratized the distribution, circulation and monetization of media. The gatekeeping function of broadcast and print media has gone, and shifted to the aggregation and search platforms of companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google. Two players, Google and Facebook, now dominate a digital advertising market which was once the key support mechanism for funding free news media. Whilst news media companies have benefited from digital in terms of audience growth, the disruption to the advertising model particularly for non-broadcast media has had an enormous impact.

The vast majority of US citizens now access news through online aggregators, with Facebook and YouTube being by some way the largest. For news journalists and consumers alike these changes have meant navigating a dynamic but noisy environment of often unverified and

unverifiable sources. The 'attention economy' of the advertising-based internet boosts content which is highly engaging, be it cat videos or well-crafted political rhetoric. Research has repeatedly shown that material which appeals to emotions is more likely to garner large audiences or 'go viral' than material which is rational or boring.

There are many advantages to the low barriers to entry created by online media, and the microtargeting model of advertising that underpins it. Minority voices long ignored or excluded by mainstream media and those previously reliant on the intermediary powers of the old gatekeepers can now speak directly to their communities and markets. It is cheap to create and promote a vast diversity of content in a free flowing environment. The flip side of information abundance is however that, like any unregulated market, the opportunity for bad actors to manipulate the capabilities of digital media outstrip the capacity of those good faith actors to correct it. As a result misinformation and disinformation is rampant, and, as we saw in 2020, carries with it often grave consequences in the real world.

Although we are here to discuss the role of the traditional media in amplifying extremism and untruths, the digital context is important, as it sets the regulatory, economic and cultural agenda for every media market, from the parish newsletter to the largest broadcaster. It is I believe impossible to separate fully the influence of cable news, broadcast television and even print media from the dominant gatekeeping platforms and messaging systems. The seeding and proliferation of any narrative in a digital environment relies on a network of interlinked news sources, influencers and promotion techniques for success.

As the Committee is examining the role of legacy media, it is worth underlining that media owners and platform companies alike are operating in an increasingly deregulated environment designed to foster competition and growth.

A forty year path of deregulation has transformed the US media landscape in both economic and political terms. The abandonment of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 paved the way for the late Rush Limbaugh and other opinionated broadcasters to address audiences on matters of

political sensitivity and public interest without an obligation to provide contrasting views or context, and the establishment of Fox News in 1996 brought similar sensibilities to cable news. The Telecommunications Act of 1996, including the Communications Decency Act, and more recently the 2017 roll back of rules restricting cross-media ownership and physical presence in local media markets by the Federal Communications Commission are all significant liberalizing measures. However, these changes also mean that the content produced and carried by powerful media entities - old and new - is unfettered of obligations towards fairness or even truth.

The polarization of cable news audiences

The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 caused economic disruption to all sectors of society, and it kept people at home, glued to the news. Simultaneously the presidential election featured an incumbent, President Donald Trump, whose engagement with social media and mainstream news media drove the news cycle across all news outlets. The two market leaders in cable news, Fox News and CNN both saw historic levels of audience growth. Fox News became the first cable news channel ever to average 3 million viewers in prime time, and CNN broke its own records.

As audiences grew, there was also a sharp polarization in how far they trusted news sources, research showed.

In a study released by the Pew Research Center in January 2020, conservative Republicans showed a very high degree of trust in Fox News, 75 per cent, and a high degree of distrust in CNN at 67 per cent. For liberal Democrats, these ratios were broadly reversed.

One of the key differences that the Pew Center noted in its longitudinal survey was the erosion in trust in other non-Fox news broadcasters that Republicans showed over time.

 "One of the biggest changes we saw was increased distrust among Republicans for 14 of the 20 news sources included in both studies, with particularly notable increases in distrust of CNN,

The New York Times and The Washington Post – [three frequent targets of criticism for President Donald Trump](). While there has been far less change on the Democratic side, two exceptions are The Sean Hannity Show and Breitbart News, which are now distrusted by a larger share of Democrats than in 2014."

By the end of 2020, however, Fox News was less of an outlier as a single choice of destination for President Trump's supporters. Two relatively new cable news channels with a conservative slant, NewsMax and One America News Network, picked up endorsements from President Trump through his social media feeds and showed themselves willing to continue to repeat false narratives about the legitimacy of the election result. Although their audience sizes are a fraction of those of Fox News, their growing loyalty among President Trump's supporters follows the perceived disloyalty of Fox News in failing to wholeheartedly support the assertion that the election was "stolen". Both channels have anchors and personalities with large social media followings.

A [Suffolk/USA Today poll]() of people who voted for President Trump demonstrated that although small, the OANN and NewsMax audiences are gaining trust and audience at the expense of Fox News. The poll also demonstrated that supporters of President Trump who watched NewsMax and OANN were more likely to believe the election was stolen than Fox News viewers.

It is important to add to the viewing numbers and trust ratings of networks, that material aired on cable is also routinely remixed and recirculated on social media, through targeted advertising methods. In addition it is widely distributed and discussed in closed social groups on Facebook and messaging apps, where we lack data from the platforms to know how material is disseminated.

The decline In local news is creating polarization and diminishing trust

Local news has historically provided a backstop for truth and trust in the American information system. In her book *Ghosting the News*, The Washington Post's media commentator Margaret Sullivan quotes research into the devastating democratic effect of a decline in local news, including a lack of civic engagement, lack of government efficiency and an increase in polarization: "..citizens are less likely to vote a split ticket choosing candidates from various political parties. Instead relying on national sources of news including cable news outlets, they are more likely to retreat into tribal corners, voting along strict party lines "

 The pandemic has had a catastrophic effect on an already weakened local news market, with advertising revenues across newspaper groups down 42 per cent. An annual survey of news deserts from the University of North Carolina, [The News Landscape in 2020: Transformed and Diminished |](#), describes how 25 per cent of local news outlets and 50 per cent of local journalists' jobs have disappeared since 2004. The pattern of closures and job losses accelerated in 2020, at a moment where communities needed accurate local information even more urgently than before.

In our own research at the Tow Center, [we have tracked](#)over 100 closures and mergers of local news outlets since the beginning of the pandemic alone. There are now over 1800 communities across the country that do not have their own source of local news. The deep recession in local newspapers is significant on two levels. First, that local newspapers and their websites have been the largest employers of local reporters, whose stories once fed local and national broadcast outlets. Secondly, local news outlets tend [to be more trusted than national media](#), although there are signs that as local news dwindles, so too does trust in those outlets

A further development to note is the polarization effects we see in national cable news are to some extent being imported into local markets. The 2017 FCC rule changes to local media ownership [were interpreted as being helpful](#) to Sinclair Broadcasting Group, America's second

largest television network, which reaches 40 per cent of US homes and carries right leaning material programming. [Academics](#) from Emory University in 2018 studied Sinclair Broadcasting's network before and after the rule changes, the researchers detected a discernible shift in coverage by local affiliate stations towards national coverage and away from local coverage, and a move to the right.

These effects

 of polarization in local markets could be compounded by the trend towards using the '[Trojan horse](#)' of local news to advance political and lobbying aims. In our own research at the Tow Center, we have traced how dark money from political and commercial sources is [infiltrating local news.](#) This pattern is an established playbook now used in campaigning across the political spectrum. In a [report](#) from academics and researchers forming the Election Integrity Partnership, a watchdog group monitoring misinformation about polling practices, the importance of local news in providing a corrective to polling misinformation is highlighted. As is the propensity for spreaders of disinformation to pick up local news stories and distort them to gain traction for a false narrative. In our research at the Tow Center we have also noted how hyper-partisan local news sites used misleading or deliberately false stories on election night to add to a strategic campaign undermining the integrity of the election.

It is clear that the existence of strong local news outlets is a possible line of defence against the worst excesses of disinformation, particularly when it is representative of the community it covers and rigorous in its reporting. It should be a matter of great concern to the Committee that local news markets are denuded of funding and are now subject to the same forces of polarization seen in national media.

The vacuum left by advertising receding from local markets is easily filled by low-cost, high volume networks who rely on political or corporate funding in what the [New York Times](#) describes as a 'pay to play' influence model.

Polarization, distrust and the spread of misinformation

Research confirms that even in a varied news environment, the effect of many sources does not necessarily mean that audiences are persuaded by evaluating different views. In fact, abundance of sources can have the opposite effect, as demonstrated in a recent paper for the Scientific American, where the authors note:

. *"Experiments consistently show that even when people encounter balanced information containing views from differing perspectives, they tend to find supporting evidence for what they already believe. And when people with divergent beliefs about emotionally charged issues such as climate change are shown the same information on these topics, they become even more committed to their original positions"*

In other words, ideological belief can overwrite evidence. The Washington Post found that President Trump made more than 30,000 false or misleading claims during the course of the Presidency with nearly half of these occurring in the last year of his presidency. That finding is likely to be believed by those that have some trust in the processes and institution of the Washington Post, and discarded by those that see this as part of liberal media bias.

Equally, the presence of Fox News as the premier source for right-leaning and Conservative audiences, brings with it liberal scrutiny to the station's partisan handling of sensitive stories. In April 2020, an open letter from journalism educators to Fox News owner Rupert Murdoch and his son, Fox News chief executive Lachlan Murdoch, outlined what the threat to public health posed by Fox News coverage. The letter laid out specific instances of journalistic carelessness and malpractice committed in the first month of the pandemic:

"The network's delinquency was effective. ….A Pew Research poll found that 79% of Fox News viewers surveyed believed the media had exaggerated the risks of the virus. 63% of Fox viewers said they believed the virus posed a minor threat to the health of the country. As recently as Sunday, March 22, Fox News host Steve Hilton deplored accurate views of the

pandemic, which he attributed to "our ruling class and their TV mouthpieces — whipping up fear over this virus."

The influence of one cable channel on national discourse and political opinion is hard to evaluate precisely, and correlation is not causation, although there are a number of academic papers under review which examine the link between cable news and viewership and compliance with basic safety measures. A [paper](#) published in January 2021 measured the impact of the viewership of Fox News on compliance with Covid-19 mitigation strategies. The paper found that on one measure - stay at home measures - the impact was 'significant' :
'In particular, news media appears to be sufficiently persuasive to dissuade many individuals from complying with containment policies.'

Similarly for the narrative around the insecurity of mail-in ballots. Harvard law Professor Yochai Benkler and a team of media researchers produced [a report](#) detailing evidence of a pattern of promoting speculative and verifiably false narratives about mail-in ballots was planted early in the election cycle, through mainstream media coverage and frequent tweeting by former President Donald Trump.

This analysis is in line with other research, such as [the finding](#) that Fox News repeatedly aired items and guests casting doubt on the election results. ([In the two weeks after it called the election, Fox News cast doubt on the results nearly 800 times](#)) .

As Fox News is challenged by new competitors willing to take more extreme positions such as News Max and OANN, the problem of news audiences being exposed to conspiracy theories and untruths which they are ideologically predisposed to believe only increases. In the recent [Suffolk /USA Today](#) poll, this effect can be seen in supporters of President Trump believing that the election was stolen at rates that vary according to their choice of news outlet.

"Fox News is losing the most loyal Trump voters. On the issue of whether Trump voters believe Joe Biden was legitimately elected, 73% (of viewers who trust Fox News) said Biden was not. Among Trumpers trusting OANN, the number was 90% and among Newsmax Trumpers it was 92% saying Biden was "illegitimately elected."

Mitigating the damage of 2020

It is impossible to know precisely what actions might have mitigated or avoided the shocking events of 2020 and 2021. A president who regularly denigrated the press has undermined trust in all but the most loyal outlets. The commercial success of Fox News, Sinclair Broadcasting, OANN and NewsMax serves to remind us there are few penalties for deploying misinformation. The markets and technologies that enabled the seamless manufacture of vast amounts of misinformation are the outcome of editorial, product and policy decisions. We are at the end of a forty-year arc of deregulation during which the environment has optimized for growth and innovation rather than for civic cohesion and inclusion.

There is an opportunity for America to identify and act on the priorities that are already known to work against extremism and disengagement. Finding the means to fund and sustain more independent local reporting is a burning priority. The gap between abundant polarizing national coverage and scarce local accountability journalism is widening. Civic journalism representative of the communities it serves, could be established and strengthened through a reform agenda which takes the information needs of communities seriously. This should not be a luxury but a right. The Washington Post's editor-in-chief, Marty Baron, retires from his post at the end of this week. He was asked what represents the biggest challenge for news media in the future. He replied it is the " *level of conspiracy thinking that has become entrenched with a substantial portion of the American public.*

"... It's expected that in a democracy, people will debate the challenges we face, the policies that should be implemented, and that debate should be vigorous…..But traditionally we have always operated from a common set of facts — and now people can't even agree on what happened yesterday."

I would like to thank the Sub Committee for giving me the opportunity to contribute towards the work being done on this most important topic.

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