

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

**Questions and Answers at Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and
Broadband Hearing entitled, "Shot of Truth: Communicating Trusted Vaccine Information"**

**Witnesses: The Honorable Gordon H. Smith, President and CEO, National Association of Broadcasters,
Tracie Collins, M.D., M.P.H., Secretary of the New Mexico Department of Health; member, Association
of State and Territorial Health Officials,**

**Yonaira Rivera, Ph.D., M.P.H., Assistant Professor of Communication, Rutgers University School of
Communication and Information**

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Cantwell: Well thank you Senator Lujan, and thank you so much for holding this important hearing and for the witnesses being here today, Senator Smith, good to see you. Sorry to hear about your retirement, well actually not sorry for you because I know you are returning to the beautiful Northwest, hard to beat, where you and I come from. I know we have heard a little bit of the dialogue this morning, but obviously the Paycheck Protection Program extending to newspapers and to TVs, I believe was really critical in continuing to tell the story. I mean that's what the premise was, to make sure that radio, and TV broadcasters, and others who have unique reach into particular communities, whether that's African American radio stations or in the Northwest it could have been the Asian broadcasters, or what have you. So, how important is it for us to continue to make investments to keep these diverse sources. I don't think people really understand how close we are to losing more and more.

The Hon. Gordon H. Smith: You know I did say earlier to other questions, Senator, but I think, before I reiterate some of those things, I just want to express to you personally, how much we appreciate your extra mile efforts with the CARES Act, to make sure more and more broadcasters who provide, uniquely provide, localism and journalism to your constituents and our communities. You've been a superstar in our eyes and we thank you for it.

Cantwell: Thank you.

Smith: But as I said earlier, you know, ever since the beginning of democratic institutions, a free press and serious journalism have been really important to preserving the trust in democracy. And we're losing that, we're losing it because the revenue streams which are advertising, that move goods and services, and promote jobs and enterprise, that is drying up for broadcasting and for newspapers, and we're suffering the consequences in our democracy. Now, you can't put the genie back in the bottle in terms of social media, we all, I love my iPads and all, and iPhones. It's a part of it. But freedom of speech, yeah, it's free, but when it comes to journalism, it comes at a price. There needs to be a way to pay for good investigative journalism. And so we want to work with you for ways to accomplish that, with Senator Klobuchar earlier who mentioned her approach on that. We're interested in all of the above because, I think, if we're to preserve our republic, we have to preserve the fourth estate which is freedom of the press. It's in the First Amendment because it's first in importance, that's the keystone of our democracy. And we want to support those things, those policies in the future, which will leave other platforms in business, that's fine, but not sacrifice the ones that have helped us to have a trustworthy democracy.

Cantwell: Well, the focus of this is COVID. So, do you consider news critical infrastructure as it relates to delivering key public health information?

Smith: Completely, I mean there is no platform quite like broadcasting to reach nearly well above 90% of the American people and it's free, and it's local, and it's live. And it includes all ethnicities, all of the diversity of America. And we have anchors of all the diversity of American, management, we need to do even more in terms of ownership diversity. But there's great ways to accomplish that and there's other ways as well. But I just think we have a really important interest in getting the truth out there and we have the desire to do it. I know in every newsroom, every broadcast station I've ever visited, they want the facts, and they want to report it in a way that's trustworthy.

Cantwell: I think that's the key thing that struck me, is that when you have a pandemic like this, people want the local news.

Smith: They do.

Cantwell: They don't really, I mean, they're not as interested in what's happening somewhere else, as like what is happening in our community. They want it to come from a trusted source, they want it to be from somebody that they believe is in the community, is going to be straight with them. I thought, to me, when we were falling behind in Yakima because we weren't doing enough, so many in the community, General Mattis, who lived down the road basically did his own thing to try to communicate to the community. I kept thinking well if we didn't have the Yakima Herald, where would we be, if we weren't able to use that as a vehicle at a time when the pandemic was roaring in that community? Where would we be if we didn't have those vehicles of broadcasters and newspapers to communicate to them? So I plan to, Mr. Chairman, push this issue as it relates to this critical infrastructure investment we're making. I think news, local news particularly, a trusted source, is frayed beyond belief. And if we don't shore it up, at least until the legal battles play out with the tech industry, that will be making a big mistake. So I continue to appreciate this hearing, because I think it was a good diagnosis of how important local journalism was and I think the critical infrastructure needs to be preserved.