

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
**Full Committee Hearing “We Interrupt This Program:
Media Ownership in the Digital Age”**
February 10, 2026
Sen. Cantwell Opening Statement
[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for calling the hearing and the witnesses to be here today. This is a subject that, generally, I would say I care a lot about and I do think that today we'll get into a pretty big debate about the amount of digital content now in advertising, and controlling that market.

I also think we'll hear a lot about why it's not a good idea for consumers to have so much content behind paywalls and them not being able to access it. I think the first two witnesses will agree on that. I'm not sure they're going to agree on other things, but they are going to agree there.

This past Sunday, more than 100 million Americans watched the Super Bowl. Obviously, I'm very happy about my state of Washington and the Seattle Seahawks bringing home a second Lombardi trophy. Right now...

Sen. Cruz: On the over-under, on whether you'd make it a minute before saying that I had the under. Congratulations.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you.

Sen. Klobuchar: And you did it with the former Vikings quarterback to add to our pain, to add to our pain.

Sen. Cantwell: I want to say there was a lot of people helping the Seahawks, a lot of Texans, a lot of – great job by your former quarterback, yes.

Right now, millions are also turning to the Olympics and watching that. And this brings communities together. This brings fans together. It brings our country together. But Mr. Chairman, as the media landscape becomes more fragmented every year, those shared experiences are becoming rarer. And as I said earlier, my concern about how much is being eaten up by tech companies in the broadcast model, and how much is being put behind a paywall, is very concerning.

That is why several years ago, as Ranking Member of the Committee, we put out a local journalism report... ‘America's Most Trusted News Source.’ And that is why my focus is what are we going to do to help keep that. From the report, it says, ‘modern economic literature views this through the lens of information economics or asymmetrical information, which is now recognized as [a] basic tenet of economics.’

Basically, what we're saying is, if you don't have a lot of competition on information, you're not going to get perfect information. You're going to get distorted information.

So, as the report says... 'Economists across the political spectrum agree that increased reporting on local conditions leads to fair prices for goods. A decline in local journalism and ensuring decreases in available information result in market inefficiencies.' So, today I'm here to fight for local journalism.

If the Nexstar-Tegna deal goes through, a single company will control 265 stations capable of reaching 80 percent of all the television households, more than double the current cap. And for nearly half of their audience – 100 million people – Nexstar would own two or more stations in a media market. Now that concerns me. To me, that is not more local voices, that is fewer. So I want to see how we are going to deal with this kind of situation.

We've invited Mr. Waldman who in his testimony says that [there are] roughly 40 local journalists for every 100,000 Americans. Today, that number is eight. That was in 2002. That number is now down to eight.

The decline is not just limited to small outlets. Just [last] week, we saw a massive layoff at the Washington Post. This includes cutting over half the journalists covering local D.C. news. So if flagship national institutions are struggling, imagine the pressure on small local stations and newspapers, creating – in my opinion – the need for more stability and accountability, not less competition.

So, the important thing that we are here today to talk about is that local news is quite literally, in my opinion, the seed – corn seed, if you will – for AI. You can't have perfect information if journalists aren't creating it, but yet, we know that AI is consolidating that data and all of that information. And if before they weren't compensating for that, now, they certainly are perpetrating a business model that will make that even less clear.

Mr. Waldman describes we are in a vicious cycle: less local news may makes AI less accurate and it makes local news less viable. So we have to fix this. That is why I introduced the bipartisan COPIED Act with Senator Blackburn to stop AI companies from using journalist content without their consent. [That's] why we support—and Mr. Waldman and I were just discussing—a tax credit where states are using tax credits for local journalism, as we have proposed.

And AI companies should want a format where you are creating content and that content is accurate and competitive in a nature that makes [the] U.S. stack [of] AI information more accurate than other countries. That's to me, it seems, the goal.

Changes to the cap do not address the real structural problem, and they risk reducing the diversity of local voices without solving the underlying problems of economics. So I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about the solutions that will help us grow local journalism for the future. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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Sen. Cantwell: Well, Mr. Chairman, I want to weigh in on that particular point before I start my question. I definitely believe the FCC should have a Commission level [vote] if they are going to take action. I'm not making a statement as to whether they have that power or not. I'm simply saying if they do, it should be at [the] Commission level. And I think that Chairman Carr has practically prejudiced himself in an information process that's supposed to be independent if he's already made a decision. So I don't, I don't like that. Don't like that, but let's start with something maybe we can agree on.

Do the witnesses think that right now...I mean, because I look at these viewpoints, I'm kind of, last week I was where Mr. Waldman was. I was like, on this hand, on that hand, and what is it we really want to provide? And so, you know, I'm for elevating this larger context, that Big Tech just has too much power. But I don't know, do they have too much power in this marketplace? Mr. Ruddy?

Mr. Ruddy: Well, I think that consolidated Big Tech is a danger to the public interest. I think there should be more competition in Big Tech across the board...

Sen. Cantwell: I just meant as it relates to now preserving local journalism and how much of the business model. I mean, I think here you have a cord cutting problem. Mr. LeGeyt basically has a, you know, a big money maker for himself right now, which I'm for. I am for broadcast sports, not because the Seahawks won. I'm for broadcast sports because I do not want my consuming public to have to pay to see content if they can just watch advertising to see it. I want it to be cheaper.

So, I'm for not allowing these people to put so much content behind a paywall and making consumers pay out the nose for it. So...on this point, do we need to do something here so that we have [a] more level playing field? Are they the bigger issue here?

Mr. Ruddy: No, I think that local news is almost entirely by broadcast TV. Big Tech creates almost no original local news. So, we need to protect the diversity and competition in that field.

Sen. Cantwell: Mr. LeGeyt is telling you this is his money maker right now, and...he's getting eaten alive on this because of what's happening, because of the digital advertising revenue.

Mr. Ruddy: They haven't made the case. I'm sorry to say, Senator, they have not made the case that Big Tech has hurt their businesses. Their businesses have grown 500 percent in the past decade. How do you how do you explain that that's all during the Big Tech period?

Sen. Cantwell: Believe it or not, I'm going to agree with you in a minute, but on this point, I don't okay? And so, I think that the point is...okay...does anybody else want to comment on this quickly? Because I have another question.

Mr. LeGeyt: Big Tech has entirely undermined the advertising model for local broadcasting.

Sen. Cantwell: Okay. Mr. Johnson?

Mr. Johnson: I think by eliminating some of these prescriptive rules, Senator, what you do is you give the affiliates better bargaining power, negotiating at the table. So they can, in their discussion with MVPDs, with Big Tech, they can say we want more local control over programming.

Sen. Cantwell: Mr. Waldman?

Mr. Waldman: Yes, absolutely. Big Tech is a big part of the reason for the undermining of the local news business model for TV and local news, and it's about to happen again with AI.

Sen. Cantwell: Right, So Mr. LeGeyt, key point, though, is that...and look, I've helped the broadcasters on good faith protections for broadcasters. I've actually sided with the broadcasters, you know, on these issues that now...we're hearing complaints about. But again, [we're] in this world where the cord cutting and streaming media is leading to this, I'm not sure that I believe that consolidating people so that you could then own three TV stations [in] one media market and then basically decimate that media market without competition, is the way to go.

And so, I have a concern, Mr. Waldman, that...to your question, which is you're asking us a question to consider, but I'm asking it back, why would I want to support -- now, I'm not saying you have to have three TV stations in every media market, but I do want diversity -- and why would I allow for more consolidation when our biggest problem has been concentration? Why would I go for that? Why would I go for this merger if, in fact, you're going to basically hand over more concentration [and create] less diversity? And if that means somebody is going to do general programming and give me less...and Mr. LeGeyt, you made a good point about the number of eyeballs, the power of growing, because, like, digital did grow even with broadcasters. But that doesn't mean that we had all the local content or the diversity of voices. So, isn't this the crux of the issue? That basically, you're going to be able to own more media markets and concentrate...own three TV stations and then basically decide how to blow them up and give me general programming from New York. Which I don't want.

Mr. Waldman: Which we are seeing more of, and, you know, Senator Cruz quoted President Reagan a while ago. I would quote President Reagan on another point, which is trust but verify. Yes, in some cases, mergers might lead to more local news, but the evidence is that in many, many cases, it goes the other way -- that it cuts local news. So if...Congress considers loosening these caps at all, it should be contingent on commitments that they maintain or increase the number of local reporters.

Sen. Cantwell: Okay, interesting. I mean, this is the crux here. We can't be for a merger just to get bigger, to fight Big Tech on their eating up sports revenue, which they're putting behind a paywall that makes consumers pay more. I can't, you know, I can't be for that. But I do think that we have to also, you know, point out, Mr. Ruddy...I really don't want so much concentration of this marketplace by 80 percent, or whatever it is, ownership by these big corporations who then just generalize content out to my new stations. That's not healthy for any of us in the ecosystem.

Mr. Ruddy: The National Hispanic Coalition did a poll in December, Democratic pollster that found over 70 percent oppose the Nexstar merger and the consolidation. Only about less than 7 percent supported it. A recent Republican poll, Public Opinion Strategies, found again, 75 percent opposition to consolidation, only 7 percent [support]. So this is a bipartisan...

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I definitely support more diversity in voices. [W]e have to figure out how we're going to get there -- but anyway, I appreciate [it]. Mr. Chairman, thank you.