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**SUBCOMMITTEE ON STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS,
AND RELATED PROGRAMS
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

MARCH 12, 2020

I am honored to appear before the Subcommittee on the importance of citizen access to trusted, quality, and locally relevant news and information. Internews, an international non-profit organization headquartered in California, has worked to improve the flow of civic-minded, locally produced news and information for nearly 40 years. I urge the Committee to include language in the Committee's fiscal year 2021 report supporting continued funding for Internet freedom and media and civil society development programs through the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

I want to express my gratitude to the committee for its many years of leadership and support regarding these essential issues. In more than 100 countries, we have trained more than 100,000 people in journalism, media, and business skills, and supported partners in more than 30 countries to advocate for and develop policies that advance an open, accessible Internet.

We request the Committee:

- Increase investment in democracy, human rights, and governance programs broadly, with support for independent media as a critical element of building healthy democracies, while also combatting disinformation and dangerous speech.
- Continue to support and expand the Internet freedom agenda, ensuring that all citizens of the world, particularly the traditionally disenfranchised, enjoy safe and unfettered access to and use of the Internet.
- Continue to support global health and humanitarian projects that deliver high quality and contextually appropriate information to ensure global populations are able to make informed choices for the health of their families, while also being able to withstand sudden onset epidemics, such as Ebola or the COVID-19 (AKA Coronavirus).
- Continue to prioritize engaging and empowering women across these programs, with particular emphasis on media's role in advancing women's rights, visibility, and leadership.

We are very grateful for the Committee’s leadership and support for programs which advance independent media, Internet freedom, and overall freedom of expression; these programs are both essential for building a democratic society, and are also root solutions to solving the world’s most pressing issues, from pandemics to environmental degradation to extreme poverty.

DISINFORMATION IMPEDES THE SUPPORT OF HEALTHY DEMOCRACIES

Disinformation and dangerous speech suppress and distort useful information

Since our beginning, Internews has envisioned — and worked toward building — a world in which all people could seek, receive, and impart credible information that was important to them.

Despite the incredible advances in connectivity and the expansion of communication options for individuals all around the world, our information age faces more challenges than ever.

Rapidly changing technology brings with it the dangerous rise of disinformation; new, more invasive forms of government surveillance and censorship; bad actors intervening in the global information space; digital and physical insecurity of journalists and other storytellers; and the disintegration of the market for local news.

Disinformation, or intentionally false information, puts democratic processes under direct attack. In Gabon, for example, a “deep-fake” video contributed to an attempted coup of President Ali Bongo in 2019. Unless there are programs to counter it, disinformation will continue to be a roadblock to progress in achieving a rule of law in fragile countries.

Despite all these challenges, there is progress being made.

Independent media is making an important impact in Ukraine. While Ukraine’s growing and vibrant media landscape stands out in the Eurasia region for its professionalism and maturity, the overall information landscape is polluted by the malign spreading of inaccurate information. Ukrainian organizations are committed to advancing media literacy, and Ukrainians themselves self-report that they are increasingly aware of paid-for or intentionally misleading news.

With the support of USAID, Internews is a hub of expertise, coordination, and knowledge-sharing among media organizations and companies in Ukraine, providing small grants to trusted media partners, media literacy groups, and media watchdog organizations.

Progress can also be found in Afghanistan, where, with USAID support, Internews has been able to train hundreds of women journalists to play a leadership role in the media sector there. In Kunduz, Afghanistan, where religious extremism reinforces rigid gender roles, Kaihan FM, a woman-led station and partner of Internews, continues to create programming focused on women’s issues and women’s rights.

REALIZING THE POTENTIAL OF A DIGITALLY CONNECTED WORLD

Internet Freedom and digital security for the most vulnerable

The Internet continues to create unprecedented opportunity for freedom of expression and access to information around the world. The Internet's potential, however, remains unfulfilled and under threat due to persistent gaps in access, affordability and safety. This is a critical moment for the development of one of the world's richest resources.

Internews, in partnership with the Department of State and USAID, is helping people gain the ability to safely access information and make their voices heard around the world, including in places where information is most under threat. By assisting high-risk or marginalized human rights defenders and journalists around the world with their digital safety needs, Internews is ensuring that credible, objective information continues to flow through the Internet and that local actors can navigate digital risks as they arise.

Sustaining healthy media and communications over the long term also requires effective and supportive Internet and telecommunications laws, regulations and policies.

In support of such policies, Internews has worked to empower civil society and business sectors in over 20 countries to expand their ability to engage in public policy dialogues and advocacy on issues of essential relevance to Internet freedom. This effort also brings previously unknown voices to the international policy discussion dealing with Internet governance and infrastructure, and ensures that as connectivity expands, civil society in emerging markets is empowered to advocate for domestic internet policies that promote and protect fundamental civil and political rights.

INFO-DEMICS AND CHRONIC CONFUSION

Understanding the role of information in health and humanitarian crises

With its first known cases in December 2019, COVID-19 (AKA Coronavirus) has emerged as a global public health threat. Originating in the Wuhan Region of China, the virus threatens to rapidly spread worldwide. An estimated 75,000 or more have already been infected by the end of January.¹

Perhaps more infectious than the COVID-19 virus is the rumor and misinformation surrounding the virus, which is spreading both in local contexts, in local languages, and more globally. As a result, we see a range of misunderstandings from how health authorities are handling quarantine response to how the virus behaves and potential vaccine treatments. The information environment around the virus became so convoluted so quickly that by February 2nd, the World Health Organization dubbed it an "info-demic."

Trusted and familiar local media outlets and social media influencers help facilitate vital two-way communication with affected populations in local languages they understand. These trusted local sources have proven in crisis after crisis to be the most effective way to mainstream and

¹ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/01/200131114753.htm>

amplify fact-checked information in ways that are appropriately contextualized for vulnerable communities.

We cannot effectively fight an emerging pandemic without also fighting the surrounding “infodemic.”

MAXIMIZING THE POWER OF WOMEN

Ensuring women can safely and effectively participate and lead online and in media

The entrenched, dramatic underrepresentation of women in informational content around the world, coupled with their challenges in safely accessing information, leads to devastating inequality between men and women in benefitting from the transformational role of information in our modern society.

Globally, women represent only 24% of the people we see, hear and read about in the news and just 19% of expert sources – rates that haven’t changed in nearly two decades. The absence of women’s voices in the news contributes to a culture that devalues women – a world where women’s potential is perpetually limited by their lack of exposure to powerful role models and the reinforced notion of traditional gender roles. It also means that newsrooms miss out on perspectives that are critical to break stories and grow their audience.

To help change those numbers, Internews, in partnership with the World Economic Forum, has launched *Reflect Reality*, a resource and toolkit for newsrooms, journalists and business professionals that includes strategies and best practices from more than two dozen individuals and organizations working around the world to amplify women’s expert and authoritative voice. These practices are already being implemented through pilot projects in Tanzania and Iraq, bringing much needed diversity to women’s experiences in media.

As internet connectivity continues to expand around the world, the sexual and gender-based violence women and girls face offline is being replicated online. 73% of women have been or will be exposed to some form of cyber violence in their lifetimes. One in five women live in a country where harassment and abuse of women online is unlikely to be punished.

In response to threats to women’s empowerment and participation, Internews, with partner Defend Defenders, built a flexible, year-long fellowship program that empowers networks of women civil society leaders in target regions to understand digital safety. Through the program, women learn how to keep themselves safe online and transfer that knowledge back to their own communities. Over the last two years, Internews has run the fellowship program with women from eight countries in East Africa.

100% of participants report changing their behaviors online to mitigate the threats they face, and several have changed their careers; they are now respected leaders in the digital security sector and teach digital safety to their communities full-time.

CONCLUSION: BUILDING HEALTHY INFORMATION ENVIRONMENTS

Even in these challenging times, our commitment to this work does not waver. For nearly 40 years, Internews has strengthened and supported local media and information providers with the belief that this support builds stronger communities.

We consistently see examples of increased accountability and real progress in changing lives and empowering people through information. Together with our allies, our partners and our own staff, we embrace a vision: *to realize the potential of a digitally connected world: a world in which evidence-based information advances human progress, enables broad opportunity and accountability, and fuels vibrant civic debate.*

Change does not happen overnight. Our work supports not only individual journalists, but the business models, the legal frameworks, and the technical tools needed to preserve the potential of news and information in communities around the world. Last year, in more than 80 countries, we supported more than 1,000 local partners to strengthen, piece by piece, the information ecosystems that make it possible for people everywhere to access quality, trusted, local information.

We are proud to work in partnership with USAID and the US Department of State in advancing our shared vision that functioning, independent media and access to information empowers people to create positive change in their own lives

We urge the Committee to include language in the Committee's fiscal year 2021 report supporting continued funding for Internet freedom and media and civil society development programs.

Local media, internet freedom, citizen media, and civil society institutions empower and stabilize communities while supporting American development, diplomacy, and national security goals.