

<https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/540093-broadcasters-combat-misinformation-with-a-focus-on-the-facts>

The Hill

Broadcasters combat misinformation with a focus on the facts

BY GORDON H. SMITH, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 02/23/21 03:00 PM EST

“A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes.”

This quotation — often misattributed to Mark Twain, ironically — about the never-ending struggle to distinguish between fact and fiction is perhaps more relevant today than at any other time in human history.

In today’s world, we are blessed with more sources of news and information than ever before — all at the touch of our fingers. Yet, this same blessing allows a lie to travel around the world in the blink of an eye, even as the truth is unfolding, with the potential for wide-ranging consequences. A single lie can shape elections and governments or influence financial markets and spark social movements.

This week, the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Communications and Technology is continuing its series of hearings on how misinformation and disinformation — the lies of the 21st century — have impacted recent events in our nation. As lawmakers explore this issue, they should be mindful of the vital role radio and television broadcasters play in our communities by exposing lies, uncovering the truth and reporting the facts.

As Americans’ most-trusted source for news, local radio and television stations and broadcast networks understand their responsibility to deliver reliable, fact-based journalism and have invested in their news operations to better serve their audiences’ changing needs. In recent years, to combat misinformation online, broadcasters such as Univision have offered training for journalists to help them identify false information on social networks, while others such as NBC News and Graham Media have created specialized news teams that focus on exposing fake stories.

Broadcasters have also bolstered their fact-checking operations or partnered with other news organizations to verify political claims made by candidates, campaigns and outside groups seeking to boost their preferred electoral choices. Examples of broadcasters’ expanded fact-checking enterprises include:

- TEGNA’s roll-out of Verify, a standalone vertical offering expertise from the company’s 49 newsrooms across the country;

- Hearst Television’s partnership with FactCheck.org, allowing the broadcaster to feature fact-checking stories on 34 television stations and two radio stations;
- Scripps’ creation of “Electionland,” a series produced through a partnership with ProPublica to investigate issues related to election security and voting concerns; and
- Univision and Telemundo’s collaboration with FactChat, which provides fact-checking stories translated into Spanish for the broadcasters’ audiences.

Broadcasters’ work over the past 12 months has also, time and again, highlighted their invaluable role in providing a trustworthy accounting of history.

Last summer, as demonstrations for racial justice and equity broke out across the country, broadcasters were there to bear witness, even at the risk of their own safety. Broadcast journalists interviewed protestors so they could voice their grievances and demands. They documented wrongdoing by law enforcement officials and demonstrators alike to provide accountability. Local radio and television stations held town halls and promoted dialogue about racial issues facing our communities and the nation. Millions of Americans turned to their local broadcasters to watch the demonstrations and receive greater context about what was happening.

Local TV and radio stations and broadcast networks also provided exemplary reporting of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol Building, painting a vivid picture of the assault on our democracy. Journalists inside and outside the Capitol detailed the violence, despite facing harassment, bullying and threats to their safety. Broadcasters conducted live interviews with members of Congress while they took cover during the siege, allowing them to provide eyewitness testimony of the events as they unfolded.

Broadcasters across the country have also done incredible work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to keep Americans informed, healthy and safe. In the early days of the pandemic, radio and television stations held virtual town halls, interviewed experts and broadcast special reports to explain the deadly impact of coronavirus. They provided airtime for educators and created special programming for students at home. Broadcast journalists have risked their own health to go inside hospitals to show the devastating impact of the virus and investigated health care issues affecting local communities’ response to the pandemic. Now, as vaccines are being deployed, broadcasters are dispelling myths about inoculation, educating the public about its benefits and publicizing mass vaccination events.

Broadcasters believe that combating misinformation and disinformation, which can erode trust in our institutions and cause real-world harms, is a necessary and noble pursuit. As lawmakers explore ensuring Americans have access to accurate information, they would be well-served to remember that reliability, trustworthiness and an adherence to the truth have been the calling cards of our industry.

Gordon Smith has been president and CEO of the National Association of Broadcasters since 2009. He is a former two-term Republican U.S. senator from Oregon.