

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of**

Subcommittee on Communications and Technology Chairman Mike Doyle

Hearing on “Fanning the Flames: Disinformation and Extremism in the Media”

February 24, 2021

I'd like to thank our witnesses for appearing before us today.

Today, we are talking about media outlets such as cable news, broadcast news, and radio - and the role they play in disseminating disinformation and fomenting extremism.

My hope is that our witnesses can help this Subcommittee better understand the current media ecosystem, how we got here, and potential solutions.

I doubt any of the members here are naive about the media - this is the industry that coined the term “if it bleeds it leads.”

But the degree to which Americans have become awash in disinformation - and the profound events that our country has recently gone through - require examination and evaluation of this industry.

This week marks a grim milestone for our nation as half a million Americans have died from Covid-19. That matches the American death toll in Vietnam, Korea, and World War 2 combined.

This pandemic has touched almost every aspect of American life and taken so many friends and loved ones from us, including from one of the witnesses here today who tragically lost her father.

The real tragedy is that it didn't have to be this way - it didn't have to be this bad.

But some in the media sought to downplay this virus from the beginning.

They refused to acknowledge how deadly it was.

They criticized stay at home orders, they mocked social distancing, and they told their audiences that they didn't need to wear masks.

All of these were scientifically validated steps that could have saved lives and prevented so much anguish and grief.

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In the midst of this pandemic, we also saw the rise of the “stop the steal” movement - fomented by former President Trump and propagated by members of the media that sought to dispute the outcome of our elections and overturn our democratic process.

As we all know, this led directly to the horrific events of January 6th and the attack on our Capitol and our democracy by insurrectionists motivated by former President Trump.

Five lives were lost that day – and more have been lost since.

A Capitol police officer was murdered - others were savagely attacked, beaten, and called vile racial epithets. All our lives were put at risk - as was the Vice President’s.

The First Amendment protects the freedom of the press and freedom of speech, and the freedom of speech encourages us to ask tough questions about what is going on in the media - and what is motivating the tidal wave of disinformation that is putting the lives of so many Americans - and ultimately our democracy - at risk.

Partisanship and polarization in the media has been building for years, but these more recent events reflect a frightening escalation.

As Ms. O’Brien points out in her testimony, media companies have increasingly set aside journalistic standards to chase audience share and higher profits.

Ms. Bell’s testimony discusses the decline of local media and local newspapers - once the lifeblood of our democracy - now rapidly accelerated by the financial hardships of COVID.

These changes have given rise to national media entities that are more focused on the kind of tactics we see from social media companies - they engage their viewers by enraging them and further dividing us - and our nation.

We’ve also seen the rise of news as entertainment - where the claims of anchors and commentators are likened to performance art. When they are challenged in court, the lawyers from their own networks even claim that no reasonable person could believe these people are speaking the truth or reporting facts.

When truth becomes a commodity - to be traded upon for profit - and facts and consequences don’t matter to those who report them, our democracy is undermined. It is the responsibility of this Subcommittee to hold these institutions to a higher standard.

Thank you, and I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses.