

**Subcommittee on Communications and Technology**  
**Hearing on**  
**“Fanning the Flames: Disinformation and Extremism in the Media”**  
**February 24, 2021**

Ms. Soledad O’Brien, Anchor, Matter of Fact

**The Honorable Anna G. Eshoo (D-CA)**

1. You testified that you oppose Congress forcing editorial decisions in newsrooms, and I agree with you. Are there any actions Congress could take to encourage the advancement of journalistic ethics among journalists or the development of a market that demands ethics?

**RESPONSE:**

At the heart of America’s misinformation problem is the death of local journalism. Around 1,800 communities in the US have been left without a local news outlet, creating so-called “news deserts.” The decline of local journalism has directly led to increased polarization, less cross-party voting, increased government corruption, and increased government waste. People are less informed about almost all aspects of daily life including economics, politics, education, the environment, and more.

There are many proposals out there, including Rebuild Local News, that explore ways that the government can revitalize local news without impacting editorial decisions. Some of those ways include tax credits, small business credits for buy advertising, support for public broadcasting, making it easier for nonprofit newsrooms to get and keep tax-exempt status. There are so many ideas that are out there. Without endorsing any one of them, I urge you to explore and examine them and give them your ear. The decline of reporting is affecting us all and congress can play a vital role in supporting a long tradition in this country of having a journalistic community that covers our important institutions and communities.

**The Honorable Yvette Clarke (D-NY)**

1. In your testimony, you stated that “...Local news is the heartbeat of American Journalism.”

For several decades, Black-owned newspapers and magazines like the New York Amsterdam News, Chicago Defender, Ebony and Jet Magazines from Johnson Publishing and other periodicals played a critical role in Black communities across the nation as trusted news source, employing numerous Black journalists. Today, most media outlets with primarily Black audiences are no longer Black-owned and the media industry continues to be white and male dominated.

Do you believe that communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by misinformation and disinformation campaigns as locally-owned and minority-owned periodicals have shuttered?

**RESPONSE:**

I can point to the US Senate Intelligence Committee's report on Russian disinformation in the 2016 campaign to answer your question. The Committee found that "no single group of Americans was targeted by IRA [Internet Research Agency] information operatives more than African-Americans", including operating a "Blacktivist" Facebook page which generated 11.2 million engagements, maintaining five of its top ten Instagram accounts to focus on "African-American issues and audiences", and its YouTube page where 96% of the content "was targeted at racial issues and police brutality" ('Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election', Vol 2, pg 6 - 7)

So we know, affirmatively, that African-Americans are disproportionately targeted by disinformation campaigns.

In the broader context of reviving local news, the government needs to be cognizant of the specific barriers that are present for Black and Brown journalists and news entrepreneurs. We could help overcome these barriers by deploying the technical guidance and education to nonprofit news organizations. Congress could also consider leveraging existing programs that help minority owned businesses by specifically targeting minority owned media organizations that operate in communities with large populations of people of color.

More good reporting has the power to directly counteract disinformation and misinformation campaigns aimed at the African-American community (as outlined in the Senate Committee report) by having dedicated journalists who can respond to community-concerns, and gain trust within their own communities.

According to Pew Research in 2019, 33% of Black Americans place "a lot of trust" in the information they receive from local news, more than Hispanic (28%) and White (27%). Only 23% of Black Americans placed the same level of trust in information from national news. So, investing in local news outlets will have an immediate impact on disrupting the impact of disinformation and misinformation in communities of color.