

**Committee on Energy and Commerce**  
**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery**  
**of**  
**Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.**

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

**February 24, 2021**

Let me start by saying we’re all staunch defenders of the First Amendment and its mandate that “Congress make no law abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.” The First Amendment prohibits us from passing laws that inappropriately limit speech – even when it is controversial or overly partisan. But that does not mean that we should ignore the spread of misinformation that causes public harm.

Putting a spotlight on the issue and having an open dialogue is exactly what the Founding Fathers envisioned because it may help us solve a very dangerous problem. We owe it to our constituents and our democracy to examine how and why disinformation is being aired on traditional media and social media.

That means we must ask uncomfortable questions. Like whether these media outlets, for example, have an incentive to air extreme conspiratorial programming or content. And, how journalists can help each other find ways to cover controversial topics in a way that doesn’t undermine our democratic structure and health. There are no easy answers, but we must try to find them.

In my opinion, too many traditional media outlets have yet to seriously wrestle with these questions. Very few have acknowledged their role in spreading deadly disinformation. Some have tried to self-correct, but only after the damage has been done, or only after faced with public backlash or legal action.

This debate—in my view—is our best hope for addressing one of the challenges confronting our country. I hope that we can have a smart and sensible discussion today because there is so much at stake.

Months of disinformation about the Presidential election results helped fan the flames for the attack on the Capitol on January 6 – an abhorrent, attempt to overturn a free and fair election.

For the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has threatened the American people’s physical, emotional, and economic health, and these threats have been exacerbated by ongoing disinformation about the pandemic.

The daily, and in some cases deadly, dose of disinformation and extremist content is often amplified by some of our most longstanding media sources: broadcast and cable television and broadcast radio.

Disinformation and extremism is a threat to our nation – both collectively and individually – but it is not partisan. The insurrectionists at the Capitol targeted Vice President Pence individually and our democracy collectively. Disinformation has undoubtedly contributed to the rapid spread of COVID-19 and 500,000 Americans have died without regard to whether they are Republicans or Democrats.

Last summer, we examined the role of social media in spreading extreme content and dangerous disinformation. However, our media ecosystem involves both social media and traditional media outlets, that are often part of a vicious cycle of reinforcing conspiracy theories and disinformation.

Despite the rise of social media, surveys indicate that a majority of Americans get their news primarily from television or radio programming.

Over the past year we have seen some of these outlets air programming that downplayed the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic, peddled ineffective treatments, and mocked effective precautionary measures. There are consequences to the constant airing of misinformation and false news. Some have tragically lost their lives because they relied on disinformation about COVID-19, including the father of one of our witnesses here today.

For months, some of these outlets aired programming that falsely claimed the presidential election had been stolen. Five lives were lost, and over a hundred injured, as a result of the “Stop The Steal” propaganda campaign that some media outlets encouraged, and which ultimately led to the Capitol Insurrection. Only after this violence, did one broadcaster recognize the role that its programming had played, and asked its on-air personalities to stop claiming the election was stolen.