

Feb. 9, 2023

Testimony in support of HB 2605

Chair Fahey and Members of the House Rules Committee,

In 1967, due to reports of a dearth of educational public programming, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, creating a structure that would disburse grants to ensure a flow of funds for needed independent, educational and public-service television and radio.

Today, in all forms of media, civic journalism to inform the public is in a dire state across the country, especially in rural areas that cover much of Oregon. The [New Jersey legislature took action](#) in 2018 to start to [address this problem](#), and I urge you to follow suit for the sake of Oregonians.

As a reporter for three decades, I've come to see how in a million little ways, the information produced for the public by journalists often is the lubrication that keeps democracy's gears working, in ways that are subtle and often overlooked:

- Reporting lets members of the public learn about needed services or how upcoming decisions may affect them significantly.
- Good, steady news coverage improves society's awareness and understanding in crucially important ways, giving members of the public, elected officials and other decisionmakers access to information they otherwise would not have. Again and again I've seen small articles lead to major developments later on.
- One of the most important things functional news institutions do is to deter bad behavior in real time simply by existing and doing their jobs. Years ago, I asked a sheriff's sergeant how journalism affected his work, and he responded that hardly a week went by that a dumb idea wasn't rejected in a meeting with a statement like "How is this going to look in print?"
- Public-service reporting often lets voters know about alarming red flags in a candidate's past. It can even help expose malfeasance. There are too many examples to count, but one of the most clearcut cases happened in 2015, when reporters broke stories leading to the state recouping millions and the investigation and conviction of two men in Oregon for public corruption ([see 5-minute video](#) with DOJ crediting them here).

Over time, these benefits have suffered as the Internet undercut community media outlets' business models. This shift has hollowed out the institution of journalism, hurting its quality and depth.

Today, with scarce resources, reporters in many Oregon jurisdictions are powerless when some secretive local officials cynically use tactics of onerous public records fees and delay to keep accurate information from reaching the public.

There is hope: journalism is evolving and exploring new models — as is occurring in New Jersey with the Legislature's help. The Oregon News Exploration project is a great example, and should be included in this effort.

But the needed change is not happening fast enough.

I urge you to please support HB 2605.

Nick Budnick