

The Corvallis Advocate

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Submitted by,
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Chair Jama and members:

I support SB 686 because I believe local journalism is essential for a functional democracy, and specifically for the wellbeing of Oregonians. As the founder and publisher of The Corvallis Advocate, I have witnessed firsthand how the online environment's largest platforms have impacted local and state information ecosystems over the last thirteen years, and the harms to news organizations and the public.

There has been ubiquitously available reporting on just how the larger online platforms have systemically stolen and used the intellectual property of news gatherers over the last two decades. There has also been plenty of reporting on how these platforms have come to dominate the online advertising sales market and successfully beat down the news industry's flailing gasps for business sustaining revenues over the years. In essence, the largest online platforms are both our chief competitors, and the rules makers for how we are permitted to compete – the results are about what one would expect.

In a recent memo, Rebuild Local News cites these daunting statistics, "Oregon lost 71% of its local newspaper employees between 2017 and 2022, compared to the 44% staff lost by U.S. newspapers, according to data collected by Oregon Public Broadcasting."

"Since 2022, nearly 20 local news outlets in Oregon – including around 13% of Oregon's newspapers – have closed or have been merged with other outlets, according to a forthcoming report by the University of Oregon Agora Journalism Center," according to the memo.

I concur with the body of other testimony that SB 686 is a well-crafted bill that takes lessons from outcomes in other states and countries. I appreciate the nuanced balances the bill works to achieve.

I also believe some amendments would strengthen SB 686, and that there should be more thought given to the possibility that the larger online platforms could retaliate against news organizations if it is passed.

- I believe the envisioned Oregon Civic Information Consortium board should include three for-profit news organization owners that reside in the state of Oregon. Publishers are the ones tasked with trying to make payroll work so that more reporters can be hired. I also believe that at least one of those owners should serve a community of less than 100,000 population, and another serving a community of less than 5,000 population.

- Two Consortium members should be associated with Oregon based news organizations that identify as either alternative or non-traditional media, or serving generally underrepresented groups.
- The hours requirement defining a ‘news journalist’ should be eliminated or at least reduced by half. Think of a retired reporter or subject matter expert agreeing to take on a small or specialized part-time beat.
- The \$100,000 content revenue generation requirement should be eliminated. Consider towns small enough that two-part timers can cover everything. Think about towns of less than 5,000 folks, and startups in larger communities.
- Likewise, the International Standard Serial Number requirement should also be eliminated. A start-up or a couple covering a small town may not meet that requirement. Possibly, the organization’s assumed business name or corporate filings with the Secretary of State could be substituted.
- I believe it would be valuable to establish some fungibility between funds for reporters by headcount and the Consortium grants. My concern is for startups that may envision a scale that is too large for the consortium alone – and for organizations that have been successful with their grants and are becoming ready to scale upward.
- Exclusive of those concerns, but possibly ameliorating them, the portion of proceeds from SB 686 going to the Consortium could be increased, and I believe, should be.
- The current language says one of the grant making goals for the Consortium should be to, “Meet the information needs of low-income communities and racial and ethnic communities that have been underserved by the media.” I would include, “and other underserved groups or constituencies.” For instance, at The Advocate, we are specifically sensitive to groups that may be seen as having mental health issues, or that may be neuro divergent. That may not be our primary focus, but we have put resources toward serving that audience in ways that other organizations don’t.
- Given the current shifts to large language generative artificial intelligence models in the online environment, especially by the largest online platforms and services, and specifically as goes search, the State of Oregon should be poised to respond with further legislation if needed. It may be valuable if the Consortium or some other body is tasked and independently funded to examine what the state can do to influence the general online environment for the wellbeing of Oregonians.
- In other countries and states that have passed legislation, the larger online platforms have sometimes retaliated by either removing, disallowing or throttling links to news or news organizations. If there is any evidence of the online platforms similarly responding to this legislation, the State should on an emergency basis pivot to an advertising sales tax. This could require a special session. However, in my view, the state of our shared information ecosystem and the news industry is, in fact, at an emergent inflection point.

Finally, I wish to thank Senator Khanh Pham for writing a bill that has been obviously given deep thought and is exceptionally well crafted. I also wish to thank Chair Jama and the other members.