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On Behalf Of:  
Committee: Senate Committee On Rules  
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB686

My name is Lee Shaker. I'm a resident of Portland and an associate professor of Communication at Portland State University. Since 2006, I have studied the contributions that local media make to their communities—and the way that those contributions are lost as the public migrates from old media (like local newspapers) to new media (like Facebook). There have been very few moments of optimism as I have examined this subject—but I am hopeful that you are again considering legislation to begin addressing this problem in Oregon.

Over the past twenty years, as newspapers and other local media have withered away, contributions that we took for granted for centuries have become more apparent. Research shows that the loss of local media undermines public knowledge of local affairs, reduces civic engagement and political participation, and increases political polarization and corruption. For generations, local media were viable businesses because they provided a venue for commercial advertisements. Today, the internet provides ample opportunity for businesses to reach consumers without advertising in a local newspaper—but the civic roles that local media assumed over time still need to be filled. Unfortunately, nobody has developed a clear business model for local media in the 21st century.

Without local media, citizens increasingly lack the infrastructure to communicate effectively with the people in their geographic environs—public officials, but also other citizens outside their social groups. Democracy cannot function without healthy communication environments: we cannot come together to advance our shared interests (and negotiate our inevitable conflicts) unless we have the spaces and tools to talk with each other. People need media that provide accurate information about their communities. Though it might be technically possible for big digital platforms like Facebook or TikTok to provide these spaces, decades of experience with social media clearly show that these companies are not offering the solutions we need. Put simply, they are global businesses with little interest in and no responsibility to any specific place. Yet, we all live in places—and the quality of our lives in these places is intimately tied to effective governance – which requires healthy local communication infrastructure.

For generations, the relationship between the public and the government was mediated by local journalists. It was the reporter who attended meetings on behalf of the citizen at home, but also the reporter who spared the public official from creating their own direct line of communication to the public. As the nexus between the public and its government, local media have been integral to the democratic functioning of

our towns. As local media collapse, we must find new ways to produce, share, and discuss information. New systems will inevitably develop, but if we wait passively for them to occur, we risk years (or decades) of conflict and dysfunction—and the end result may be inferior. To have productive democratic interactions—and effective governance—it behooves us to proactively work together to develop new structures to cultivate and support public communication in our communities. We should act now, with alacrity, before our civic fabric frays further.

SB 686 rightfully targets the winners in our new digital information economy – large platforms – as a source of revenue to support investment in Oregon’s local media. These entities have built hugely lucrative businesses as layers on top of the hard work done by local media and many other creators. Yet, through quirks of our legacy legal framework, they are able to profit from others’ work without supporting it. This is a bargain that is not sustainable for Oregon’s local media – or for the well-being of Oregon’s democracy.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute these thoughts. Please support SB 686 to bring new funding to Oregon’s vital communication infrastructure.