

Legislative Testimony

Chair Jama, Vice-chair Bonham and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee;

Thank you for considering my written testimony. I'm John Schrag, a longtime Oregon journalist and co-executive director of Uplift Local, a nonprofit news organization working to fill information gaps in the region. This month Uplift Local launched a collaborative, bilingual news service in the Columbia River Gorge, working with journalists there to provide better local news, in both Spanish and English, to the area's rural and increasing diverse population.

I had signed up to testify in support of SB 686 on April 23, 2005 but unfortunately there was not time for me and a few others to speak. So, I will share here why I think this legislation is an important step in addressing the many problems stemming from a lack of trusted local information.

At the hearing you heard a lot about journalism. I'm going to focus on trust and civic engagement. That's because **our research shows a strong correlation between access to local news and information and people's trust of civic institutions and civic leaders**, including lawmakers like you.

The model we rolled out in the Gorge is based on three years of research—the most in-depth study ever of where Oregonians get information, what they think about local news and how the decline of that news impacts their lives.

We heard from more than 3,600 people through surveys, local focus groups and person-to-person interviews, conducted in four languages (Spanish, English, Russian and Ukrainian). And, like us, they are not just aware of the decline in local news, **they are alarmed by it**.

We found significant gaps between what people want from local media and what they are getting. And while these gaps surfaced everywhere, they are disproportionately impacting three groups.

- **Rural residents** are no longer getting the information once provided by local newspapers. And it's getting worse. As you heard from Heidi Wright and others, several rural publications in the region have recently suspended their print editions or closed completely.
- **Distinct cultural communities** do not see themselves or their life experiences reflected in the media. Given that Oregon is the whitest state on the West Coast and Portland is the whitest big city in America, that's not a surprise. But it is a problem as the lack of cultural awareness erodes trust in the media and, all too often, creates actual harms.
- **People whose primary languages are not English** struggle to find basic information, from transportation and education basics to housing and jobs, regardless of where they live. This language barrier often makes them feel unwelcome and is an obstacle to civic engagement.

In the absence of trusted local information, Oregonians turn to national media, which has been shown to increase polarization by its common default to red/blue filters. For local news, Oregonians, particularly those mentioned above, often rely on word-of-mouth or social media, knowing that it subjects them to misinformation.

And, perhaps most troubling, our research shows that **if people can't find relevant news and information about *their* lives, they become disengaged from civic life.**

Oregonians lacking trusted local news are less likely to vote, attend community meetings or legislative hearings, volunteer for local boards and commissions and run for office.

As part of our research, we asked survey respondents to read a hypothetical news story. This article included more than a dozen sources of information about a matter of public policy. We then asked the respondents to tell us which of these sources they trusted.

There was only one source category that a majority of Oregonians said they trust "much or most of the time." That was scientists, who are trusted by 61% of respondents.

After that it fell off quickly, and fell off most sharply among people without a source of local news:

- Non-profit organizations and academic experts are trusted by 45% of Oregonians
- Judges: 40%
- School District officials: 35%
- City, county and federal officials: 30%
- Religious leaders: about 25%

If you're wondering about elected Republican and Democratic officials, well, we asked. And you won't like the answer: **You are viewed as a source of trusted information by only about 1 in 5 Oregonians** who lack a trusted source of trusted local news.

So, this isn't just our problem, it's also yours, and anyone else interested in crafting public policy around a shared set of facts in Oregon.

I'm grateful to Sen. Pham (who was a college intern at Willamette Week when I worked there) for bringing this issue to the Oregon Legislature. And if we are serious about nurturing the healthy local information ecosystems essential to a healthy democracy, we must support both the legacy media still providing trusted local news, and the smaller news shops innovating new ways to fill the gaps. With the amendments outlined by Sen. Pham on Wednesday this legislation provides a good framework to do that.

If you are interested in our research into Oregonians views on local news, it can be found at upliftlocal.news/our-research.

Sincerely,

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