

**TESTIMONY BY JEANNE BOURGAULT  
PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
INTERNEWS**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS,  
AND RELATED PROGRAMS  
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
U.S. SENATE**

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**JUNE 8, 2020**

I am honored to provide testimony on behalf of Internews to the Subcommittee on the importance of citizen access to trusted, quality, and locally relevant news and information. I urge the Committee to include language in the Committee's fiscal year 2021 report supporting continued funding under the Department of State and in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for health information, internet freedom, independent media, democracy and civil society development programs.

I am deeply grateful to the committee for its years of leadership on foreign assistance and democracy issues.

Internews, an international non-profit organization headquartered in California, has worked to improve the flow of civic-minded, locally produced news and information for nearly 40 years. Last year, in more than 80 countries, Internews supported more than 1,000 local partners to strengthen, piece by piece, the information ecosystems that make it possible for people everywhere to access quality, trusted, local information.

Internews is proud to work in partnership with USAID and the U.S. Department of State in advancing our shared vision that functioning, independent media and access to information empowers people to survive, adapt, and create positive change in their own lives.

Today, amidst the global pandemic of COVID-19, we all experience the urgency of access to timely, relevant trusted information. Knowing that most of the world does not have such access is what drives Internews.

I request the Committee:

Continue to support and recognize the need to expand global health, humanitarian, democracy, human rights and governance projects that support local independent media to deliver high-quality and contextually appropriate information to ensure global populations are able to make informed choices for the health of their families, while also being able to withstand sudden onset epidemics, such as COVID-19.

I am very grateful for the Committee’s leadership and support for programs which advance independent media, internet freedom, and overall freedom of expression. These programs are both essential for building a democratic society and are also root solutions to solving the world’s most pressing issues, from pandemics to environmental degradation to extreme poverty.

## **INFO-DEMICS AND CHRONIC CONFUSION**

### ***Prioritizing the role of information in health and humanitarian crises***

The COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly transformed the information and media systems of every society it touches.

Internews sees a range of misunderstandings from how health authorities are handling quarantine response to how the virus behaves and potential vaccine treatments. The information environment around the virus became so convoluted so quickly that it has been dubbed an “info-demic.”

While unique and in some ways unprecedented, COVID-19 has not created entirely new challenges. Rather, it has amplified and escalated the challenges that Internews addresses in our mission to build healthy information environments around the world:

- People need clear, evidence-based information they can understand and act upon to stay safe.
- Misinformation and disinformation are flooding all information environments.
- Authoritarians exploit fear to silence dissent and accountability.
- Journalists and activists face compounded security risks.
- The media market is collapsing.

The world cannot effectively fight an emerging pandemic without also fighting the surrounding “info-demic.” Information is a root solution to solving health crises like COVID-19.

The Internews approach to addressing COVID-19 is anchored in our strategy, which calls for building five elements of a healthy information environments:

- **Good, Accurate Evidence-based Information:** The science around the pandemic is complex and evolving. All journalists and content creators everywhere need support to report that science accurately, responsibly, safely, and in a way that helps their audiences take appropriate action.
- **Information that everyone can access safely:** Human health depends not only on readily accessible health care, but on ready access to accurate information about how to protect oneself, one’s family, and one’s community. Restrictions and intimidation of those searching for information denies people access to information that is critical to managing this pandemic and saving lives.

- **Information that consumers know how to critically assess:** Internews works with our local partner media outlets and content creators to offer people trusted channels through which to receive the verified and timely information that comes from our fact-checking partners and networks.
- **Information that is valued by its community and sustained by business models that work:** In order to deliver high-quality information and accountability mechanisms, local media and information providers need to stay afloat. To survive, media outlets must take urgent action, at least to assess their ability to endure this crisis.
- **Governments and businesses that are accountable for sustaining healthy information environments:** Across the world, we see governments increasing surveillance, control and even attacks on freedom of expression by way of response to COVID-19. We face a critical time to protect and promote strong legal and regulatory environments for free expression, and an accessible, secure, open internet.

Internews staff and partners immediately adapted to provide programs and resources that respond to the need for information. Our partners and allies include media outlets, internet freedom advocates, fact checkers, media literacy trainers, social media influencers, information researchers, artists, lawyers, technologists and others. Our response has included:

- Mobilizing a team of 18 senior health journalists and experts from across the globe to serve as Pandemic Media Mentors to our partners and others who are working so hard to push out accurate information on what COVID-19 means for their audiences, and to counter the tide of rumor and misinformation.
- Disbursing more than \$600,000 in small grants to small, local news organizations to help them reach underserved communities and maintain their own operations in the face of COVID-19. The work of these organizations has included investigative reporting into other governmental procurement processes and translation of medical information into dozens of local languages for refugee communities.
- Deploying Internews staff with extensive expertise in health reporting and humanitarian information services to work with major global health actors to produce webinars, tip sheets, reporting guides, and other resources, and to inform and support new information networks that are springing up in response to COVID-19.

In an information climate as complex as that surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak – and when face-to-face interactions are severely limited – local media has a vital role to play in communicating with communities, providing timely, accurate and trustworthy information, as well as channels for gathering and addressing feedback from vulnerable people.

With supportive programming to help spread accurate, trusted information, we are able to elevate local voices to the global stage, and to address global challenges at the community level.

## **CONCLUSION: BUILDING HEALTHY INFORMATION ENVIRONMENTS**

Even in these challenging times, our commitment to this work does not waver. For nearly 40 years, Internews has strengthened and supported local media and information providers with the belief that this support builds stronger communities.

I consistently see examples of increased accountability and real progress in changing lives and empowering people through information. Together with our allies, our partners and our own staff, Internews embraces a vision: *to realize the potential of a digitally connected world: a world in which evidence-based information advances human progress, enables broad opportunity and accountability, and fuels vibrant civic debate.*

Change does not happen overnight, and the complicated environment of the current pandemic demands nimble approaches. Our work supports not only individual journalists, but the business models, the legal frameworks, and the technical tools needed to preserve the critical role of news and information as a cornerstone of democracy in communities around the world.

Local media, internet freedom, citizen media, and civil society institutions empower and stabilize communities while supporting American development, diplomacy, and national security goals.