



NEW YORK PUBLIC INTEREST RESEARCH GROUP

**TESTIMONY
OF THE
NEW YORK PUBLIC INTEREST RESEARCH GROUP
BEFORE THE JOINT HEARING OF THE
SENATE FINANCE & ASSEMBLY WAYS & MEANS COMMITTEES
REGARDING THE FISCAL YEAR 2026-27 EXECUTIVE BUDGET
EDUCATION PROPOSALS
January 29, 2026
Albany, N.Y.**

The New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) is a non-partisan, not-for-profit research and advocacy organization. Consumer protection, environmental preservation, public health, healthcare quality, higher education affordability, and governmental reforms are our principal areas of concern. We appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony on the Governor's Executive Budget education proposals.

This testimony focuses on the needs of the state's public broadcasting stations. NYPIRG urges that you support a \$15 million increase over the Executive Budget. The Executive Budget funds public broadcasting at its "typical" level: \$14,002,000.

As you know, New York State is home to nine public television stations and sixteen public radio stations that have been supported for decades through state appropriation. However, the governor's proposed budget ignores the reality facing public broadcasting -- the attacks from the Trump Administration and the Congress that not only cut federal support for public broadcasting but did so by whipping out money that had already been approved and budgeted for by public stations across the nation.

Luckily for New York stations, last year's legislative "add" into the final budget provided an additional \$4 million to public radio stations. That addition was based on the expectation that the Trump Administration and the Congress would act to slash federal support. An expectation that unfortunately came true.

Had it not been for the additional support last year, public stations would have been on the ropes. Indeed, jobs have been lost, services reduced, and there will be more unless the Legislature again provides additional support beyond the "denialism" public broadcasting budget that the governor has advanced.

Why support public broadcasting?

James Madison, traditionally viewed as the Father of the United States Constitution and a defender of open government, wrote

*"[a] popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps, both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."*¹

Later Madison argued that *"the advancement and diffusion of knowledge"* is *"the only Guardian of true liberty."*²

¹ Letter from James Madison to W.T. Barry (August 4, 1822), in *The Writings of James Madison* (Gaillard Hunt ed.).

² Letter from James Madison to George Thomson (June 30, 1825) (on file with The James Madison Papers at The Library of Congress).

Unless actions are taken, we are in Madison's "prologue."

The Problem: Local journalism is evaporating and with a growing rise in propaganda.

The accelerating loss of local newspapers and other media outlets has had a devastating impact on civic life. Current projections show that the United States will have lost one-third of the newspapers that it had back in 2005.³ And many of those who are surviving barely cling to life.

The problem has become so bad that areas without local media outlets are now considered "news deserts." A "news desert" is a community, either rural or urban, with limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level.⁴

The number of local "news deserts" expanded in the U.S. this year with 127 newspapers shuttering, leaving nearly 55 million Americans with limited to no access to local news, according to the Medill State of Local News Report 2024.⁵

While the definition is vague, the impact is clear: Inadequate local media coverage can result in communities that are more willing to rely on ideological messengers and a community where government is less accountable to the public it is supposed to serve.

In our representative democracy, an informed electorate is fundamentally important to ensure that the system works. Many Americans have unprecedented access to information, but with lives busier than ever, it's very hard for citizens to fill the reporting and analysis void provided by local reporting.

If the "watchdogging" that has historically been done by local media evaporates and there isn't anybody watching the local town or city council meetings and reporting on them, there's potential for abuse or fraud. There's a growing body of compelling research that has found that as local news coverage declines, government corruption and government costs increase.⁶

Moreover, less local coverage can dampen public interest in local elections. Local news drives civic engagement. And when it comes time to pick our representatives, voters living in "news deserts" are less likely to know who is running and how they stand on issues. Thus, they are less likely to participate.⁷

Exacerbating the problem is that the platforms from which many get their news, social media platforms, are increasingly curtailing "fact checking" measures that were instituted to curb hate speech and propaganda.

³ Hastings, D., "The Decline of Local Newspapers, Closeup, December 12, 2024, <https://www.closeup.org/the-decline-of-local-newspapers/>.

⁴ "What exactly is a 'News Desert'?" Center for Innovation and Sustainability, University of North Carolina, <https://www.cislm.org/what-exactly-is-a-news-desert/>.

⁵ Northwestern University, Local News Initiative, <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/>.

⁶ Durr, J., "Local News Coverage Is Declining — And That Could Be Bad For American Politics," 538, June 2, 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/local-news-coverage-is-declining-and-that-could-be-bad-for-american-politics/>.

⁷ Penington, L., "News Deserts And Voter Turnout: How Local News Shortages Decrease Voter Participation" (2024). <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1721&context=honorstheses>.

Following the lead of “X”⁸ (formerly known as Twitter), META announced last year that it will no longer fact-check content.⁹ As a result, misinformation will rise and will increase as AI takes control.¹⁰

As a result, we are facing Madison’s fear. So, what should be done?

The Solution: New York State should boost funding for local public broadcasting stations.

There is one way to fill the information gap found in “news deserts.” Invest in existing public broadcasting outlets that have the capacity to expand their cover of community events.

New York State’s enhancement of public broadcasting would undoubtedly help those entities trying to manage a world without federal support. The stations, as you know, are organized as IRS 501(3) charities. There are strict limitations against nonprofits engaging in political activity. As a result, these nonprofit news organizations are forbidden from endorsing or opposing candidates for office and there are limitations on how they can support or oppose legislation.

We’re well into a reordering of how some of our basic institutions have operated for the past century. The decimation of news gathering and reporting outlets in communities across the nation imperils democracy by reducing local government accountability and the amount of information voters receive about their own communities. That’s something that should concern us all and is worthy of putting near the top of the issues we collectively need to address in the decades to come.

NYPIRG urges your support for additional funding of public broadcasting.

⁸ Kaye, B., “Musk’s X disabled feature for reporting electoral misinformation – researcher,” Reuters, September 26, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/musks-x-disabled-feature-reporting-electoral-misinformation-researcher-2023-09-27/>.

⁹ McMahon, L., et al, “Facebook and Instagram get rid of fact checkers,” BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly74mpy8klo>.

¹⁰ Center for Countering Digital Hate, “The Double-Edged Sword of AI: How Generative Language Models Like Google Bard and ChatGPT Pose a Threat to Countering Hate and Misinformation Online,” <https://hdsr.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/vn2v6ety/release/1>.