

# Freedom of the press amid COVID-19

## KUOW PULLS PLUG ON LIVE WHITE HOUSE BRIEFINGS

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*Whatcom Watch*  
 Bellingham, Washington  
 May 2020

On March 25, public radio station KUOW announced that it would stop airing President Trump's live Coronavirus Task Force briefings. With no time to adequately fact-check the president's often misleading and false claims, the station said, it was doing more harm than good preempting its shows to carry the briefings live.

"After airing the White House briefings live for two weeks, a pattern of false information and exaggeration increasingly had many at KUOW questioning whether these briefings were in the best service of our mission," the radio station said on its website and social media. The reason: the station could not effectively fact-check the president's claims in real time – "a challenge during a live broadcast." KUOW assured its listeners that it would continue providing rigorous reporting and news analysis, but it had decided not to interrupt its regular programming to cut in with the White House announcements on the coronavirus.

"I was clapping, literally, when I heard that on the radio," said Marie Eaton, a retired Western Washington University professor and paying subscriber to KUOW. "I think his news briefings have been a platform for political rally rather than for information. He's doing a disservice to the populace," Eaton said in a phone interview on April 15.

KUOW, which airs NPR shows like "Morning Edition," "All Things Considered," and "Fresh Air" in addition to local programming, is a service of the University of Washington and is run by the nonprofit KUOW Puget Sound Public Radio. The studio, based in Seattle's University District, broadcasts at 94.9 FM in Seattle and at 90.3 FM in Bellingham. The station live streams its programs on KUOW.org.

The first confirmed case of the coronavirus in the United States was reported on Jan. 20 in Snohomish County, the county directly north of King County, where Seattle is

located. By Jan. 29, President Trump had established the White House Coronavirus Task Force, assembling a cast of health and medical experts to inform the public on the spread of COVID-19. Daily live briefings ensued, typically with President Trump leading the helm.

Televised live from the White House and sometimes running longer than an hour, Trump attempted to paint a sunny picture of the nation's response to the coronavirus, which the WHO had classified as a pandemic on March 11. Critics of the president, however, said it seemed that he was using the live opportunity to perpetuate the cat-and-mouse antagonism already established with the media as Americans watched him berate journalists who stomped on each other trying to ask the leader challenging questions. More importantly, critics and the press have pointed out that Trump is spewing false information that could affect lives. "Of even greater concern was the potential impact of false information on the health and safety of our community," KUOW provided as rationale for its programming decision.

Eaton, who serves as Community Champion of WWU's Palliative Care Institute, gets her news from NPR in addition to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. With news of the pandemic, she's started to follow Andrew Cuomo, the governor of New York, who has been making the rounds on news shows and in interviews. His state has the dubious distinction of having the highest number of both coronavirus cases and deaths in the United States.

"We have not helped people be critical consumers of media. That concerns me deeply. I appreciate having that particular firehose off," she said of the live briefings.

### Reporting vs. broadcasting

Longtime newsman Len Downie, who served as executive editor of *The Washington Post* from 1991 to 2008, says KUOW, like any media outlet, has the prerogative to make programming decisions because news consumers can go elsewhere, like WhiteHouse.gov, to get a live feed of Trump. Also important, Downie points out, is

the distinction between reporting and broadcasting.

"Carrying the briefings live is not reporting," he said during a phone interview on April 15. "Active journalism is not stenography.

When a station carries a baseball game live, it's a broadcast. Then, when the sportswriters give analysis, that's reporting."

A journalism professor at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Downie outlines Trump's "unprecedented hostility" toward the press – whether at rallies, press conferences or on social media (namely Twitter) – in the report "The Trump Administration and the Media: Attacks on press credibility endanger U.S. democracy and global press freedom." Commissioned by the New York City-based press freedom advocacy group the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the report came out April 16. With quotes from nearly 40 media critics, journalism professors, longtime news reporters, press freedom advocates, media lawyers and administration officials, it outlines the president's ploys to undermine the credibility of the press.

New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen, a media critic quoted in the report, urges news stations to stop live coverage of Trump's speeches, rallies and press conferences, adding that they should, "no longer participate in his briefings."

KUOW made it clear the station was continuing its coverage of the federal government's response to the pandemic; it was merely shutting off the live broadcast of the president's task force. Whether KUOW made its decision due to pressure from its listeners or in part by media critics nudging stations to pull the plug on the live briefings is unknown.



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Four days before the KUOW announcement, Margaret Sullivan wrote in *The Washington Post*, “Radical change is necessary. The cable networks and other news organizations that are taking the president’s briefings as live feeds should stop doing so.”

Weeks later, echoing Sullivan’s urgency, longtime *New York Times* writer Charles Blow denounced the live briefings. “Stop Airing Trump’s Briefings!” his April 19 headline blared.

“Under no circumstance should these briefings be carried live,” Blow wrote. “Doing so is a mistake bordering on journalistic malpractice. Everything a president does or says should be documented but airing all of it, unfiltered, is lazy and irresponsible.”

## Seeping into the collective

Ken Rasmussen was driving his electric car when he heard the KUOW announcement on the radio. The former bike mechanic, who worked at Fairhaven Bicycles for 13 years, says that false or misleading messages that go unchallenged are often taken at face value.

“Trump’s press conferences are for the purpose of promoting his ego and his image with his base. He has no regard for the truth,” Rasmussen said during a phone interview on April 20. “We are not hard enough on people who deliberately misinform the public, and that is what Trump does.”

Rasmussen, who lives in Bow, attended Fairhaven College in the late 1960s. He says he gets his news from NPR, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian* and the *New Yorker*. He chooses books over TV and cited David Cay Johnston’s *The Making of Donald Trump* (2016) as suggested reading.

A decision whether to run the president’s live briefings is a tough one for any news outlet, according to Lynn Walsh, chair of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Ethics Committee. During an SPJ Twitter chat on April 3 using #CovidEthics #SPJEthics as hashtags, she was fielding ethics questions and put out this Tweet: “The briefings do provide good info, but also have had incorrect & confusing info. in them. I like the idea

of fact-checking them & then airing BUT then people are not getting info in real time.”

While KUOW may seem to have a bandwagon of support for its decision to cut off the live White House broadcasts, media outlets are under pressure to build public trust. Dr. Jonathan Peters, a journalism professor at the University of Georgia, also a consultant on Len Downie’s CPJ (Committee to Protect Journalists) report, points out that, while programming decisions are ultimately those of the news outlets, transparency with the audience is key. “Let news consumers in as much as possible,” he said in a phone interview on April 20. But “I don’t think you can govern a newsroom in a populist way.”

Retired teacher Carole Hanaway, a Bellingham resident since 1989, said she was overjoyed to hear KUOW’s decision. In addition to English composition and literature, Hanaway has taught journalism and has served as faculty adviser for the student newspaper at Skagit Valley College.

“The media has a responsibility to be thoughtful about what they are putting out on the airways, and the reality is that when something is heard over and over and over again, it becomes the selective reality,” she said during an April 20 phone interview. A regular listener of KUOW and NPR, she gets her news from *The Seattle Times*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. As an avid traveler, she also goes online to read news from Turkey and Australia. “The experts out there are busting butt to find out answers and to get that information accurately out to the public, so I want my radio station to be very responsible and very cautious and maintain their reputation that they’re giving us the best information possible,” Hanaway added.

As an alternative, some stations have started the live broadcast and then cut away after a period of time, according to Jennifer Royer, the Society of Professional Journalists’ director of communications and marketing in Indianapolis – for example, her NBC affiliate WTHR-13 TV, which she typically has on in the background while working from home during the coronavirus.

“They’ll air a few minutes, then go back to

their regular newscast or programming, telling people they can watch the livestream of the briefing on their website,” Royer said in an email on April 23.

A news outlet’s decision that affects programming is never taken lightly, and while Margaret Sullivan in her *Washington Post* column strongly encouraged, if not implored, her media colleagues to stop airing the briefings live, she conceded that restricting listeners and viewers to live access may hurt the press, if not the public, in the long run.

“There’s a strong counter-argument to be made, of course: that the press shouldn’t be in the business of shielding the public from the president’s statements – no matter how misleading, xenophobic or damaging. It’s a persuasive argument, and one I wish I could still believe in,” Sullivan wrote.

Strengthening media literacy programs can empower the public when it comes to consuming news. Eaton, the retired Fairhaven College professor, said that during her 40 years of teaching, especially near the end, she was pushing critical thinking skills with students, “because Google had become their primary resource.”

“Many students in college didn’t have that skill. They began to believe that if it’s in print or someone said it, then it’s true,” she added.

## KUOW declined interview request

KUOW declined a request for an interview to respond to the following:

- How did KUOW come to its decision?
- Who comprises the editorial board that made the decision?
- Was there any discussion of collaborating with other NPR affiliates or public radio stations?
- What has been the response from listeners regarding the announcement?
- How is KUOW handling its daily assessment regarding live preemption?

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