

MISINFORMATION, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AND
“INFODEMICS”: STOPPING THE SPREAD ONLINE

Thursday, October 15, 2020

U.S. House of Representatives,
Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence,
Washington, D.C.

The committee met, pursuant to call, at 1:31 p.m., via Webex, the Honorable Adam Schiff (chairman of the committee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Schiff, Himes, Speier, Quigley, Swalwell, Castro, Heck, Welch, Maloney, Demings, and Krishnamoorthi.

The Chairman. Good afternoon and welcome. The committee will come to order. I want to thank my colleagues and our staff for joining us for another virtual committee hearing. Without objection, the chair may declare a recess at any time.

Before I begin, I want to go through our usual housekeeping matters. First, today's session will be conducted entirely on an unclassified basis. All participants should refrain from discussing any classified or other information protected from public disclosure.

Second, the committee is conducting this virtual hearing in compliance with House Resolution 965, and the regulations for remote committee proceedings. It is being broadcast live on the committee's website. Because the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic remains ongoing, we are proceeding with this hearing remotely in order to ensure the safety of our witnesses, members, staff, and the public. While we wish we could return to all standard in-person events, health and safety protocols dictate we find alternate means of carrying out our oversight obligations.

Okay. So let me remind members of a few remote hearing procedures. First, consistent with the regulations, the committee will keep microphones muted to limit background noise. Members are responsible for unmuting themselves when they seek recognition or when recognized for their 5 minutes. Because there are sometimes delays when muting or unmuting, I would ask members and witnesses to allow sufficient time before speaking to ensure the last speaker has finished.

Second, members and witnesses must have their cameras on at all times. If you need to step away from the proceeding, please leave your camera on. Third, if you encounter technical difficulties, please contact technical support through the channels established prior to the hearing. Our technical staff will work to get you back up and running as soon as possible. Finally, consistent with past practice, I will, at the

appropriate time, recognize members for their 5 minutes in order of seniority, starting with those who are present at the commencement of the hearing. Thank you again for your patience as we proceed under these extraordinary circumstances.

The vast majority of the committee's work necessarily takes place behind closed doors, but we also have a responsibility to take public testimony from those outside the U.S. Government, and inform the public about growing trends that could endanger our Nation in both the short term and the long term. Building on prior unclassified hearings today, we examine the risks posed by misinformation, conspiracy theories, and infodemics online.

These forces are now transnational. They can originate and incubate overseas or here at home. But once they have taken root and begun to circulate, our foreign adversaries can advantage their malign interests by amplifying baseless, misleading, or inflammatory claims. And over the past several years, a disturbing picture has emerged. While the threat from without in the form of state-backed media, online operatives and trolls is real and substantial, we cannot ignore the threat from within which grows more pernicious every day. The online ecosystem and unwitting audiences that the Kremlin so ably exploited remain vulnerable to unscrupulous, homegrown actors who seed and spread falsehoods of their own. If left unchecked, there could be irreversible damage, not only to our Nation's discourse, but to how we as a society discern fact from fiction.

Misinformation and conspiracy theories predate the internet's existence, but the very nature of social media can propel inaccurate or manipulated content, misleading claims, and outright lies far and wide and, at the speed of virality. Leading social media platforms have all made significant changes in their policies and capabilities since 2016, but they have not changed the foundational features of their platforms that expose users, and even recommend to them often extreme, sensational, or emotionally charged

content. The algorithmic engines that power social media platforms designed to keep us scrolling and clicking are optimized for human attention.

They are sophisticated and difficult, sometimes even for their own designers, to fully understand that the algorithms are undeniably effective at their mission, keeping users on the platforms as long as possible.

It should surprise no one that controversial, extreme, or untrue content often engenders the strongest engagement, creating fertile ground for conspiracy theories and misinformation to cross from the internet's fringes into the mainstream.

This has all come to a perilous head in a set of evolving conspiracy theories, delusions, and twisted beliefs falling under the banner of QAnon. Its precepts are arcane and Byzantine, but they echo anti-Semitic tropes, and often amplify white supremacy, all while positing the existence of an all-powerful cabal of evil elites who traffic children and must be defeated, imprisoned, or killed.

Against the backdrop of the global pandemic, associated lockdowns, and preventive measures to protect the health of our communities, the movement has witnessed a huge spike in visibility and followers. The notorious Plandemic video, which was rife with false, conspiratorial themes, and health misinformation about COVID-19, was boosted by QAnon supporters and earned some 8 million views prior to removal from social media.

It is incumbent on all of us to understand how and why it jumped from obscurity into public view, because QAnon is not just a conspiracy theory, it is a violent world view with a devoted following of adherents who feverishly believe that a bloody reckoning awaits their perceived foes. A recent West Point report warned about potential escalating terrorist-style attacks driven by QAnon-style beliefs, and some of its affiliates have already engaged in real-world violent acts.

An armed man drove hundreds of miles to investigate whether a pizza parlor here in D.C. was holding children captive in its basement. There was no basement, there were no captives, and thankfully, no injuries despite the self-proclaimed investigator firing his weapon.

A woman was arrested after attacking two strangers in Waco, Texas, believing them to be child traffickers. A man is accused of murdering a New York City mob boss in March of last year, believing that he was part of -- the mob boss was part of a deep state which the movement demonizes for its alleged plotting against the President. The same man wanted to carry out a citizen's arrest of political figures the President has targeted, including myself.

In response to the openly violent and hateful rhetoric of QAnon, the social media companies have begun to respond. Just hours ago, YouTube announced a platform-wide prohibition targeting the conspiracy theory. And since July, Facebook and Twitter have initiated large purges of affiliated pages, groups, and accounts. These are necessary preliminary steps. But such forceful responses are made more difficult when conspiracy theories are at least partially egged on by the President of the United States.

Just this week, he twice retweeted a conspiracy theory alleging that Osama Bin Laden was still alive, and President Obama had Navy Seals killed as a part of a coverup. Such a polluted online landscape unfortunately remains rife for exploitation by foreign adversaries. The DHS and FBI have warned that amplification of conspiracy theories and misinformation about voting or the pandemic are part of a disinformation campaign originating overseas this election cycle.

Americans are voting right now in the midst of a pandemic. It could take days or weeks to count all the votes after Election Day, and that period will be especially

susceptible to conspiracy theories and misinformation, especially if amplified by malign foreign actors, which could potentially cast out on the legitimacy of the electoral outcome itself, or make us doubt the viability of our free and open democracy. That scenario goes to the heart of our national security, and evokes the oversight mandate of Congress and this committee.

Social media companies bear some responsibility, but the private sector alone cannot reverse these trends. The U.S. Government must remain a credible partner to recognize and address these threats also. We must be clear-eyed that conspiracy theories can radicalize followers to commit acts of domestic terror. Each of us have personal responsibilities too, to do what we can to restore trust and engender expertise and authoritative information; to not reflexively share incendiary content or misleading claims knowing how quickly they can catch fire; to build bridges between the widening chasms that exist on both online and offline so we can try to occupy the same shared reality once again, even if we have differing views about how to best turn that shared reality into a brighter future; and to step outside of our own personal information silos that have vulcanized us as a society where we no longer seem to agree on the same set of facts.

I want to thank the witnesses for joining us today, and I look forward to an enlightening and important discussion of these issues. So let's move to opening statements. We will go alphabetically by last name. First, Dr. Joan Donovan, Research Director at the Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media Politics and Public Policy; Second, Ms. Nina Jankowicz who is the Disinformation Fellow at the Wilson Center; next, Ms. Cindy Otis, Vice President at the Alethea Group; and finally, Ms. Melanie Smith, head of Analysis at Graphika. Welcome, again, to all of you. Our thanks for your participation and your work. And, Dr. Donovan, let me begin by

recognizing you for 5 minutes.

STATEMENTS OF DR. JOAN DONOVAN, RESEARCH DIRECTOR, SHORENSTEIN CENTER ON MEDIA, POLITICS, AND PUBLIC POLICY, HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL; NINA JANKOWICZ, DISINFORMATION FELLOW, THE WILSON CENTER; CINDY OTIS, VICE PRESIDENT, ALTHEA GROUP; AND MELANIE SMITH, HEAD OF ANALYSIS, GRAPHIKA, INC.

STATEMENT OF JOAN DONOVAN

Ms. Donovan. Thank you for having me, and it is a pleasure to be here in my house testifying for you all. And thank you, Chairman Schiff, for organizing this hearing. I think it is a really important topic.

This summer, junk news operations, disinformation campaigns, and propaganda spun up by foreign and domestic operatives, targeted people seeking information, information about the election, the pandemic, and the protests. As the Research Director at Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center, I lead a team that is analyzing media manipulation and disinformation campaigns for their effects on society.

Today, I am going to speak about the sector shouldering the true cost of misinformation at scale. In January 2020, Facebook published a really important statement, and I quote, "In the absence of regulation, Facebook and other companies are left to design their own policies. We have based ours on the principle that people should be able to hear from those who wish to lead them, warts and all," end quote. Policies like this push corporate responsibility onto the public and onto other professional sectors.

Facebook goes on to stipulate in that same statement that paid advertising, though, will have to abide by, quote unquote, "community standards." But what

happens when political and media elites coordinate to blanket social media with falsehoods? In these cases, advertising isn't necessary for spreading lies to millions because all they need is the platform to work exactly as designed. Who, then, is responsible for explaining why a consumer was exposed to certain falsehoods? Who is responsible for making public correction when falsehoods are identified?

Yesterday, we saw Facebook and Twitter refuse to let their services be used to distribute leaked materials. Over the past year, platform companies have taken similar actions on White supremacist manifestos and COVID-19 misinformation too. It will take some time for moderation to become part of the design of social media, just as it took a decade for media manipulators and disinformers to scale their attack.

Recently, Facebook's former Director of Monetization, Tim Kendall, gave testimony before Congress that suggested a new policy framework for assessing social media's negative effects on society. Kendall compared social media to the tobacco industry, because both focused on increasing the capacity for addiction by slowly modifying their products over time. Legislation about smoking had to move beyond the rationale that it was an individual choice, and accept that secondhand smoke had public health effect. For some time, families, insurance companies, employers, and businesses paid the price for smoking's ill effects on society.

Our research team has identified four clear impact zones that are charged with cleaning up after the damage caused by unmoderated, unregulated, and unmanageable misinformation conspiracies. Journalists, for instance, have had to adapt over the last 4 years to the normalization of misinformation on social media, and have developed a misinformation beat. But covering misinformation is a drain on newsrooms or resources, which could be much better spent on sustaining journalism rather than moderating content on platforms.

The second area of impact is public health and medical professionals. Increasingly, public health and medical professionals, including the WHO, have turned to my team for assistance in dealing with medical misinformation. Doctors should not have to become online influencers in order to correct misinformation, pushing miracle cures and bogus medical advice. When conspiracies link up with medical misinformation, it can be especially difficult to advocate for the truth.

Third, civil society. We are now in a position where racialized disinformation is a seasoned tactic of domestic and foreign influence operations. Racialized disinformation refers to campaigns that either impersonate the identities of communities of color, or use racism to boost polarization on wedge issues.

Brandi Collins-Dexter recently testified about these issues at a hearing in June, where she highlighted how tech companies have hidden behind clarion calls to protect free speech at all cost, without doing enough to protect those subject to medical misinformation, hate speech, incitement, and harassment on social media.

Lastly, law enforcement personnel and first responders are unfairly shouldering the burden of rumors and lies that are being spread where flashpoints for violence are permeated by calls to action on social media, including the tragic events in Kenosha. Law enforcement are at a serious disadvantage when attempting to do their jobs amid rumors and conspiracy theories spreading like digital wildfire online.

And I will close by just saying rather than hold onto techno nostalgia for a time when social media was not this harmful, sometimes it is worth asking: What would it take to uninvent social media, so that we can chart a course for the web we want, a web that promotes safety, equity, and democracy? Thank you.

[The statement of Ms. Donovan follows:]

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The Chairman. Thank you, Dr. Donovan.

We will now go to Ms. Jankowicz.

STATEMENT OF NINA JANKOWICZ

Ms. Jankowicz. Thank you. Chairman Schiff and distinguished members of the committee, it is an honor to testify before you today on the degradation of our information ecosystem, and its exploitation by malign actors. This is a threat that is dismantling democracy. As Americans right now exercise their democratic rights, it is critical the Nation is informed about how disinformation might blunt their voice and their vote.

I came to study disinformation through the lens of Russian influence operations. My work has led me to an unsettling conclusion: Not only have the U.S. Government and social media platforms all but abdicated their responsibility to stop the threat of foreign disinformation, domestic disinformation now runs rampant. It is amplified in the media, online, in the Halls of Congress, and from the White House itself. It does our adversaries' work for them, leaving us vulnerable to continued manipulation and leaving our democracy imperiled.

Today, I will outline three trends that exemplify the modern information space: The first is the increased use of information laundering to deliver foreign disinformation. Today, malign actors like Russia are increasingly amplifying their narratives by using authentic local voices or organizations to conceal the origin and to lend legitimacy to a given malign narrative.

Perhaps the most well-known example of information laundering, and one that this committee knows intimately, is the nexus of conspiracy theories related to Ukraine

and Vice President Joe Biden. These unsubstantiated and misleading narratives, promoted by self-interested and corrupt individuals seeking power and personal gain, were endorsed by the President's advisors, treated as fact by portions of the media, and legitimized within the Halls of Congress.

Individuals that served as sources for these theories have since been discredited, sanctioned, and revealed to have active connections to Russian intelligence services. And, yet, this week, we are still talking about these theories.

The use of local actors and information laundering makes cracking down on disinformation through content moderation alone much more difficult, given First Amendment protections. This is why disinformers take advantage of social platforms' incentive structures to seed malign narratives and contribute to today's second trend, conspiracy convergence, when adherents of one theory are exposed to and encouraged to spread others.

This year, as Americans searched for answers about the coronavirus pandemic, closed spaces online have become a fertile ground for seeding and amplifying disinformation. As my co-panelist, Cindy Otis, and I have found, conspiracies run rampant across platforms and cross-pollinate between communities and indoctrinate new members. This, in particular, is a problem on Facebook groups.

Facebook has made changes to soften this phenomenon, but they leave aside the most pernicious source of disinformation, high-profile accounts to which Facebook's community standards seemingly do not apply. President Trump pushes content, including falsehoods about the safety and security of mail-in balloting, which is expressly against Facebook's terms of service to nearly 30 million users on his page alone.

Unlike what Facebook's policies might imply, disinformation campaigns do not begin and end on Election Day. They are built over time, trafficking in emotion and

increased trust, to undermine the democratic process as a whole. When our information ecosystem gets flooded with highly salient junk that keeps us scrolling and commenting and angrily reacting, civil discourse suffers. Our ability to compromise suffers. Our willingness to see humanity in one another suffers. Our democracy suffers. But Facebook profits. In 2019, Facebook generated 98 percent of its revenue, a whopping \$69.7 billion, from ads.

And, finally, the third trend relevant to our brilliant, all-female panel today, is that disinformation often targets women and minorities. We know that the IRA disproportionately targeted Black voters to suppress the Black vote. We know that the Kremlin has targeted women with sexualized disinformation campaigns meant to drive them from participation in public life. And today, an ongoing Wilson Center project I lead has observed an increase in individuals spreading demeaning and false narratives against Senator Kamala Harris ahead of Election Day. These campaigns are meant to affect American women and minorities' participation in the democratic process. Every American should categorically reject them.

Overall, these trends mean that foreign adversaries no longer need creativity or brute force to be successful. They need only sit back and watch, regurgitating and amplifying what is already endemic to our society.

Nineteen days before voting closes in the 2020 election, I believe we are more vulnerable to online disinformation from both foreign and domestic sources than ever before. Any of the recommendations we discuss today need to have an underlying recognition that any government that claims to fight disinformation originating from outside its borders cannot do so while it embraces the same methods within them.

Disinformation is a threat to democracy, no matter what political party it benefits. It is long past due that we begin to address this challenge to the very foundation of our

country and its values. My written testimony details the urgent changes necessary to heal our information ecosystem. I look forward to discussing them with you later today. Thanks so much.

[The statement of Ms. Jankowicz follows:]

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The Chairman. Thank you, Ms. Jankowicz.

Ms. Otis.

STATEMENT OF CINDY OTIS

Ms. Otis. Thank you, Chairman, members, and my co-panelists. I am honored to appear before this committee, especially during this critical time in our Nation's history. I am here today to lay out the threats as I see them from a range of actors, both foreign and domestic, who are doggedly sowing and amplifying false information to influence and manipulate the American people. My analysis of these threats is informed by the decade I spent at the CIA as an officer in the directorate of analysis, serving our country under both Republican and Democratic administrations. It is also informed by the years I have spent since leading disinformation investigations in the private sector.

Almost 4 years ago, the Intelligence Community publicly released its unclassified assessment on Russian interference. In their report, the IC stated that, quote, "Russian efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow's longstanding despair to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order, but these activities demonstrated a significant escalation and directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations," end quote.

Since the release of their report in January 2017, I have seen a failure to take the necessary actions to combat foreign and state-sponsored interference itself.

As a result, and perhaps inspired by Russian efforts, more countries than ever are using false information to advance both their domestic and foreign-policy goals, such as China and Iran. Many of these foreign actors are actively targeting political divisions in

this country to manipulate and influence American citizens and to degrade America's standing in the world and the credibility of our institutions.

In the last nearly 4 years, I have also witnessed a rise in the number of both foreign and domestic commercial entities and financially motivated individuals who sell disinformation services under names like social media influence. Like foreign governments, they see an America more divided than ever, and they are more than happy to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories if doing so lines their own pockets.

We are also now witnessing a rise in nefarious activities by political campaigns and democracies around the world, including ours. They embrace and deploy tactics that sound much more like foreign influence operations than the tactics of good digital campaigning. In the United States, stoking political division with false information or conspiracy theories may win a candidate votes, but it also makes our democracy an easier target for foreign adversaries, promotes broader distrust by Americans in the institutions that should be working for them, and discourages people from engaging in the democratic processes.

Threat actors know that peddling disinformation and conspiracies work. They have become effective tools, and campaigns are cheap to produce. There are no meaningful consequences for those spreading disinformation, and no real recourse for those who fall victim to disinformation. Yet, a foreign government, a domestic group, or a for-profit entity, we are seeing, in real time, the impact of an American information space cluttered with voices trying to mislead and manipulate.

And in a global pandemic, when facts and truth are the difference between life and death, the situation could not be more dire.

We are living today in the biggest period of false information in history, and we

Americans are largely doing it to ourselves. The technology platforms have largely failed to adequately address the problems. Lies can go viral instantly on social media, while the truth takes longer, and the platforms even curate those lies into menus tailored to their users' purchases or appetites to ensure clicks. They make their users easy targets for disinformation actors to sow and spread content.

Americans are losing trust in what they read and see online. We are desperate for information, but certain groups feel they cannot trust the traditional institutions upon which they used to rely, including the media, who are now regularly threatened and blamed for the events that they cover. Americans are gravitating toward more extreme ideas and sources as well.

As a result, dangerous conspiracy theories and groups, such as QAnon and antiscience voices, are on the rise. In just 3 years, QAnon went from being a few posts on a fringe forum that primarily attracts White supremacists, to being a mainstream talking point by elected officials and political candidates running for office in our country.

Many Americans may have discounted conspiracy theories as harmless before the pandemic, but we are seeing conspiracies translate into real-world harm, such as violence, threats to marginalized communities, refusals to follow public health recommendations, and the targeting of young people, and foreign actors are absolutely taking advantage of that.

We can still take action, but the longer we stall, the more difficult it will be. Threat actors have taken their time, the time we have given them, to build and hone their capabilities and tactics. We must act now.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering your questions.

[The statement of Ms. Otis follows:]

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The Chairman. Well, thank you, Ms. Otis.

We will now go to our last panelist, Ms. Smith.

STATEMENT OF MELANIE SMITH

Ms. Smith. Thank you. Esteemed members of the Intelligence Committee, my name is Melanie Smith, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to talk about my research with you today. I have been studying the movement known as QAnon for over 2 years now, and I have watched it evolve from a fringe conspiracy theory into part of mainstream discourse.

When I first began researching QAnon, it was just one of a long list of communities that represented a concern for U.S. election integrity. Now, I believe it to be the most pressing threat to trust in government, public institutions, and democratic processes.

The QAnon movement supports a nebulous set of conspiracy theories that emerged in late 2017 when an account known as Q began posting coded messages on 4Chan. As mentioned, these theories revolve around the belief that there is a global elite cabal whose members are embedded in influential positions in government, media, finance, and the arts. QAnon represents a dualistic world view with a good and an evil, a hero and many villains.

I would like to tackle two of the most frequent misconceptions I hear about why QAnon poses a threat. These are that QAnon has been stoked or infiltrated by foreign actors, and that it is driven by bots or fake accounts. While both of these may have been true at various points in time, I would like to stress that QAnon really does appear to be a homegrown movement that engages real users.

The real reason QAnon poses a threat is in its systematic undermining of facts and

truths on topics of genuine concern, such as the integrity of elections, human trafficking, and the global COVID-19 pandemic. As Chairman Schiff noted, QAnon is steeped in anti-Semitic tropes, and the community has called for and been involved in the coordinated harassment of numerous individuals and organizations. Concerns about offline harm with QAnon are centered around the subsection of this movement that has an appetite for real-world violence and coordinated action.

There are three observations from our research that I want to highlight: It is a conspiracy movement that has permeated the mainstream in many countries; it is highly adaptable and adept at reaching new audiences; and as a result of these first two, it has become very difficult for social media platforms to take meaningful action to restrict the spread of its content.

On the mainstreaming element, when my team and I first created a network map of QAnon Twitter accounts in 2018, what we found was the most dense conspiracy community we had ever studied. This means that the accounts engaging with QAnon theories at this time represented an extremely tight knit and insular community that relied upon mainstream, right-wing accounts to boost its messaging and content. By the end of the following year, 2019, it had been increasingly scattered and autonomous. These accounts also became prolific in their sharing, often employing spam-like patterns of behavior to amplify certain pieces of false and misleading content. Offline support for QAnon has also increasingly mobilized. We tend to consider online conspiracy movements as restricted to the confines of the internet, and this is no longer the case with QAnon.

The second of these observations is that QAnon is highly adaptable, and its success appears to lie in its ability to shape shift. It is an all-encompassing, flexible framework that assimilates a wide range of existing and emerging conspiracy theories.

Coupled with the sheer volume of support of accounts, these loose, ideological boundaries enable the movement to be highly adaptive to the news cycle.

Since June 2018, Graphika has produced over 1,100 network maps on a wide range of online conversations taking place around the world. 195 of these contain at least one cluster of accounts that are primarily defined as QAnon supporters.

These include conversations about topics that are seemingly irrelevant; the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral, yoga, the Nike boycott, Brexit, and alternative medicine, to name a few. This means that these new audiences are likely to be exposed to conspiracy content through more benign topics that act as an unfortunate gateway.

As a consequence of QAnon becoming mainstream, and as a result of its ability to envelop existing conspiracy movements, it has become very difficult for social media platforms to take meaningful action. I am pleased to see new efforts being announced in recent weeks to restrict the spread of QAnon content. However, it remains to be seen how consistently and comprehensively these policies can or will be applied to a movement that evolves at such rapid pace.

We have already seen the QAnon community try out a number of tactics to evade detection and to coordinate moves to alternative platforms. During the time I spent working on violent extremist movements, a significant proportion of the difficulty with restricting the spread of that content lay in its detection. Enforcement was straightforward with much of this content needing to be removed from social media platforms and swiftly.

QAnon poses a more nuanced challenge. Detection is not the core difficulty, and appropriate policies to contain the influence of this content without compromising essential freedoms are not obvious. Taking meaningful action against this threat will require sustained attention from researchers to understand how it is evolving, creativity

from platforms to craft new and appropriate frameworks, and renewed efforts from entities tasked with ensuring that trust in government, public institutions, and processes cannot easily be eroded.

[The statement of Melanie Smith follows:]

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The Chairman. Thank you very much for that testimony. All of the panelists, we thank you for bringing your expertise to bear today.

We will start the Q&A now. Let me start, if I can, Ms. Smith, with where you left off. Given that QAnon has, as you indicated, cross-pollinated with other conspiracy theories, assimilated other groups of individuals pushing other misinformation and conspiracy, how do the platforms go after them? How effective do you think the steps that have just been announced by YouTube and Facebook and earlier announced by Twitter will be if this keeps morphing and evolving? And does that mean it ultimately all gets back to the algorithmic amplification of extreme content? Is that ultimately where the answer must lie, given the amorphous and adaptive form that groups like QAnon take?

Ms. Smith. That is a really interesting question. Thank you. There is a few changes that I think could be made by social media platforms in various different areas, the first of which is kind of a reminder that alternative platforms are really important here. So outside of mainstream media, we also see these slightly more closed-off fringe platforms becoming increasingly popular, and the spaces in which the adherence of these conspiracy theories really forge their beliefs. Mainstream media -- mainstream social media is then often used to amplify these ideas and to garner support for them.

So the few changes that I think should be made are, we need to be talking to alternative platforms about restricting content, and making a concerted effort in that space. I also think there could be changes to platform engineering to restrict the exposure of new audiences to algorithmic reinforcement of some of these ideas. That is something that Dr. Donovan, I know, has done. She might want to respond there.

I also think the content removal piece, it is important to consider the impact of pushing that content to fringe platforms. So that the best possible solution here when

we restrict content on mainstream social media is that QAnon will retreat to the fringes, and, therefore, not be able to be exposed to new audiences and new communities that could be impacted. I think demonetization and removing the financial incentive is a third possible way forward. But thank you for the question.

The Chairman. Well, thank you. And, Dr. Donovan, I would love to hear your thoughts as well. But perhaps you can, at the same time, respond to one of the other points that was made, which is: You now have actors in the United States knowingly amplifying this false content, including QAnon content, with an extraordinary number of people running for office, amplifying it with the President himself pushing it out. What challenge does that pose to the platforms, particularly in their political speech, which is given the broadest amount of protection under the First Amendment when you have, you know, elected officials, including the President of the United States, who are the purveyors of some of this false information and conspiracy theory?

Ms. Donovan. Yeah. Thank you for the question. And to comment a bit on what platform companies are recently doing, because it is such a mixed bag, scattershot approach, we do see a lot of shifting between platforms for these groups, who are essentially trying to make up for lost infrastructure. And, so, the points that Melanie made about these groups being extensive, adaptive, and resilient, and multi-platform, are really important in terms of whatever approach policy is going to take.

The other factor there is there is the way in which Facebook has redesigned posts, the sort of junk news era, to recommend groups. There has been extensive reporting by Brandy Zadrozny of NBC about this. But the recommendation of these groups, these private groups, is actually producing what we call hidden virality, that is, we have a really hard time studying what is being served in private groups on Facebook. And some of these private groups can be tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people.

And so it can be really a difficult challenge to understand even the extent and the scope of this.

And, of course, demonetization and reducing incentives is a really important aspect here, because some of these groups, particularly influencers, this is content. And if the content doesn't make money, they make other content. And so that's important to understand, especially as I talk about a different kind of feedback loop, which is essentially a White propaganda feedback loop. That is White propaganda. We know where it is coming from. And this is what you are saying in terms of, you know, when we see certain politicians using their social media as a lever to cause a misinformation cascade throughout our entire media ecosystem, this is a very important topic because it creates an enormous waste of resources by shifting the attention of journalists, who then have to write an entire story about something that isn't real because that piece of misinformation, or that propaganda, has now already reached millions of people.

And Cindy's points about this being over time is really important as well because this has been going on for a decade now, right. Social media is no longer new. It has matured into its fullest form now, and we know what the patterns of behavior are.

And, so, that cascade effect, though, is what I am talking about when I am talking about the true costs of misinformation. Who is paid to clean up all of that? It is an enormous task. And ultimately, I think, platform companies are showing that they are capable when they want to be, and responsible when they want to be. And we need to encourage that behavior, especially as conspiracies do what Nina was talking about, converge, that is, they kind of lay these rails, and then the train of disinformation shuttles along them. And so we have to think about how to you dismantle those rails in order to have any kind of impact in the long term on our entire media ecosystem.

The Chairman. Well, I have a bunch more questions, but I am going to go to

Mr. Himes for our next 5-minute round.

Mr. Himes, you may be still muted.

Mr. Himes. Okay. Am I coming through?

The Chairman. Yep. You are now.

Mr. Himes. Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses for a very interesting conversation.

I want to direct my questions to Ms. Jankowicz who said two things which horrified me. Number one, she said that information is dismantling democracy and that will be the --

The Chairman. If members could put their -- make sure they are on mute because we are hearing some background noise.

Mr. Himes. So Ms. Jankowicz said that misinformation is dismantling democracy. I am skeptical of that, and that will be my question. But she said something that horrified me even more, which was that governments -- I forget exactly how she put it -- are fighting disinformation, and I sense that that was said approvingly. Maybe it was growing up in Latin America in the 1970s, but I had a pretty up-close and personal experience with governments that fought misinformation, disinformation, and I am violently allergic to the inclusion of the word "information" and "government" in the same sentence, whether it is analyzing, evaluating, determining misinformation. We start going down that path, and we are not just breaking democracy, we are breaking classical enlightened liberalism.

And, so, I have really just two questions, and I should acknowledge that we are pretty careful. We understand that we shouldn't be in the business of fighting misinformation. That is probably inconsistent with the First Amendment. So what do we do? We ask that it be outsourced to people that we otherwise are pretty critical of,

like, Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey. We say you do it, which strikes me as a pretty lame way to address what may or may not be a problem.

So, Ms. Jankowicz, two questions for you. Number one, what evidence is out there that this is dismantling democracy? I don't mean that millions of people see QAnon. I actually want to see the evidence that people are seeing this information and are, in a meaningful way, in a material way, dismantling our democracy through violence or through political organizations. Because if we are going to go down that path, I need something more than eyeballs, so I need some evidence for how this is dismantling our democracy.

And, secondly, if you persuade me that we are dismantling our democracy, how do we get in the business of figuring out who should define what misinformation or disinformation is? That strikes me as hard. We are talking a lot about QAnon on this call today, but I remember the previous President, who I respected and admired very much, telling the American public that if they wanted to keep their private health insurance plan, they could do it. That turned out not to be true. So should Zuckerberg go to town on that?

So, I think you get my point here, is I am looking for the evidence of the dismantling of our democracy, and if that evidence is persuasive, what do we actually do to fix that rather than simply sort of admiring the problem?

Ms. Jankowicz. Thank you very much, Congressman. I totally understand your aversion to the idea that government would fight back against disinformation. In fact, you know, the use of that term has been basically the foundation to some very draconian fake news laws in places like Russia, or even Singapore. I do not believe that government should be in that business either, and I will get to some of the solutions in a second.

But to address your first question related to evidence of the dismantling of democracy, there are two news stories that I think point to this from the last couple of weeks alone. The first is related to the kidnapping plot against Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. The social media platforms played a huge role in allowing that group to organize. It allowed, you know, that group to -- it seeded the information that led them to organize. And, frankly, as a woman online who has been getting harassed a lot lately with sexualized and gender disinformation, I am very acutely aware of how those threats that are online can transfer onto real world violence. And that, make no mistake, is meant be to keep women and minorities from not only participating in the democratic process by exercising our votes but also keeping us from public life. So that is one big example.

But there was another example just recently from a Channel 4 in the U.K. documentary that looked at how the Trump campaign used Cambridge Analytica data to selectively target Black voters with voter suppression ads during the 2016 election. Again, this is -- it is affecting people's participation. It is not just about fake news, you know, stories on the internet.

In fact, a lot of the best disinformation is grounded in a kernel of truth. And in my written testimony, I go through a couple of other examples of how online action has led to real world action. This isn't something that is just staying on the internet. It is increasingly in real life.

Mr. Himes. Ms. Jankowicz, I don't have a lot of time. Do you think that both examples that you offered up, Governor -- the plot to kidnap Governor -- the Governor of Michigan, and your other example pass the but-for test? I mean, this country probably got into the Spanish American War over 130 years ago because of the good words of William Randolph Hearst.

So, how do we -- we have had misinformation and yellow journalism and terrible media and voter suppression forever. And I understand that these media platforms have scale that William Randolph Hearst didn't have, but are you sure that both of those examples pass the but-for, they wouldn't have happened without the social media misinformation?

Ms. Jankowicz. I believe they do, because they allow the organization of these groups without any oversight, and they allow the targeting, the targeting of these messages to the groups and people that are going to find them most vulnerable and are most likely to take action against them. And that is what our foreign adversaries do, and increasingly, it is what people within our own country are using to organize violence against the democratic participation of many of our fellow citizens.

Mr. Himes. Okay. Well, I am out of time. I would love to continue this conversation and pursue what you mean by groups being formed, quote, "without oversight." That also is language I would like to better understand, but I am out of time. But I would like to continue this conversation into, well, if this is the problem that you say it is, what do we actually do about it?

The Chairman. Mr. Quigley.

Mr. Himes. Mr. Chairman, I yield back the balance of my time.

The Chairman. Thank you.

Mr. Quigley.

Mr. Quigley. Thank you. Again, thanks to all of you for being here and for your work.

I just want to follow up a little bit on what Mr. Himes was talking about, because, again, awful, evil hate groups have been around since we have been around and, you know, during Jefferson's campaign for President, there were people on horsebacks

spreading lies, and Nixon's big lies. Is the biggest difference now the ease of communication and the anonymous nature of it that makes this scarier and more difficult than past hate groups and disinformation?

Ms. Jankowicz. I will be happy to answer if no one else is going to jump in.

Ms. Donovan. I would like to jump in.

Ms. Jankowicz. Go ahead, Joan. I am happy to yield to you.

Ms. Donovan. I think -- so one of the specialties of my research team is looking at how White supremacists get organized online, and I completely agree with you. They have been with us as long -- way before the web, and they were very early adopters of blackboard systems, email, newsletter-type technologies. All along the way, White supremacists have been early adopters of different technologies and have used them to turn -- turning them to their advantage in terms of organizing, growing their ranks, and then also creating more targeted messaging for recruitment. But what the shift is here is, one, they can use these platforms to raise resources, that is, money. They make money doing this.

And the second thing they do is they broadcast their events, some of which are -- you know, there is a case where there was a vigilante group down at the border with Mexico that were hunting people and arresting them and broadcasting it through Facebook Live, and all the while, asking for donations, right.

And, so, it is not the case that somehow, White supremacy has shifted, and there is, you know, a different set of -- I will say it is the case that there is a different set of advantages to using social media, and not having anyone at the control switch to say this is content that could also mobilize other people, recruit other people, and also incentivize this kind of behavior. And so I will hand it over to Nina if she wants to respond as well.

Mr. Quigley. What is the most -- when they succeed at this, going back to past

efforts, with Nixon, it seemingly was the bigger the lie, the more believable. And you said they have gotten better at their messaging. Did they succeed because of that, or is it the type of things they are talking about that seem to be more successful and gaining interest?

Ms. Donovan. I mean, it used to be that you had to hoax a journalist, or you had to do something really big in public, like a cross burning, to get on the cover of a town's paper, right, and so they have been able to effectively circumvent and deliver that messaging directly. I will tell you, in 2015, when I was researching White supremacy -- the White supremacist use of DNA ancestry tests, when you searched on Google for White nationalists, it is not that it took you to a site about White nationalism. It took you directly to White nationalist message boards where they welcomed you with open arms.

We have fought really hard as researchers to get platforms to realize that kind of recruitment strategy through the web has important consequences, especially when we talk about someone like Dylann Roof who entered into conversations about White supremacy through searching on Google and other search engines for Black on White crime. That was the key phrase. And that is well documented in Safiya Noble's book, *Algorithms of Oppression*.

Mr. Quigley. Thank you all again for your work and for being here.

The Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Quigley. We will go now to Mr. Castro. Mr. Castro, you are muted. You are unmuted, but I can't hear you. There we are. Well, maybe not. We are still having trouble. Mr. Castro, I will come back to you next, and hopefully we can figure out the technological glitch before we do.

So let's move to Mr. Heck.

Mr. Heck. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and my appreciation to the members of

this panel, which I, frankly, find extraordinary and provocative.

I want to preface my question with a confession, which is, on some level, I have a difficult time getting my arms around realizing the magnitude of this problem because of the sheer absurdity of the conspiracy premise. Frankly and bluntly put in my mind is how could anybody in their right mind believe that, but that is exactly what I want to get at. You are all incredible experts at the systems, and as it were, the sociology of this, but what I am interested in hearing from whichever one of you would be best suited to describe it is not the sociology, but the psychology. What are the characteristics that lead people to be receptive to that which is so self-evidently, patently absurd, ridiculous, harmful, crazy?

So I ask this question because I think in order for us to be able to deal with this, it is important that we not just understand the systems and the sociology, but what causes an individual to buy in, I will use the technical term, to such crap?

So if I might, perhaps, Ms. Smith, you came the closest to kind of getting there and especially with your expertise on QAnon. But any of you that might give me some insight, I would appreciate it very much.

Ms. Smith. I would be happy to jump in on that and with the necessary preface that I am not a sociologist, nor am I a psychologist. And I think it is interesting that you say that so many of these theories are so absurd, and I completely and wholeheartedly agree with that. I think what we are seeing now is such a mainstreaming of what would have been absurd. So the way in which people influence, for example, QAnon content now is through relatively mainstream, non-absurd topics.

So we are seeing a huge explosion in content around child sex trafficking and child sexual exploitation through the kind of save the children movement which is somewhat of a splinter from the QAnon theory that there is a global elite of -- a global cabal of elites

and people out there organizing sex trafficking rings. That is a QAnon theory, but child sex trafficking also does exist. So, when you are encountering this type of content in social media, the first thing that you come across may not be particularly absurd.

The issue is then with the way that social media functions and reinforcement mechanisms for drawing these users down a pathway where they will be exposed to more conspiratorial content. And I think the vulnerabilities there are very interesting and need to be kind of unpacked on a psychological level.

But I come from a background of studying extremist movements, and particularly violent extremist movements, as many of my panelists also do, and in that discipline, there is quite a lot of time and a lot of effort taken to understanding individual vulnerabilities and societal level vulnerabilities that make people susceptible to extremist content.

Some of those are basic human desires and needs like a need for community and a need to feel like you belong to something. QAnon really offers people the perception that they are part of something that is good, and that they are fighting against evil, and that kind of natural human desire to be part of a movement and to feel like you are going to be on the right side of history is something that I don't think we can take too lightly.

Mr. Heck. So, Ms. Smith, that is basically an argument that the innate desire to become tribal is met by this, and you described the glide path in, but it stopped short of helping me understand how it is that you set aside all reason. I am a fanatic member of a tribe called Gonzaga basketball fan, but it doesn't require me to set aside all my rationality to do that. What are those individual vulnerabilities that lead people to see red and say that is blue?

Ms. Donovan. I can chime in here a bit about the way in which political polarization is playing into this, which is to say that when political elites and media elites

do, with a wink and a nod, suggest that this is okay and appropriate content and, you know, a movement worth following, then it is another signal.

What is specific about QAnon and very unique, I think, is that there are so many ways in, and the theory evolves with breaking news. So one of the main hooks was the jailing of Jeffrey Epstein and the stories around Jeffrey Epstein and all of the intrigue about his island and elites. So when we are talking about these conspiracy theories having a kernel of truth, what it has done has also just laid itself out across the internet for anybody to go find these Easter eggs.

And, so, it has these elements of participation that involve information seeking that is rewarded by the platforms themselves. And then you bring that information back to these online groups, and some people spend hours upon hours a day doing just that or repackaging that as a YouTube video so that people can follow along.

Because this conspiracy theory evolves with the news and evolves with corruption in some places as well, it is a very live wire. That is different from coming into it from, you know, understanding that even if it is playing on anti-Semitic tropes, which only when you go into the theory and you really start to dig around and you know what those tropes are do you understand what the language is really calling for.

Mr. Heck. Thank you, Dr. Donovan.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The Chairman. Before I go back to Mr. Castro, I just want to let our viewers know I am not just calling on the Democratic members. The Republican members were invited to participate in the hearing. Regrettably, they have decided not to. We think that is a disservice to their constituents, and more broadly, to the discourse, but that is their decision.

Let's try again with Mr. Castro.

Mr. Castro. Thank you. Can you hear me?

The Chairman. Yes.

Mr. Castro. I just switched out from my computer to my phone.

Ms. Donovan, you said something that I think, as we analyze these issues, is very important, which is, essentially, that social media, like other industries, produces a product. And, in this case, that product may be damaging to Americans' health and to our democracy and our public discourse. I have, over the past 2 years now as chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, taken on the media with respect to the stereotypes that entertainment, for example, produces about different groups of people. But I think as a kid, there is a certain product that is being produced that is damaging, and how do you deal with that?

What is also very interesting is over the course of American history, as media developed, the standard line has been that the best counter for lies is truth. But we presuppose that there is this marketplace, that everybody's marketplace [inaudible] ideas that everybody is attuned to, that everybody is paying attention to, and ultimately, truth and lies will both be told, and we will be able to sort out fact from fiction.

But as we have seen with social media, it is more a matter of a kind of asymmetric conversation where people are going to various different channels that they may agree with or, get suckered into, or get allured into, and then end up believing it without ever actually being exposed or confronted by fact. Or by the time they are, they disbelieve the sources or the countervailing information.

So I want to ask you: As I think through these things, at least what is important for me is, do you believe that there is any kind of common marketplace of ideas at this point in the United States where you really have this battle between fact and fiction or truth and lies? What is the state of American media as we try to figure out, you know,

whether regulation is appropriate? And I ask this for Ms. Donovan, but also for any of the panelists. As legislators, as we try to figure out what our role is, whether it is regulation, whether it is taking away tax incentives also. It is not just a matter of doing affirmative things. You can also take away tax incentives.

And, so, how do we handle that, and part of it is what is the state of American media? Is there common marketplaces at this point or not?

RPTR WARREN

EDTR HOFSTAD

[2:32 p.m.]

Ms. Donovan. Yeah, so there is some great writing on this in the -- also, a lawyer that has written an interesting piece on why we shouldn't think about the marketplace of ideas when we think about the internet.

I think it gets to the third point that is in the title of this hearing, which is, we are also living through an infodemic. We are living through a moment where there is such an abundance of information that credible information and inaccurate information are circulating in the same spaces.

So, when you go onto Google Search, for instance, and you type in any keyword, what the algorithm does is it ranks, sorts, and then prioritizes certain information in order to return it to you.

In the midst of the early part of the pandemic, when we were still calling this "coronavirus," we saw an unbelievable surge in URLs using the term "coronavirus." As people started to change to call it "COVID-19," we saw another spike in the use of URLs with that keyword in it.

And then, if you look at the URLs, you start to figure out very quickly that grifters are through the space first. It is "Maryland COVID-19 Relief" is the URL, right? And if you are trying to find information about unemployment or where to get tested and you just search on Google for, you know, "Maryland COVID-19," you might bump into this website which was actually a front. It made it look like you were applying for information and for unemployment, but you were really just submitting your information to a firm that was going to call you and give you legal services, right, and try to gin up

business that way.

We are talking 100,000 and more domains in that moment that were meant to -- in some instances, were just parked. We don't know what they were going to be using it for. But in other instances they were, you know, about trying to get people to click on the link to think they were going to buy masks, hand sanitizer, toilet paper, or apply for government funding --

Mr. Castro. Pardon my interruption. I only have about 25 seconds left --

Ms. Donovan. Yes.

Mr. Castro. -- but I want to ask you: Where do you fall, from government being heavy-handed, so to speak, in terms of regulation, to being completely withdrawn, as I think for the most part we have been so far, to somewhere in the middle? What do you recommend? Where would you fall?

Ms. Donovan. I think government needs to incentivize platform companies to do better content moderation in terms of content curation, right? These platforms should be employing librarians at the front end to make sure that, when you are searching for something on the platform and it has this money-or-your-life consequence to it, that you should be getting true and correct information and not just what is, quote/unquote, fresh and relevant.

Mr. Castro. Thank you.

I yield back, Chair.

The Chairman. Thank you.

Mr. Welch?

Mr. Welch. Thank you very much.

I thank all the panelists.

Just pick me up from where you finished, Dr. Donovan. You know, I do believe

that the flood of misinformation is a threat to democracy, but I also think the threat is also the ethic now that you can believe whatever you want. And it is not just social media, and it is certainly not just Russian interference, when you have politicians such as the President taking advantage of this, but it is also a business model with -- I will use an example -- FOX News, where they basically do monetize a type of journalism that is largely, obviously, from my perspective, pretty fact-free.

And what is absent in a more extreme way than even the yellow journalism that Mr. Himes mentioned is any editorial function at all. And that is the breakdown of institutions and the breakdown of any structure in media where there is some obligation to stand behind what you publish. And, of course, the platforms that we have have exemption from any liability for whatever goes out over their platforms.

So the questions I have is: Number one, this problem that you are articulating with disinformation, isn't that part of a broader change in the whole media landscape, not just social media?

And then, number two, just talk a bit about the remedies. Because, to the extent that we are giving deference to Mr. Zuckerberg or Jack Dorsey to decide, this is really a public function, and how do you have a public function that tries to maintain some standards of editorial competence without there being censorship?

Dr. Donovan?

Ms. Donovan. Yeah, thank you. I am sorry. I feel like I am speaking a lot here, but I do have ideas about what do we do when we have this kind of feedback loop where people are charging the platforms with censorship when they are trying to do content moderation.

You know, it all mattered a lot less 10 years ago, when people didn't really think about social media when they thought about, where do I get my news? Right? And

this is what the fundamental change is, is that social media is not additive to the information environment. It actually --

Mr. Welch. Well, let me --

Ms. Donovan. -- changes the shape of information across our society.

Mr. Welch. Let me be a little more --

Ms. Donovan. Yes.

Mr. Welch. Let me be a little more directed.

Ms. Donovan. Sure.

Mr. Welch. Number one, should we eliminate that exemption, that liability waiver for platforms in what they publish? Should they take some burden, much like newspapers do? That is number one.

Number two, should there be discussion about restoring the fairness doctrine? And when that was eliminated, it really opened it up for an enormous amount of opinion-based news and the FOX News model.

Ms. Donovan. I don't --

Mr. Welch. And then, third --

Ms. Donovan. Okay.

Mr. Welch. -- the third question is, do we need a new agency that essentially would be, on behalf of the public, making the rules, subject to legislative -- obviously with legislative authority, as opposed to having that delegated to the tech giants?

Ms. Donovan. Yeah, I am very much in favor of a new agency that would evaluate what the actual impact is on other sectors and on our information economies and then come up with recommendations.

For right now, I don't think it would be advisable to, you know, really restructure 230 without a plan for how to go ahead.

I do see that platforms, you know, social media provides an enormous public good in terms of the ways in which people communicate with each other. It is the features that are becoming the problem, the ways in which information is sorted and, by and large, as well, the way in which people can pay to play. They can pay to push their information or their, quote/unquote, news across these platforms.

And so I do think we need especially regulation around the advertising component, especially as it relates to honesty, not just in terms of what the content is, but who is behind it, who is paying for it. Because until we have that kind of transparency, people are not going to know enough about how they are getting their information to be able to vet what to trust.

Mr. Welch. Okay. Thank you very much.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The Chairman. And, Ms. Jankowicz, I couldn't tell, were you seeking recognition there?

Mr. Welch. I would love to hear from her. Yeah.

Ms. Jankowicz. Sure. I am happily able to jump in there.

I am going to jump in on the fairness doctrine bit. I, personally, would welcome its return to our country. But I also think there is a point to be made about investing in journalism as a public good in the United States.

We spend \$1.35 per person per year on our public media. And I am sure I don't need to tell any of the members here of the service that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting provides, particularly in news deserts around the country, where the local NPR and PBS stations are some of the only local journalism that is trustworthy that exists.

And I think we could stand to invest more in that dichotomy and make sure that people have somewhere to go so there isn't a vacuum for this junk news, both from

foreign and domestic sources, to really fill the vacuum.

And then, on a new agency, I am of the opinion that we would really benefit from an oversight agency making sure that the rules that platforms -- we could either create a new set of rules or see if the rules that they have created for themselves are being enforced fairly and equitably.

Because right now what we are relying on is researchers who, like the four of us, are going under the hood, so to speak, and finding this stuff out, doing the platforms' due diligence for them, and we are relying on leaks and what the platforms tell us, which, frankly, I don't trust as the whole picture.

So I would like to empower a new oversight body to make sure that there is transparency and that the platforms are doing their due diligence by their users.

The Chairman. Thank you.

Mr. Krishnamoorthi?

Mr. Krishnamoorthi. Can you hear me, Chairman?

The Chairman. Yes, we sure can.

Mr. Krishnamoorthi. Okay. Thank you so much.

And thank to you the panelists for this excellent discussion.

I guess, let me throw out this question maybe to Ms. Smith. You know, one, we have dealt in some ways with, you know, basically jihadism on the web as being a real threat to our national security. And, in some ways, this parallels what we see with QAnon. There is all kinds of crazy, magical thinking, there is Black-and-White morality plays, and conspiracy theories abound.

And my understanding is that we have done a decent job in dealing with the social media influence of jihadism and ISIS -- to some extent. I am not positive. If I am correct about this, is there any lesson to learn from what we did there with this particular

QAnon theory?

Because I understand that intelligence agencies in other countries are actually actively thinking about dealing with it. Maybe we aren't yet, but maybe we should. And I would like to know how.

Ms. Smith. That is a really great question. Thank you for that.

Just one thing on the, kind of, potential restriction of jihadist content: This is a different issue, in my mind. With jihadist content, there was quite an easy yes-and-no game to be played with the content that needed to be swiftly taken down from social media platforms. You know, some of the most gruesome propaganda that we saw from groups like ISIS was violent and harmful and horrific in nature and quite clearly contravened community guidelines.

The issue that we have with some of that content was that it fell in this gray area of -- so, for example, when ISIS recruiters realized that their potential recruits were being turned off by gruesome propaganda, they really pivoted and adapted into emphasizing the healthcare system and the education systems that had been set up in the territory that they were occupying.

So the issue that we have with QAnon is this gray area. So much, such a vast proportion of this content does not violate community guidelines in any way. The platform actions that we have seen thus far specifically target violence-inducing content and harmful content -- that is to say, in the words of the platforms, usually content that can induce real-world harm. It is a small proportion.

So I am not a policymaker in this sense, and I have very few recommendations for how to restrict the amount of content that there is on the platforms that does not contravene community guidelines. But I would kind of repeat what I said earlier that I think platform engineering really does play a large role in preventing the, kind of, rabbit

hole that we are seeing of people being drawn into more and more content of the same nature.

Mr. Krishnamoorthi. Got it.

Let me just ask another quick yes-or-no question. Can we rule out that there are any other foreign actors that are fueling the QAnon social media conspiracy theories?

Ms. Donovan. Absolutely not.

Mr. Krishnamoorthi. Okay. Well, that was an easy answer, and that is what I thought.

I have noticed that the QAnon movement has spread to Europe. I haven't seen it -- has it spread to Russia as well?

Ms. Smith. That is a good question. I have researched QAnon in 27 different countries now on various different platforms. Obviously, the data that we get is open-source and available through public APIs. So the platforms they use, like VK, are not necessarily ones that we have access to. That is kind of the Facebook equivalent in Russia.

It is a good question. I would be surprised if there is no conspiracy movement that is at least adjacent to QAnon in Russia. But, certainly, the growth of QAnon in Europe has been astounding and rapid and terrifying.

Mr. Krishnamoorthi. I would just say, Mr. Chairman, this is an excellent topic that we should drill down on as we get closer to the election. We have been talking about foreign influence and Russian influence, active influence. I am concerned that it is playing a role here with QAnon.

Finally, last question to anybody: Are there ways that we might be able to infect the conspiracy theory and the QAnon conspiracy web with other ideas or stories that could sow confusion and discord and cause it to collapse in on itself? In other words,

kind of embed other crazy things that might pit groups against each other within the theories.

Ms. Donovan. So I was just going to say briefly about this, which is that one of the things that that might do on certain platforms is actually reinforce the circulation through algorithms and recommendation systems. Because recommendation systems actually respond to that kind of excitement. And so there is an inverse system of rewards for the ways in which platform companies would react to that and then how it may or may not disrupt communities.

One of the key features of these communities is just that they keep the conversation going. And so there is already a lot of back-and-forth and chatter about what different things mean. This isn't a group that is, like, ideologically wedded to one specific idea. Part of it is the discussion itself.

Mr. Krishnamoorthi. Well, thank you.

The Chairman. Thank you.

Representative Demings?

Mrs. Demings. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you so much to our witnesses for being with us today. It is an important discussion.

My connection has been a little bad. If it still is, I do apologize for that.

Ms. Jankowicz, I just want to, first of all, thank you for reminding us that social media really allowed the platform for those who plotted to kidnap a U.S. Governor to take place. I think that is extremely important.

And when we talk about threats to our democracy, we certainly know that women, Blacks, and other minorities are always targeted. There may be different means of targeting, but the mechanism is usually the same, and that is to instill fear.

And so I do believe that this is a significant threat to our democracy.

You know, here we are again, and it is such an important discussion. And I would think that we would have learned so much, whether it is foreign interference or what is going on here at home, from 2016 and what the Russian IRA did.

Could you please, Ms. Jankowicz or others, tell me what you believe were the lessons learned? Because this environment just seems so ripe for this discussion about QAnon right now. If you could just tell me what lessons learned, and what are some of the gaps, if you will, that still exist that we need to have an immediate focus on or bring immediate attention to?

Ms. Jankowicz. Thank you, Representative Demings. And I am definitely going to be brief and throw it over to Cindy, who can definitely expand on this as well.

Thanks for your recognition of the threat to minorities and women played by disinformation. I will just throw out two quick statistics. My team tracked the disinformation on Parler and 4chan, which are two, kind of, off-platform sites used by a lot of the folks who have the same sort of inclinations that the folks kidnapping Governor Whitmer did. During the Vice Presidential debate, we were tracking instances of sexualized and gender disinformation against Senator Harris. And, on those two platforms, those instances increased 631 percent and 1,078 percent. And it wasn't just because the event was getting talked about and she was in the public eye; the number of individuals latching on to these theories is growing. So I just think that is an important thing to say.

Regarding Russia and what we have learned, I am not sure that the United States has actually learned very many lessons. I think the past couple of days have shown that we have learned, perhaps, or at least have become more circumspect about how to report on hack-and-leak materials or things that might be of an illicit provenance. But,

other than that, you know, we have not learned from our allies in Central and Eastern Europe. We need a recognition of the threat of foreign interference, foreign disinformation, and of domestic disinformation.

And, right now, as this hearing demonstrates by the lack of folks from across the aisle who are present, this issue has become politicized. But it really knows no political party. And that is the biggest recognition that we need. I think you are all setting a great example of that bipartisanship today, and I hope to see more of that in the future.

And I am going to toss it over to Cindy.

Ms. Otis. Thanks, Nina and Congresswoman.

I think we have learned some interesting things since 2016. I think "disinformation" as a word has become sort of a kitchen-table topic. It certainly wasn't an issue being discussed prior to 2016 in most households.

I think that social media companies have done some things -- and these are some social media companies -- have done some things to address this issue, with increasing the investigative capabilities, increasing their content moderation capabilities. But they are still lagging behind in really figuring out what real-world harm is and what kind of content creates real-world harm.

They often conflate, you know, harmful content with just the idea of it being personal political opinion, and particularly when it is being seeded and spread by domestic individuals. But what we have seen throughout investigations across the board on a number of different topics is that, you know, a diet of false, misleading, sensational content that encourages violence does lead to real-world violence. It also might lead to things like people not voting or changing their, sort of, political beliefs and that sort of thing.

Just quickly, one of the things that I would like to see, moving forward, is a greater

investment in nonprofit organizations that depend on things like grants and funding to do the work that they are doing so many times on behalf of social media companies or to help inform social media companies. They are seriously underfunded.

They are also doing significant work in community education, working -- in particular, some of my colleagues at First Draft News and the News Literacy Project, in particular, doing just tremendous work in educating young people in particular, who face the same threat but in different ways. And so I would love to see greater investment in those organizations doing that critical work.

Mrs. Demings. Thank you both very much.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The Chairman. Thank you.

Representative Jackie Speier?

Ms. Speier. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, each of you, as remarkable advocates for a whole, I think, genre of area that we need to spend a whole lot more time.

I must say that I think there is a cyber war going on that we have basically abdicated any responsibility for. And it is because most of us -- and I will just speak about myself -- are pretty ignorant about how the system works.

For instance, many of you now have referenced this interest of having some oversight entity. If Reddit was able to identify QAnon as a problem back in 2018 and take them off of their platform and yet we are 2 years later and we still have other platforms just now waking up to it, I think that suggests that we do need to have some uniformity in how we address many of these issues.

As part of the Democratic Women's Caucus and as one of the chairs, we spent some time with Facebook in the last few months. And there was an Institute for

Strategic Dialogue, another nonprofit organization, and they looked at June and July ads and comments on female candidates, Republicans and Democrats, as compared to male candidates, and found that there was derogatory comments being made at a much higher pace for women than men.

So your comments about misogyny, I think, are really important. And I would like for you to give us some more insights, particularly as we look at the first Vice Presidential candidate who is a woman in a very long time, the first minority, and how one comment by one former State assemblyman in California went so viral that it has become part of a disgusting commentary about Senator Harris.

And the memes that have been generated are so grotesque and violate many these platforms' own mission statements, and yet they are so slow to take them off.

So I guess I would like some commentary on what you would like to see in terms of dispelling the misogyny and also enforcing the rules that they have set out for themselves.

Ms. Jankowicz. Thank you, Representative Speier. And you are absolutely right; the ISD report is an excellent one.

The report that we are working on now is drawing off of a 2-month time period, looking at candidates here in the United States but also female candidates including in New Zealand and the U.K. and Canada and a variety of journalists and activists who have been targeted with this sort of thing.

My own research has shown that the Kremlin uses these narratives against women in democratizing countries to keep them out of public life. And so it is not only an issue of our democracy, it is a national security issue.

What I personally would like to see is much more user-friendly reporting mechanisms so that folks who are seeing these comments, you know, in a Twitter thread

or the victim themselves can really report these things a lot more easily and quickly.

As I mentioned, I have recently been going through some of this harassment myself, and you have to send an individual report for every single post that comes up. You can't track them, you have no idea where they go, when, in reality, these are part of targeted harassment campaigns that originate with certain users.

And they use code words, the same as Melanie and Joan have been talking about with QAnon. You know, these aren't things that necessarily are going to get picked up by AI. They aren't, you know, your normal dirty language that you would expect to see. And that is what is going on with Senator Harris as well.

So we will have a raft of recommendations coming out with this report. But I think, in addition to looking at how to change reporting requirements, we also need platforms to recognize the undue burden that this places on victims, women, and especially women of color, as well as understand that this does translate to real-world harm. It translates to psychological --

Ms. Speier. Excuse me. I just want to get one more question in, and I have 29 seconds --

Ms. Jankowicz. Sure.

Ms. Speier. -- so I apologize for interrupting.

One of the things we learned was that The Daily "Liar," for instance, has a number of different sites, and they make a point of posting this identical information at the same time, and it algorithmically has the effect of pushing it up. And so you have a situation where, if you look at Facebook's top 10 posts, or top 10 pages, 9 of them are right-wing or conservative.

Can you speak to that and how that is using the system? When I raised that with Facebook, they said, "Well, you know, you folks can do that too." But it seems like

manipulating the system has become very commonplace for some and is counterproductive for what is in the best interests of the American public.

Ms. Donovan. Yeah, I can take that, because I think what you are talking about are coordinated influence operations --

Ms. Speier. Correct.

Ms. Donovan. -- masquerading as news networks, right? And we do need platform companies to be much more responsive to how their algorithms are manipulated by that coordinated posting style that we are starting to see, that if you have a little bit of resources and you can pay some interns and people, that they will actually really, you know, respond to coordinated posting networks.

And one thing that is important for us to understand is that is a feature of the platform, but it is not a feature that people with very little resources can actually use, right? These are people who are being paid to post. And we have seen that happen time and time again with also troll farms that do what Nina was just talking about, network harassment campaigns, where people are being incentivized to do this kind of behavior.

The other thing I just want to add quickly, if I may, about the networked harassment problem, which is, especially when it is down-ballot candidates, sometimes those harassment campaigns target the people responding to them. So, if you are a constituent and you want to ask a politician, you know, about their campaign or their platform, you might then become the subject of that kind of harassment. And all you have to do is look at "Maxine Waters" mentions to see how that works.

But once you start to look at candidates that have much less attention online and you look at all the comments about them, it is disgusting, but it also gets in the way of people who have an earnest interest in learning about the candidate.

Thank you.

Ms. Speier. Thank you.

My time has expired. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chairman. Thank you.

We have concluded the member questions, but I just had two followups, if I could. Let me address the first to Ms. Otis.

And, first of all, Ms. Otis, thank you for your years of service within the Intelligence Community. We are very grateful to you.

As an analyst, what data would be most useful to you all to be able to analyze the growth of these groups, the danger, the cross-fertilization? What data are the social media companies not sharing that they should share to help you do your work?

Ms. Otis. Thank you for the question, Congressman.

So the social media companies are very different in terms of the access that they allow to data. A lot of the research that you end up seeing on various disinformation campaigns focuses on Twitter because Twitter shares a lot of its data, whereas some of the other platforms do not, Facebook being one of them.

I think that, you know, as researchers, as analysts, one of the most important things for us is getting the data on what content and what accounts, what pages, all of that, have been removed.

On Facebook, for example, you get an announcement every week or couple of weeks about the content that has been removed. We get a couple of screenshots maybe. We get maybe an account, maybe a page name, that sort of thing. But it is after the content has been removed, and so we are not able to, unless we were particularly tracking that threat or were part of that analysis to begin with, we are not able to go back and identify the tactics and procedures that were used by threat actors to

do this campaign in first place.

And so that sort of data would be extraordinarily helpful as we look at things like: How are threat actors shifting their operations? What new tactics are they employing? How is this manifesting on the platform?

The Chairman. Okay. Thank you very much.

One last question for anyone. This is a dilemma I think all of us face that are confronting these issues. You know, Jackie mentioned, for example, an attack on Kamala Harris by a State assembly member. I am glad that she didn't repeat whatever the attack was, but we are often in the position of having to respond to these crazy conspiracy theories. I am the subject of some of them on QAnon myself, so I have all too much familiarity with this.

The more you try to respond, the more, I understand, you are actually amping up the conspiracy theory by putting it into discussion. So what would you recommend about the best way to confront this misinformation without somehow contributing to its amplification?

Ms. Otis. I can just quickly weigh in.

So that is the exact same question that probably most of us on this panel ask ourselves every day as well. We are looking to inform the public, keep them updated on the various threats against them, but at the same time, exactly as you said, sir, there is a huge risk of amplifying something that might not have been, you know, trending or going viral or making any inroads to begin with.

And so, essentially, the way that we weigh it is: Is this something that has, you know, reached enough people that we need to respond at this point, or, if we do respond, will that actually allow the group to expand their message, potentially get new followers, and increase, essentially, the reach of a particular narrative?

Ms. Donovan. I just wanted to add particularly about -- there are different responses for different professional sectors. Journalists often have to weigh, you know, are the audiences that typically read their journalism engaging with this, and then does it constitute a story?

But I think it is actually important that politicians realize that sometimes things will be low-level on the internet but you have been targeted by a disinformation campaign, where they are just hammering your mentions with these stories and allegations, and then the fact that you do respond triggers a news cascade, that that makes it a newsworthy story.

And so I think that politicians have to recalibrate what they engage with online so that we don't put journalists in this position of having to write about it because politicians have responded to particular disinformation campaigns.

That is the one part that is really tricky, I think, for a lot of people, is that they don't often know that they are targeted by these things. And so it helps to look around and see, is this information that is actually circulating more broadly across the web and across platforms, or is this really about, you know, me as a politician or me as a journalist or me as a public health professional?

And so I think it is really important that newsworthy individuals -- politicians, celebrities even -- learn that they are playing a role in the cycle of amplification.

The Chairman. Well, thank you all so much for your testimony today. It couldn't be more timely; it couldn't be more important, in many respects. It looks like we have taken one step forward and two steps back, you know, when we look at where we are now compared to 4 years ago.

It is encouraging to see the press not so readily amplify, for example, stolen materials, hacked materials, as took place 4 years ago, without putting that in context,

about why we were receiving information about hacked materials.

But, at the same time, we have taken some considerable steps back. In 2016, the Russians had to make up some of their content and push it out. Now, the Russians can merely amplify false content coming even from the President of the United States. And that is very certain steps way backward.

So thank you for helping us appreciate the changing nature of this threat landscape. We are really grateful for your expertise.

And, with that, we will adjourn. The committee is adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 3:08 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]