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DISINFORMATION



*DEMOCRACIES REQUIRE
A RELIABLE FLOW OF
INFORMATION*



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DISINFORMATION: DEMOCRACIES REQUIRE A RELIABLE FLOW OF INFORMATION

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The reliable flow of information is one of the most essential battlegrounds in the fight to stabilize democracies around the world. The rise of disinformation campaigns, authoritarian crackdowns on press freedoms, and the decline in local journalism in the United States and around the world present three critical obstacles to that reliable flow.

Our recommendations:

- **FEDERAL AND STATE OFFICIALS, ALONG WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR, MUST PLAY A PIVOTAL ROLE IN COMBATING DISINFORMATION**
- **THE ADMINISTRATION AND CONGRESS SHOULD TAKE THE LEAD IN PROMOTING FREEDOM OF THE PRESS**
- **CONGRESS SHOULD TAKE SMART, BUT NOT INTRUSIVE, STEPS TO ADDRESS THE DECLINE IN LOCAL JOURNALISM**

Disinformation campaigns have flourished during the COVID-19 pandemic, spreading falsehoods about the coronavirus. Leaders in nations like Hungary, Russia, and Turkey continue to actively stifle dissent through limiting and controlling the ability of journalists to report on their countries. And the closure of newspapers across the world has made it increasingly hard for many citizens to gain access to unbiased information about their communities and nation.

The danger for democracy in each of these realities is that citizens lack access to the facts they need to make informed decisions. At the same time, they lose the knowledge required to hold their leaders and governments accountable. Even worse, a lack of reliable information undermines the trust that a democracy depends upon for its stability. Tragically, we saw in real-time on January 6 how false information can inflame passions and incite violence.

FEDERAL AND STATE OFFICIALS, ALONG WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR, MUST PLAY A PIVOTAL ROLE IN COMBATTING DISINFORMATION

Russia, China, Iran, and other authoritarian powers are intensifying their efforts to

undermine free societies through comprehensive disinformation campaigns. The aim of organizations like Russia's Internet Research Agency is to erode confidence in our democracy, manipulate our citizens, and sow distrust.

We advocate a range of methods for federal and state leaders to use to respond to this new frontline in the quest for democratic freedom.

Federal agencies like the Department of Homeland Security, the National Security Agency, and the State Department need to remain engaged and nimble in their efforts to stave off authoritarian powers' adaptive use of technology to spread falsehoods and distortions. As they pursue this important work, Congress must adequately fund entities like the State Department's Global Engagement Center so it can constantly monitor and expose technological threats to our democracy, whether from deepfake videos, automated bots, or fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Legislators on Capitol Hill must be fully informed and equal partners with federal agencies in developing proactive and reactive responses to cyber threats. As the devastating recent Russian cyberattacks on our government and private sector show, cyberattacks are widespread and fast-changing. They require a bipartisan approach in both houses of Congress. By targeting particular candidates or parties, our adversaries seek to foster divisions among Americans and their leaders. A unified front is one of the best tools to keep the attackers from achieving their mission.

The White House needs to lead an effective international response among the world's democracies. The United States is hardly the only target of cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns. This modern warfare is being waged from Europe to Africa to Latin America by private individuals and organizations as well as by national governments.

Coalition building will matter for the new administration. U.S. partnerships with countries like Australia, Japan, and South Korea, as well as multilateral structures like NATO, are essential to stopping a threat to all democracies to varying degrees.

In the private sector, social media companies have a crucial role to play in stopping the flow of disinformation campaigns. Social media has been central to authoritarian governments spreading lies during our recent elections, the ongoing pandemic, and America's racial protests.

Social media companies appropriately shut down content during the recent U.S. election that spread misinformation about how, where, and when we could vote, and labeled information as false no matter its source. They likewise took action after the mob assault on Capitol Hill to stop any further disinformation from leading to greater violence.

Next, social media companies must vigorously enforce their own terms of service against disseminating disinformation, strengthen internal infrastructure for identifying "fake

news” and accounts, and further develop partnerships with firms that rate content for reliability and truthfulness.

As they regularly update laws that govern the nation’s media organizations, legislators should re-examine the federal statutes that appropriately allowed the internet to develop over the last 25 years without much interference. Technologies have so rapidly changed that it is appropriate for Congress to reconsider whether there are fair and limited ways for social media companies to be held responsible for the content that appears on their sites.

Finally, state legislators and state education leaders should bolster our education system with effective media literacy courses in elementary and secondary schools. Starting early, children need the skills to distinguish truth from fiction. This includes knowing how to consult multiple sources to verify the veracity of the information we consume.

Each of these steps puts the burden on lawmakers to understand the evolution in our media ecosystem. As they seek to understand these rapid changes, members of Congress as well as state legislators should listen to and learn from technologists about how the development of new technologies might impact the flow of information.

THE ADMINISTRATION AND CONGRESS SHOULD TAKE THE LEAD IN PROMOTING FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Along with waging disinformation campaigns, authoritarian leaders are on the prowl against freedom of the press. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported in November that 22 journalists already had been killed in 2020, while 248 journalists were in prisons around the world.

As one example, the Chinese Communist Party maintains control over news reporting via direct ownership, accreditation of journalists, harsh penalties for public criticism, and daily directives to media outlets and websites that guide coverage of breaking news stories. And they have blocked numerous websites for years, including major news and social media hubs like The New York Times, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook.

Freedom of the press may actually be the most integral freedom. A free and vibrant media provides an entry point and platform for citizens to stay informed, engage in their communities, consume and civilly debate ideas, and hold government accountable for its actions.

The administration should put a priority on freedom of the press when challenging authoritarian leaders in places like Russia, Hungary, and China. This can be done through the release of public statements by administration officials defending a free press, making press freedom a priority in official head-of-state meetings, and diplomats highlighting the role journalists play in a society.

Congress must adequately fund the National Endowment for Democracy and organizations like the U.S. Agency for International Development. They work around the world to grow democratic institutions such as a free press.

Congress should provide the support that taxpayer-funded organizations like Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty require to provide valuable, accurate information to people in nations that lack a free press and uncensored news.

The administration and Congress should especially protect and restore the independence of these organizations so that their reputation for journalistic integrity is not compromised through domestic political interference. Reporting by these organizations is often a lifeline to people searching for freedom around the world.

CONGRESS SHOULD TAKE SMART, BUT NOT INTRUSIVE, STEPS IN ADDRESSING THE DECLINE IN LOCAL JOURNALISM

In the United States and around the world, local media organizations are disappearing. In the United States alone, more than 2,000 U.S. newspapers have shuttered since 2004. Their collapse has left behind “news deserts” or “ghost newspapers,” and that has led to fewer journalists reporting on local and state governments, which is one of their most important roles. Between 2008 and 2018, newsroom employment fell to 38,000 workers from 71,000.

Congress should stay clear of investing public dollars in newspapers, but legislators should consider different ways to encourage a more sustainable financial model for newspapers. First, news media organizations could be granted a temporary antitrust exemption so the industry can negotiate with social media companies. The aim would be for them to get paid for the content posted on social media, which currently do not pay for the information. Any exemption would have to be constructed properly. And social media companies would likely need an incentive like a tax break to negotiate. But changing antitrust laws, if even only temporarily, is worth exploring. Second, Congress should consider rewriting tax laws so it would be easier for newspapers to become nonprofit institutions, if they like. This could help grow more successful reporting operations in communities and states. Finally, Congress should consider making newspaper subscriptions tax deductible, as they are for public broadcasting memberships.

In each of these cases – combating disinformation campaigns, promoting a free press, and preserving local media operations – lawmakers and policymakers from Washington to state capitals can sustain the reliable flow of information that democracies require to keep their people informed.



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