

February 11, 2023

**MEMORANDUM FOR JEN EASTERLY, U.S. DIRECTOR OF CYBERSECURITY &
INFRASTRUCTURE SECURITY AGENCY**

FROM: Katie Atkeisson, Samantha Cortez, John Eigel, Colm Grove, Hailey Havron,
Lily Hawkins, Enrique Mendoza, Janneth Najera, Melina Peters,
And Peter Teachout

SUBJECT: How can the United States curtail the effects of disinformation in social
media?

BLUF: Social media has been increasingly used as a platform for disinformation by
hostile actors. In an effort to curtail disinformation, it is vital to educate U.S.
citizens on its adverse effects and how to identify it.

Recommendation (Option 3 below):

The federal government should develop cyber hygiene and news literacy education programs for primary and secondary (K-12) education. This would be enacted at the state and local level through federal support. With social media becoming an increasingly integral part of American society, countering bad actors requires a ground-level approach to educate our population on the effects of disinformation, and how to properly spot and differentiate between truth, opinion, and disinformation. While this may not have an immediate effect, it begins the long-term process of inoculating our population against disinformation.

Background:

Actors, both legitimate and illegitimate, have propagated influence campaigns as long as countries have been at war with one another. These actions have moved to the digital realm, affecting social media platforms and disrupting American society. Disinformation, or the intentional malicious distribution of false or misleading information affecting the American citizenry, directly threatens our democracy. Thus far, malign influence via disinformation has affected Americans at-large by meddling in elections, seeding public doubt in national institutions, and sowing divisions within American society. With Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the conversation regarding disinformation has been renewed. The ability of bad actors to sway public opinion and shape conversations to further their own interests must be addressed to meet this growing threat.

Disinformation affects large audiences in rapid time and dangerously influences citizens' opinions from just a click away. With the rise of technology and access to oversaturated media outlets, our nation's vulnerability to disinformation from both domestic and foreign threats needs to be addressed. Originators of disinformation have not been held accountable for misinforming our citizenry, influencing their judgment, and putting our democracy at risk. The introduction of disinformation has undermined the trust of American media. Although the distribution of disinformation is not new, the vast volumes of information from bad actors is at an all-time high.

Disinformation erodes trust in election processes, government, and industries, inciting division between groups, and has exponentially increased with the rise of social media. Therefore, disinformation is a multifaceted issue that requires a solution that incorporates all aspects of the society it affects. In recent years, disinformation's most visible effect has been dividing the American population along ideological and demographic lines. Online influence with elements of disinformation driving individuals to take action in the events of Pizzagate, the January 6 capital riots, and mass shootings in Colorado Springs, CO and Buffalo, NY. Our goal is to take steps to ensure that United States citizens are safe and secure on social media and able to recognize the issues with disinformation.

Proposals:

Option 1: 1 Year Cyber Hygiene Awareness Campaign and Celebrity Endorsement. The federal government would enact a national campaign through the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the Ad Council, on the effects of disinformation and how to spot it. As part of this campaign, celebrities would be utilized to ensure wider dissemination and further the effectiveness of the campaign.

Option 2: Social Media Platform Training. Social media companies would be financially incentivized via CISA provided federal grants to provide social media platform training for new users. Social media companies would be afforded the lead to develop social media training programs for their users that align with CISA developed standards.

Option 3: Federally Mandated Cyber Hygiene and News Literacy K-12 Curriculum. CISA in partnership with the Department of State's Global Engagement Center (GEC) and the Department of Education would develop curriculum for K-12 students to be disseminated to state education departments. Federal funds would assist states in the implementation of this curriculum. The federally developed curriculum would provide a nation-wide gold standard for cyber hygiene and news literacy education.

Analysis of Options:

Attempts to curtail disinformation from home and abroad requires collective efforts from government, technology companies, media outlets, educational institutions, and individuals. Creating a public consciousness that can more effectively discern between fact and opinion is a crucial beginning for American society to curb the effects of disinformation.

With the ubiquitous nature of social media in today's world, cyber hygiene and news literacy education is the natural progression of lifestyle education that has evolved from the likes of home economics, typing classes, and auto-shop classes. Disinformation will not go away; it will evolve, become more pervasive, and may become indistinguishable from fact. Our best defense against disinformation is a good offense.

- **Option 1: Cyber Hygiene Awareness Campaign and Celebrity Endorsement.** A 1 year nationwide cyber hygiene awareness campaign, allows for a cohesive message to reach the American public. With a defined lifespan, this option allows for a lower resource commitment than options 2 and 3.
- **Option 2: Social Media Platform Training.** Social media platform training transfers the responsibility to educate the public to social media companies. This however, limits education to only those who own accounts on the various platforms. Furthermore, the private nature of these entities makes oversight difficult.
- **Option 3: Federally Mandated Cyber Hygiene and News Literacy K-12 Curriculum.** The most ambitious option, a federal mandate for states to implement cyber hygiene and news literacy curriculum created by CISA, GEC, and the Department of Education is most likely to yield long-term results. Under this option, state governments have the responsibility to educate their young population in primary and secondary education with the full backing and support of the federal government.

Conclusion:

We recommended at minimum, the selection of option 3 to create long-term education at the state-level which prepares our citizens for a new world where adversaries use innovative techniques to shape public opinion. However, based on a desired level of federal commitment and resource allocation, a multi-option approach including options 1 and 2 would have a greater impact.