



Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

December 10, 2020

President-elect Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
Biden-Harris Transition Team
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear President-elect Biden:

U.S. national security experts have long been sounding the alarm on the threat of disinformation and misinformation from foreign adversaries such as Russia, China, and Iran, but the past few years have made it clear **that we must also protect against domestic online threats through proactive education, prioritized research, and increased transparency.**

Disinformation and misinformation are not partisan issues. They affect our collective public health, safety, and democracy. We founded the Congressional Task Force on Digital Citizenship earlier this year in order to focus our policy efforts on countering online harms by equipping Americans with tools to be resilient against online threats and falsehoods. The COVID-19 pandemic has been called an “infodemic” by the World Health Organization because of the rampant disinformation and misinformation that has spread surrounding it, particularly online.

We have seen a drastic rise in online extremism that has only been heightened during the pandemic and recent elections. There will be future disinformation and misinformation events that will attempt to erode the foundations of our democratic society, and foreign adversaries will look to take advantage of a lack of coordinated national response to these events. As your administration begins the challenge of putting in place evidence-based policies to combat online threats, we urge you to utilize a robust, whole of government system to build citizen resilience to disinformation and misinformation. We hope your administration will consider the following actions:

Launch a multiagency digital democracy task force. A new digital democracy task force should be comprised of officials from across the federal government who, with dedicated funding and resources, shall develop a federal strategy to create greater national resilience to online threats as well as explore stronger protections for the democratic process. It should be responsible for rolling out media literacy education across the federal government, including guidance for how best to proactively monitor for disinformation and communicate during a disinformation or misinformation event. Communications strategies from trusted members of the government will be needed to counter disinformation and misinformation, especially as your administration works to ensure that Americans across the country are inoculated against COVID-19.

Address media deserts and fund media literacy programs with a commitment to truth-seeking. The loss of independent local news in communities and the increasing number of “news deserts” across the United States has meant that Americans are more frequently being siloed into different news environments online, which report vastly different information and do not offer the same editorial standards to protect against disinformation and misinformation that traditional news media do. As social media platforms post record revenues from engagement, they seldom act as responsible information gatekeepers and, in fact, have financial incentives to direct users to posts that are false, misleading, or emotionally manipulative. At the same time, Americans are left with few tools to discern what is factual reporting.

Your administration could prioritize funding for media literacy and education programs that work to build resilience to disinformation and misinformation. Libraries are in every community, serving all backgrounds and ages, and can be a critical resource in arming individuals with the knowledge and skills to evaluate and understand fast-moving digital information. Investments in quality public broadcasting, reporting, and the next generation of truth-seeking journalists will also help to bolster our society against future “infodemics.”

Support collaboration between government and civic organizations to combat dangerous propaganda and increase funding for evidence-based programs. Although social media platforms have taken some steps to limit the spread of harmful disinformation and misinformation over the past year, we can still see how easily this content is posted and amplified by bad actors and unknowing citizens. And, as we mentioned above, platforms have financial incentives for engaging posts to reach larger audiences, regardless of the content. However, computer algorithms still make up a majority of content moderation, and platforms have at times refused to take action against accounts and groups promoting violence and hate speech. In 2019, the FBI labeled fringe political conspiracy theories as a domestic terror threat and it is highly troubling how many Americans have adopted these conspiracy theories as truth. With the targeted amplification of these conspiracy theories online, more individuals will be exposed to this extremist content and may be motivated to commit criminal acts.

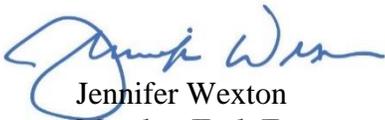
Your administration could dedicate resources to evidence-based programs within the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice that work to deradicalize individuals in online communities. Civil society and civic organizations also play a crucial role, and your administration could prioritize grant funding for experienced organizations to research the dynamics of radicalization in the online environment, teach vulnerable audiences how to spot propaganda, and build the long-term capacity of civic organizations to provide counter-narratives.

Collaborate with global allies. Disinformation and misinformation have become mainstream in 2020; however, our allies have been responding to this threat for years. Canada, as an example, took swift action after watching the events surrounding the 2016 U.S. election and stood up a new government service, the Digital Citizen Initiative, to build citizen resilience to disinformation and support a healthy information ecosystem. France has rolled out several tools that allow for public analysis of platform ad libraries, real-time fact checking to counter disinformation campaigns, and an open resource to help collaboration on countering disinformation and misinformation.

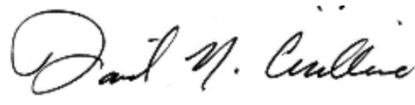
Your administration should seek to partner and collaborate with our global allies on these issues to help set global mechanisms on platform transparency, share information on the evolving digital ecosystems, and develop protocols for citizen resilience to online information. This is a complex, shared issue that recognizes no border. Deliberate collaboration with our allies and partners will provide additional perspectives and solutions we cannot imagine nor execute alone.

Disinformation and misinformation will continue to evolve and our job as policy makers is to keep up, while also looking ahead at building a more resilient society. Infodemics will not go away now that there is a COVID-19 vaccine and conspiracy theories will continue to be exploited. The United States has fallen behind global allies in understanding and working to combat disinformation and misinformation, and foreign adversaries have identified it as a point of weakness for our nation. We encourage you to work with researchers, scholars, and civil society to understand the impact of disinformation and misinformation on American society and we stand ready to assist you in putting forward these new initiatives.

Sincerely,



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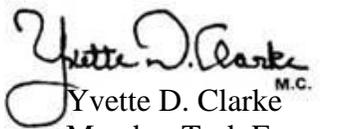
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