



Biden administration takes heat over DHS disinformation board

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April 30, 2022

News that the Biden administration's Department of Homeland Security had formed a Disinformation Governance Board was met with swift backlash from conservatives and free speech advocates worried about how the board will function and how it comports with the First Amendment.

Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas mentioned the board Wednesday during a hearing before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security, saying his department had just recently constituted the board. But the disinformation entity's name and mission set off red flags over potential free speech violations.

"The federal government is supposed to not impede free speech, and that's exactly what this board is going to do," said Lora Ries, a former DHS deputy chief of staff and director of the Heritage Foundation's Border Security and Immigration Center. "It's not at all part of the mission of the Department of Homeland Security."

Critics swiftly compared the board to the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*. One of the key concerns is who will decide what constitutes disinformation, Ries added. On this measure, the disinformation board attracted additional scrutiny.

Nina Jankowicz, who was a disinformation fellow at the Wilson Center and adviser to the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry as part of the Fulbright Public Policy Fellowship, confirmed Wednesday that she had been named executive director of the board. However, Jankowicz has a history of sharing misleading claims about British ex-spy Christopher Steele's discredited Trump dossier and downplaying the controversy embroiling Hunter Biden.

When pressed by a reporter about the situation, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Thursday that she needed to learn more about it but defended the board's mission.

"It sounds like the objective of the board is to prevent disinformation and misinformation from traveling around the country in a range of communities," Psaki said. "I'm not sure who opposes that effort."

The White House supports the disinformation board, Psaki added, citing disinformation that has circulated about COVID-19 and elections. On Friday, the White House said the disinformation board is a continuation of a Trump-era initiative.

The elections issue came up during Mayorkas's congressional hearing as well. Illinois Democratic Rep. Lauren Underwood cited misinformation as a possible contributor to election outcomes that could be addressed.

“A newer trend that we saw in the 2020 election and already in the 2022 midterms is that disinformation is being heavily targeted at Spanish-speaking voters, sparking and fueling conspiracy theories,” Underwood said to Mayorkas. “DHS and its components play a big role in addressing myths and disinformation in Spanish and other languages.”

Such concerns raise further red flags, argued Ries.

"It's revealing that they're concerned about the election and Spanish-speaking voters," she said. "I think that kind of gives away their game."

At this point, it isn't clear exactly how the board will function or how it will combat misinformation. DHS has not issued a press release about the board, and a search for "disinformation governance board" on the department's website turns up no results.

The *Washington Examiner* has reached out to DHS seeking more details about the disinformation initiative.

Ironically, the board's scattershot public unveiling may be contributing to the sort of false narratives it purportedly exists to correct, says Cato Institute policy analyst Will Duffield.

"The launch has been terrible," he said. "The launch of this thing probably has already created more disinformation or led to it than the board will ever be able to combat."

The lack of clear information about the board's role and purpose could lead people to assume the worst. Depending on how the board functions, it could be a useful tool to coordinate messaging across the many missions of DHS. Absent more information, that is yet to be seen.

"Frankly, I'm skeptical that this thing has any reach at all and isn't just a paper-shuffling exercise," said Duffield. "But again, we don't really know."