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GOP Pushback Swamps Administration's Plan for Disinformation Board

Biden officials say blowback jeopardizes broader bipartisan efforts, while Republicans raise speech concerns

Tarini Parti and Dustin Volz

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The Biden administration's announcement of a new government board that it says aims to support efforts to fight disinformation has set off a partisan dispute over its mission.

The newly launched Disinformation Governance Board is described by the administration as an internal working group under the Department of Homeland Security. The administration says it is designed to work on countering disinformation that it says poses threats to homeland security. Examples cited include misleading information used by smugglers to persuade migrants to travel to the U.S.-Mexico border and disinformation spread by foreign states such as Russia ahead of the midterm elections.

Republicans have raised concerns over potential infringement on First Amendment protections, drawn comparisons to George Orwell's state-sponsored propaganda-pushing Ministry of Truth in his dystopian novel "1984" and argued the board illustrates what they say is President Biden's overreach.

"The creation of the 'Disinformation Governance Board' appears to double down on this administration's continued abuse of taxpayer dollars and the federal government's powers to attack Americans who disagree with its policies, smearing them as extremists and perpetrators of 'mis- dis- and mal-information,' " a group of Republicans led by Rep. James Comer (R., Ky.), ranking member on the House Oversight Committee, wrote in a recent letter to Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

Administration officials have defended the board, saying that it builds on work begun under former President Donald Trump and that it would protect free speech and civil liberties. Prior administrations of both parties have for years struggled with how to address disinformation—which technology researchers say social media has turbocharged—without stoking fears that the federal government is censoring speech and eroding democratic norms.

Some officials at DHS's cyber wing, which is separate from the board but has previously worked to combat election-related online disinformation, have grown concerned that the rocky rollout could hinder their own work by eroding bipartisan support, according to people familiar with the matter.

"There has been confusion about the working group, its role, and its activities," DHS said Monday in a fact sheet that didn't name identify the board by name until halfway through. "The reaction to this working group has prompted DHS to assess what steps we should take to build the trust needed for the Department to be effective in this space."

The additional steps included releasing quarterly reports about the board's activities to Congress and asking the bipartisan Homeland Security Advisory Council to make recommendations for how DHS can address disinformation while protecting free speech.

DHS also clarified that the board would focus on coordinating work on disinformation from across the federal government and wouldn't have any "operational authority or capability."

The steps come after Republican lawmakers grilled Mr. Mayorkas about the new board in a committee hearing after it was announced.

A senior DHS official said Tuesday it was a "great misperception" that the board itself would directly engage in operations to dispel information, while acknowledging the rollout messaging was bungled. "We did not appropriately prepare for this."

The board hasn't held its first meeting, but expects to within the next 10 days, the official said.

Mr. Mayorkas is likely to face more questions about the board when he testifies before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee on Wednesday, said Sen. Rob Portman (R., Ohio), the panel's ranking member who has previously supported efforts to fight disinformation.

Mr. Mayorkas said Sunday that the administration had botched the board's rollout in explaining its mission. "We could have done a better job of communicating what it is and what it isn't," he said on NBC's "Meet the Press." The department's website didn't previously provide information regarding the board.

Jeff Kosseff, associate professor of cybersecurity law in the U.S. Naval Academy's Cyber Science Department, said that transparency and trust are key in efforts to combat disinformation and that the department should have released more information about the board.

"The bigger problem is that this was just such a terrible communication strategy for what I think was probably a fairly narrow and well-intentioned project," Mr. Kosseff said. "I mean, you start with the name—it's like, if you held a contest for the creepiest name possible for a government program, this would probably be a winner."

He added, "I don't see how they could continue this board at this point, because it's just going to feed daily conspiracy theories."

Matthew Feeney, the director of the Cato Institute's Project on Emerging Technologies, said on [Twitter](#), "Although initiatives like this can begin with a narrow focus, that focus can widen."

Mr. Mayorkas has said the board wouldn't monitor U.S. citizens. It would work on "addressing disinformation that presents a threat to the security of our country—how to do that work in a way that does not infringe on free speech, does not infringe on civil liberties," he said on "Meet the Press."

Other administration officials have pointed to similar efforts under Mr. Trump.

"This is a continuation of work that was done under the prior administration," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Monday, adding that the board would coordinate government efforts on disinformation. "The mandate is not to adjudicate what is true or false online or otherwise," Ms. Psaki said.

DHS—a sprawling agency set up after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks—has mandates ranging from immigration enforcement to national cybersecurity. It has long struggled to determine how or whether it should attempt to tackle what it sees as disinformation, according to current and former agency employees.

During the Trump administration, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, or CISA, was focused on collaborating with U.S. intelligence agencies to thwart foreign, cyber-enabled election meddling, a mission that grew out of Russia's interference in the 2016 election.

But at CISA and elsewhere in the administration, officials began to view domestic disinformation as a bigger threat than foreign efforts. Their view hardened in 2020 as Mr. Trump questioned the security of voting by mail during the Covid-19 pandemic and asserted that election results could be tampered with, former officials have said.

In the run-up to the 2020 election, researchers flagged concerns that an unprecedented amount of political mis- and disinformation was circulating widely online. (Originally published Oct. 2, 2020)

As the election approached, an initiative called "rumor control" was created at CISA. It was championed by Chris Krebs, the former CISA chief whom Mr. Trump later fired after he pushed back on the president's claims that the results declaring Joe Biden the victor couldn't be trusted. No evidence has emerged of widespread fraud in the election, which national-security officials declared the most secure in U.S. history, though Mr. Trump has continued to falsely claim it was stolen.

For the CISA initiative, Mr. Krebs was partly inspired by efforts by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, also a unit of DHS, to fact-check misinformation around Covid-19, he and former officials have said.

Mr. Krebs said in a tweet Monday that he supported the work of the board but added that the rollout was flawed.

Mr. Mayorkas has defended the hiring of Nina Jankowicz, a disinformation researcher with expertise in Russian information operations who previously was a fellow at the D.C.-based Wilson Center, to lead the board. Conservatives have criticized a series of her statements as partisan, including a tweet about Republican criticism of Hunter Biden, the president's son.

Last week, she said her tweet was taken out of context and was "simply a direct quote from both candidates during the final presidential debate."

In her book, “How to Lose the Information War,” Ms. Jankowicz wrote that several Eastern European countries have recently sought to improve their societal resilience to disinformation campaigns, often with government-led programs.