



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Chairman Bill Foster (D-IL)
of the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight

Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee Hearing:
The Disinformation Black Box: Researching Social Media Data

Tuesday, September 28, 2021

Good morning, and welcome to our members and our panelists. Thank you for joining us for this hearing on researcher access to social media data. For years, experts have been raising the alarm about how misinformation and disinformation spreads unabated on social media platforms. Before “fake news” was an epithet, aimed at anything conflicting with someone’s worldview, it described falsehoods presented maliciously as fact in order to influence opinions. The problem of misinformation is not a new one, but social media has fanned the flames, and it is now difficult to imagine political and social discourse untouched by its influence.

The damage caused by misinformation reaches far beyond our phone and computer screens. Lies about the 2020 election inspired thousands to invade the Capitol on January 6 in an attempt to stop the certification of the election, resulting in five deaths. Lies about the severity of COVID-19 prevented millions of Americans from taking the disease seriously, resulting in needless infections and deaths. Vaccine disinformation is discouraging Americans from receiving safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, extending the pandemic and allowing new variants to proliferate. For years we have seen the harmful effects of anti-vaccine rhetoric, causing the re-emergence of diseases like measles that had been eliminated by vaccines.

In July, the Surgeon General declared that misinformation on social media is a public health hazard. It is therefore imperative that the Science Committee address it as we would any other threat to public health – by ensuring that we have the brightest minds researching the problem so we can base future policy on the best available science.

Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult for researchers to gain sufficient access to social media data. Companies do make some information public, but it is largely through interfaces they control, meaning that researchers can only see what companies want them to. And access can be cut off at any time. Today, we will hear from our witnesses about the research they are able to conduct in this environment. They will tell us about the limitations of the existing tools, and what data they believe can and should be made public so we can have a better understanding of how social media users interact with misinformation and how that impacts their behavior on- and offline. We will hear about how mis- and disinformation is delivered to social media users

through the “black box” of the algorithm, drawing eyes to sensationalist content that inspires user engagement regardless of the truth.

We on the Science Committee understand the very real limitations to full data transparency by social media companies. Platforms will argue that some information should be protected as trade secrets. In addition, social media users are entitled to privacy, particularly of personally identifiable information. However, these concerns cannot be broad excuses to shield social media companies from a full outside accounting of how their platforms may be endangering public health and safety. We cannot simply leave social media unstudied. It is as influential a force on the social fabric of the 21st century as any other. But as it stands, advertisers on these platforms often enjoy more access to data than academic researchers looking to assess the impact of promoted posts. I believe that this hearing can be a constructive launching point to explore how the Science Committee can contribute to this conversation. We must strike a balance between protecting user privacy and confidential business information, while also acknowledging that objective, independent research is necessary to understand how these platforms influence modern society.

I look forward to hearing from our panelists about how we can support their important work shining a light into the disinformation black box poisoning our discourse.

I now yield to Ranking Member Obernolte for his opening statement.