



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

Opening Statement

Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

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

Tuesday, September 28, 2021

Good afternoon to our panelists, and thank you to Chairman Foster for holding this hearing. This topic will only grow in relevance as social media becomes all the more ingrained in our lives. And worryingly, these issues will become more dangerous with every topic that becomes hotly politicized.

Disinformation has been a public health threat for decades. Experts estimate that 330,000 deaths from AIDS in the early 2000s can be attributed to disinformation about the connection between HIV and AIDS. The fact of human-caused climate change, with decades of empirical evidence and expert consensus behind it, has nonetheless become a subject of great debate. Monied interests fan the flames of doubt as oceans rise and forests burn. And now, as we conduct this hearing virtually due to a surge in COVID-19 cases, conspiracy theorists and malicious actors spread lies about the severity of the pandemic. Laymen speculate wildly about the vaccine's safety, drowning out expert voices. Social media offers fertile ground for these falsehoods, and unfounded claims can spread across the globe in the blink of an eye.

We must not leave the black box of social media disinformation unexamined. Navigating the difficulties in extending access to data will not be easy, but failing to do so will have devastating consequences. This current moment is a grave example of the stakes at hand. We will not beat this pandemic without increased vaccine uptake, and every day, social media users are dissuaded from getting the shot after seeing deeply misinformed posts. People are making decisions for the health and safety of themselves, their families, and their communities based on abject falsehoods. And researchers determined to mitigate the damage are unable to access crucial data on how these lies spread.

I'm pleased to join Chairman Foster in welcoming our witnesses today. They are doing important research into how misinformation circulates online and impacts our real-world health and safety. I look forward to hearing your testimony.