

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

“Disinformation, COVID-19, and the Electoral Process”

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Nina Jankowicz, Disinformation Fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center Science and Technology Information Program; author of “How to Lose the Information War”;
Sophia Ignatidou, Academy Associate, International Security Programme, Chatham House

The Briefing Was Held From 10:30 a.m. To 11:34 a.m. via videoconference, Mark Toner, Senior State Department Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding

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TONER: We have with us three distinguished panelists, all of whom bring a unique perspective to today's topic of disinformation and its corrosive effect on the electoral process. Before we get too far into today's topic, however, I wanted to invite the Helsinki Commission's chief of staff, Alex Johnson, to say a few introductory remarks. Alex, the floor is yours.

JOHNSON: Thank you so much, Mark. We deeply appreciate your leadership as our senior State Department advisor. I just wanted to say a few words to our participants who have been eagerly awaiting public activity from the Commission. We thought it was important to be judicious in how we engage right now. We know that there are a lot of issues and we have sought to find a unique contribution that we can make. So the public should anticipate a number of convenings in terms of hearings and briefings moving forward from this point.

First, I wanted to say that as many of you know, Chairman Hastings as well as our commissioners have been on the forefront of raising the security implications of disinformation, both in Congress and at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, where we have been very active as a U.S. delegation. What stands out the most and the reason why this was so important to convene at this time was the degree of coordination of messaging that we are seeing right now, particularly in how it is aimed at undermining perceptions of the United States, multilateral institutions, as well as U.S. foreign policy.

So we have a stellar group of panelists here. Just wanted to take this opportunity to thank them for making the time to continue to be partners with the Commission from their respective institutions. And with that, I'll turn it back over to you, Mark. Thank you.

TONER: Thanks. Thank you, Alex. Appreciate that.

Well, as Alex just said, my name is Mark, Mark Toner. Just a brief introduction. I'm the State Department's senior advisor with the Helsinki Commission. In previous roles, I've had to confront the challenge of disinformation up close and personal, as they say. I was Deputy Assistant Secretary for public diplomacy in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs in 2014, when Russia launched a massive disinformation campaign in an effort to validate its actions in Ukraine. I was also the department's Deputy and Acting spokesperson on and off from 2011 to 2016. So I appreciate the enormity and the difficulty of the challenge. As one of our panelists likes to say, it can sometimes feel like playing whack-a-mole.

The Helsinki Commission comes at the issue of disinformation in a unique and bipartisan way. Our 18 Commissioners and the Commission staff represent the U.S. in the Parliamentary Assembly, as Alex just pointed out, of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a multilateral organization that's premised on the shared commitment of its 57 participating states to democratic principles and human rights. And one of the OSCE's primary functions is election observation. Every year the OSCE and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, ODIHR, conduct election observation missions in many participating states, including the United States. And the reports produced by the OSCE are often the gold standard when it comes to determining the freeness and fairness of an election.

Now, access to credible information is a key factor in that determination. More and more, however, we see the capacity of state and nonstate actors to influence the outcome of these elections through coordinated, targeted disinformation campaigns is growing in both scope and sophistication. The threat's adapting all the time to the latest technology. And the tactics used in 2016 or 2018 might already be obsolete. Are we ready for what comes next?

The challenges are real. State actors, primarily Russia and China, are intent on using disinformation to undermine our democratic processes and sow discord in the transatlantic relationship. Domestic or nonstate actors are also using similar tactics to distort reality and shape public opinion. And the relative openness of the internet in Western democracies means there are many vulnerabilities to exploit. I believe, however, our panelists can offer us a hopeful perspective that we are building more resilient, more agile, and more cohesive approaches to defeating these cynical attempts to undermine what's one of the core precepts of a democracy, which is the people's right to choose their leaders and to make those decisions in an informed fashion.

Just a brief note about the format. Each of our three panelists will speak briefly on the topic and then we'll open it up to questions. I'll probably ask a couple of questions at the top just to get the ball rolling, and I'll explain how you can use the webinar format to ask a question when we get to that point.

Our first panelist and speaker today is Heather Conley, who's senior vice president for Europe, Eurasia, and Arctic and director of the Europe Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Heather, the floor is yours.

CONLEY: Mark, thank you so very much. And greetings to all. I hope everyone is safe and well during these difficult days. Thank you so much to the Helsinki Commission for raising this important topic as we are six months out before the U.S. presidential election.

I think what I want to do with my few opening minutes is to frame the discussion, to go back to some first principles. Step one, to understand that for Russia this is part of their military doctrine and this is a strategy of influence. It is to break the internal coherence of what they would term the enemy system, which is the West, or democracies. It's also important to know that many times we focus very clearly on an election, but this is not just about an election. Russian disinformation operations and their – and their larger influence operations – are designed to be ongoing campaigns.

So we begin to see tactics and techniques that happen well before any U.S. election or other foreign election. We see efforts to break into email systems of party leaders, of parties, of political leaders two, sometimes even three years before an election begins. So we see this as an ongoing campaign. And to understand that the seeds for Russia's interference in the 2020 elections actually has happened back in 2016 and continued through 2018. So we're seeing in some ways the fruits from those early seeds.

Russia does not create the weaknesses; they simply exploit them. And this is where I think it's very important to understand that in the U.S. system they're exploiting, obviously, our

partisanship. So we are offering them the weakness, and then they use it wherever they can. They exploit these weaknesses – and this is why I think, Mark, to your comment of the whack-a-mole, it feels like it comes at us in so many ways. Again, it's just the seeds that have been planted, they're using these tools and effectively exploiting societal weaknesses. And how do you weaken or break the internal coherency of democracy? Well, of course you delegitimize the election process. You amplify and exploit the grievances that are present in the election, and the divisions between society. You inherently seek to create distrust in leaders and in those institutions.

So I think what we are going to see – and Nina and Sophia are going to do an awesome job of telling you all about the different tactics and the tools. But these efforts have already begun. We may see a very clear display of Russian tactics. We may not. They may choose to not use all the tools and the seeds that they have planted, or they may have the opportunity to exploit them. I think it's also very important to understand the evolution. As I've seen Russian disinformation, it is less Russia. It is more American.

So the voices that you'll be hearing that will be spreading some of the main campaign themes of division and questioning of legitimacy will appear far less Russian than they did in 2016. They will be from American influencers and American voices through chat rooms, through affinity groups. And this actually, again, strengthens that exploitation of our polarization. So the only way – and the pandemic in some ways – COVID-19, we are seeing all of the old tools and the toolkits that Russia has used. And this will also play into it.

So that – I will stop and, Mark, turn it back over to you.

TONER: Great. Thanks so much. I appreciate it.

Our next speaker is, I would say, an outspoken expert on disinformation, in all the good senses, and has strong ideas about how we build a more cohesive response, and also identifying – nobody knows the playing field better than – I would say – than Nina Jankowicz. Nina is – sorry, Nina. I'm looking for your bio very quickly here, as I struggle here, because I want to give you the proper title. I don't want to make it up. Nina is the – is the author of the soon-to-be released book, I think it's coming out in July, "Losing the Information War." And she's also the disinformation fellow for the Wilson Center Science and Technology Information Program. Nina, the floor is yours.

JANKOWICZ: Thank you so much, Mark and Alex, for this opportunity to speak with you about this critical topic today.

The democratic process is under threat as never before, but these threats don't only concern the physical and cybersecurity of our elections, their security and the security of our democracy goes far beyond the ballot box. It's about the security and health of our informational ecosystems as well. Disinformation undermines democracy, regardless of its source and regardless of who benefits. There's an unsurprising interest in understanding how disinformation affects people's individual voting choices. And this is usually how we've sought to measure whether or not disinformation was effective.

But I would argue this is not the point. By flooding the information ecosystem with spurious narratives that capitalize on pre-existing social fissures and emotion, bad actors are hoping to get voters to disengage. They want people to consume less news and to feel like participation at all stages of the process is futile, whether that means communicating with our elected representatives, participated in civil society, or even the act of voting itself. Democracy doesn't work without fulsome participation, and disinformation threatens that sacred act.

This has been evident during the coronavirus pandemic, as we've all been feeling a fair amount of news fatigue, partially drive by the large quantities of information, trustworthy and not, that people have to sift through to make sense of the day's events. Some people, myself included, are understandably rationing their news intake as they deal with this crisis. But where people are turning to the internet, they're looking to answer the many questions they have about this pandemic and assuage some of their uncertainties. Malign information sources are filling these gaps.

And while disinformation might seem to be clearly based around this health crisis, it's contributing to the further deterioration of our information environment in an election year, as Heather was just very astutely explaining. Disinformation is not only around our election day or even election season. The seeds are planted much earlier than that. The pandemic has laid bare, I think, how lacking society's awareness of the tools and tactics of disinformation is, and how sorely we need to invest in helping people navigate their digital environment in order to protect their democracies.

A recent viral meme claimed that media outlets were deliberately misappropriating an image of California's beaches in their coverage of the reopening of Florida's beaches and the crowds that happened there afterward. But basic media literacy skills, including, for instance, how to do a reverse image search, could reveal in about 30 seconds that the meme's claim was not true. Media and digital literacy are often derided as soft solutions that won't solve the disinformation problem. And don't get me wrong, they are not a magic wand. But they are worthwhile generational investments, as displayed by programs and countries on the frontlines of the information war.

Every country where I've conducted research has shown – that has shown some manner of success in countering disinformation always has a citizens-based component to their response. For instance, Estonia, which has a large Russian-speaking population and has been at the brunt of Russia's information war since 2007, has invested since then in Russian-language media and educational programs in order to try to fill in some of the societal fissures that Russia and other bad actors exploit.

Several countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Czech Republic, are training, for instance, civil servants on how to spot and respond to disinformation as part of their professional development program. And of course, I can't leave out Ukraine, especially today on Vyshyvanka Day. Ukraine's investments in media literacy, not only in school-age children but in the voting-age population, have shown that these tactics have a staying power. Over a

year and a half after being trained program participants not only are able to recall their skills, they are still double-checking their sources more than their untrained peers.

During the pandemic I think it's especially important that we remind voters that disinformation runs on emotional manipulation. This is why I've been advocating for what I call informational distancing along with social distancing. If you feel yourself reacting emotionally to a story, it's best to put some distance between yourself and the context. Literally walk away from your device for a while before considering whether or not to share it.

So the United States, I think, has not made the types of systematic investments in information literacy of its voters that are necessary. And meanwhile, bad actors of all varieties – not only foreign, but domestic as well – are continuing to attack our democratic processes, beyond election season. And it's time to reverse this trend. And finally, one last note. And I say this all the time. Disinformation is not a partisan issue. If we're to make any progress in protecting our democracies, we need to not only clearly recognize the threat that disinformation poses but reject its tactics whole cloth. Any government that uses disinformation cannot hope to fight it.

And this is why we at the Wilson Center work with lawmakers not only here in Washington on both sides of the aisle, but across political parties around the world, in order to provide nonpartisan analysis and equip them with the tools they need to respond to disinformation. And in the future, we hope to support the creation of a bipartisan congressional disinformation caucus. And if you're interested, any of the staff on the call, in joining that, please do get in touch.

Thanks again so much, Mark, for having me. And I look forward to the discussion.

TONER: Sure. Thanks so much, Nina. That was great. And I love your new term “informational distancing.” That's a great way to put it.

Look, lastly we have with us Sophia Ignatidou, who is an academy associate with the International Security Program at Chatham House. Sophia authored a deep dive that I read, in-depth as well, into how the U.S. and Europe can use existing mechanisms and structures to collaborate more effectively in combatting disinformation in the electoral space and beyond. Sophia, the floor is yours.

IGNATIDOU: Well, thank you very much, Mark. Thanks for the introduction and for hosting this brief.

Yeah, I would like to mention a couple of points I raised in that report that you just mentioned. One of my arguments was that EU and U.S. cooperation should be grounded on international human rights law. And the reason for doing that is that international human rights law is suitable to deal with an issue that doesn't respect any physical boundaries. And it can provide a more holistic view of the issue of disinformation which we are lacking sometimes, I believe. It's an internationally accepted framework, and it can also assist in domestic, legal, and in institutional development.

At the same time, international human rights law can actually avoid a situation where disinformation countermeasures are actually impinging on other human rights, rather than freedom of expression. You have seen lots of internet shutdowns, for example, in various countries around the world as a countermeasure to disinformation. The reason I mentioned human rights is also the fact that the EU and U.S. have one specific key difference: their approach to human expression and how to – their factoring that human right into the disinformation debate.

Freedom of expression is obviously protected by international human rights law, in the U.S. Constitution, in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. And it's also the main argument that tech companies have been using to push back against regulation. But I find that a bit misleading, because disinformation – the problem with disinformation is dissemination patterns and scale, not content, per se. And freedom of speech does not equate freedom of reach. And I do think we have to actually internalize that.

Then one of – the other issue I raised in my paper was the issue of gatekeeping, the fact that disinformation is inherently a problem created by inefficient gatekeeping conducted by digital extractive companies. I think it's fair to say that, you know, we have health – the health of our information environment should not be taken for granted.

And there is a reason why journalism used to be perceived at least one of the pillars of democracy, because it was tough to hold power to account and serve the public interest by efficient gatekeeping. And I don't think tech companies are in a position to do that. Because they are gatekeepers, contrary to what they advocate sometimes. They just do that by algorithmic models rather than real-time negotiations taking place in newsrooms.

Another issue I would like to raise in regards to how the press is factored into this debate is the issue of employing strategic silence. I think journalists should start being more conscious of whether or not to engage with clickbait rhetoric that aims to sow division by, again, framing complex issues that cannot possibly be analyzed in the context of a social media platform. And in general, they have to be more mindful of how they frame issues, the stories they choose to cover, and not – and stop being driven, basically, by the imperatives on online platforms. Because what we you have been seeing is a feedback loop between the press, legacy media, and social media. And this circle is self-reinforcing, sort of.

And it's also, I think, really important to raise the issue that elections cannot be undermined just by disinformation, per se. But sometimes they're undermined by the lack of impartiality and balanced reporting. And I think we can all agree we have seen a lack of any kind of balance in online political discourse.

I would like to finish off just with a couple of comments. We have been talking about Russia and foreign actors, but I do think we have also to take to consideration domestic actors. At the state level, domestic propaganda is also a rising problem. And the instances of political actors that try to influence the public perceptions of their own people are increasing every year. And it's an issue really complicated because sometimes there is a lack of political will to actually

solve this problem. And sometimes we also are lacking the tools. And by tools I mean electoral law that can actually monitor and provide efficient oversight of digital campaigning, or a media regulatory framework that can actually uphold impartiality in media coverage and therefore ensure a level playing field for the conduct of elections.

I will just finish off by saying that I think all political actors, both domestic and external, but – should be more conscious of the messages they share, and the – and the created ambiguity that they sometimes employ that can be really misconstrued by malign actors. And, yeah, I'm really looking forward to the questions. Thank you very much.

TONER: Thank you so much. I'm going to try – so we are – thank you, Sophia. I appreciate. And actually your terminology, as a former spokesperson I can endorse the idea of strategic silence. That's a very good idea sometimes. (Laughs.) Because it is easy to get pulled into some of these debates, and it does no good.

Look, we are to the question and answer period, which is great.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

Just a reminder that this is all on the record. But that's OK. I just want to get that out there so you're aware.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

OK, really, I guess this is a question for every one of our panelists to get started. But there was lots of debate, and you guys touched on it, you know, how to – of the major areas that we need to address in terms of disinformation it's how do you regulate, or what do you regulate, the big internet platforms, Facebook, et al? And lots of discussion on either side of the pond, as they say, about how best to do that, whether it's a matter – you know, obviously, our First Amendment rights we hold dear in America. Freedom over expression over everything. And yet, on the other side there's – in Europe, there is a concern over privacy considerations.

How do you bridge the gap? How do you effectively – what are some of the ways – practical ways we can tackle this and address the issue that, as Sophia and others pointed out, that there's a content issue, and that it's not always a matter of just freedom of expression and let every opinion out there. That these platforms need to, in some fashion, curate their content?

I guess I'll start, maybe, with Nina, but others can weigh in.

JANKOWICZ: Sure. Thanks, Mark. I think there are, you know, a lot of approaches that can be taken, and we're seeing them run the gamut around the globe right now while we're kind of in stasis about this here in the United States, unfortunately. We've not really made progress on the regulation question because of other crises, but also because the regulation of social media has become a very politicized issue, unfortunately, for everyone involved.

I think the best first step that we can take is more transparency. This has been talked about a lot, of course, with Senator Klobuchar's Honest Ads Act. We've not even taken that, you know, that low-hanging fruit off the tree. This Honest Ads Act would allow people to understand who is advertising to them, especially in a political context. I would like to see that for all internet advertising because there is a lot of dark advertising that we don't understand how an ad's making its way to us and what information was used to target us. So that's really important.

But outside of the advertising realm, I think we need a lot more transparency as well. We have seen this pivot to privacy that Facebook has made, where it's driving and incentivizing people to participate in groups, many of which are private and secret. And these groups can have hundreds of thousands of people in them, but they operate like these little, small communities. And there's, you know, algorithmic recommendations that drive you to other groups that are related.

At any rate, you don't know who's running them, a lot of the time. You don't know what their real identity is. And I think, you know, while Facebook wanted to pivot to privacy and these more personal conversations, I would argue that these groups aren't doing that. They are operating like pages did, except with a lot less transparency and a lot less visibility for researchers and the people who are trying to enforce the rules. So I would start with transparency as a core measure, giving people information, arming them with the facts so they know how they're being messaged to. And then there are steps to take beyond that that I'm sure the other panelists will address. But for the United States, I think transparency is something that we can all agree is a good thing.

TONER: Great. Great. Thank you so much. That's great. Go ahead, Sophia. You look like you're –

IGNATIDOU: Yeah. No, I agree that we always need more transparency, but there's an issue of how do you define transparency? And given the fact that it has been the main thing in big tech's attempt to actually stave off regulation, they haven't been doing much – such a great job in terms of transparency. If you talk to researchers whose actual job is to look into online campaigning, how these platforms are operating, they really don't actually get the data they need. But that's what you are hearing from everyone. They just – they have to work with whatever Facebook, or Google, or Twitter is providing them. And in fact now Twitter has been more open compared to Google or Facebook.

But you cannot really have transparency when you're really selective with the data you are providing – you are providing researchers with. And the other key element I think is we do need this research to be done. We do need to realize how these platform are operating, how their algorithmic systems are functioning, their variables, their functions. And until we do that, we will not be able to establish what kind of transparency we need, basically. I think we just need to open the black box and get access. And it's something that both the U.K. government and at the European level is being discussed.

TONER: Great. Thank you. Heather, anything to add to that, or?

CONLEY: Well, just to add on, again, the transparency is key. I would also reemphasize the societal education. So we know that there are specific campaigns that are designed to exploit our divisions. We need to, and this gets back to the research transparency, if there are specific campaigns and specific target audiences, that's where the education has to go in, that's where the bipartisanship has to come in to say they – this is national security. They are weakening us. We need to address that, and then ultimately begin to do some positive messaging.

But what concerns me, and I mentioned this in my earlier comments, that this is becoming much more organic to Americans. So infiltrating chatrooms and Facebook groups, they're injecting these themes to accelerate an exacerbate our societal divisions. We've got to start to heal ourselves and heal some of those divisions. And unfortunately, our political environment right now is only to amplify those divisions.

So in some ways I'm often asked this question – and I have to say, sometimes I don't know if the Russians have to do that much, that which we are not already doing to ourselves. And that's where that bipartisanship has to come in and has to begin to address it. Because we are giving them all the material that they need. They really don't have to do too much. And that's a sad state of where we are politically.

TONER: Yeah. Thanks. That's a great summation, and it also speaks to, as you said, the depoliticization, but also just the fact that, you know, as much as we subscribe to the idea of the free marketplace of ideas, you know, these algorithms within these platforms are manipulated, and they're easy to manipulate. And it's not necessarily just a free flow of ideas and information. It just doesn't exist in that respect.

I want to try to do an outside question. I think I'm doing this correctly but forgive me if I'm not. Dinilla Gaparovich (ph), do you have a question? And if you do, I'm not sure how to – I think I just unmute you. I'll try that. I know it's not working for me. Hmm.

Q: Hello.

TONER: Is that Dinilla (ph)?

Q: Yeah. Can you hear me? Yes. Yes.

TONER: Yes, we can. Wonderful. Thank you. Go ahead, sir.

Q: Yeah. It's very good to see. And Mark, thank you very much for doing this. The Helsinki Commission does a brilliant job. And Nina, we just published an article with your interview to my colleague Mark Walker (sp) about your mentioning of disinformation.

My question is, how Russia or other actors could use COVID-19, this disinformation, to influence U.S. elections in 2020? Because it's kind of a very disturbing time when, for example, Solarium Commission just mentioned about the, how to say, safety of paper ballots. But then,

paper ballots presume human contact. And it's so complicated. So can you please tell us how Russia or other actors can use it? Thank you.

JANKOWICZ: I guess I'll start. So I think the important thing to understand – and we were discussing this ahead of the event, and I think some of the other panelists will agree – the important thing to understand is Russia and China, Iran, Venezuela, are using this very opportunistically. I think, you know, we're seeing convergence of their narratives around disinformation, around the poor response of the U.S. government to COVID-19, et cetera. And it's not necessarily that they're sitting on a Zoom call together trying to, you know, make sure – have a pitch meeting, right? (Laughter.) It's that this is opportunistic. And as Heather was talking about, we're giving them lots of opportunities through which to manipulate us, through which to drive us apart further. So any opportunity that comes up they're going to seize on.

I think specifically related to elections we're going to see a lot of scaremongering about whether it is safe to vote, because that is a huge question and a huge uncertainty. And certainly we've been seeing a lot of domestic disinformation recently about whether mail-in voting is a legitimate way to vote. And I think we will see bad actors seizing on that discussion and trying to drive us further apart in that regard as well.

TONER: Yeah. Anything for the other panelists to add on that, or are we good?

IGNATIDOU: I just wanted to mention that COVID-19, like anything, can be used as a wedge issue. You can use anything in order to divide – the key difference with COVID-19 is it touches upon something really fundamental, which is your own health. And therefore, it's much more powerful as a tool to divide. That's all I want to say.

TONER: Heather, you're – oh, there we go. No worries.

CONLEY: Oh, there – better? Thank you.

I think, again, key framing message is: This is delegitimizing democracy. So the more you paint that the U.S., the U.K., Italy, Spain, what have you, are inherently because of the organization of their system unable to respond, and authoritarians – like China – can respond so much better, or Russia. Although, Russia's having huge challenges itself. That delegitimizes democracies. You sort of go underneath that. What we're seeing sort of Russian disinformation more globally, not so much focused on sort of U.S. elections per se, it's bringing back, you know, Soviet disinformation greatest hits.

So they're pulling the language they use, and it's disinformation on, you know, U.S. biological weapons created the HIV/AIDS community, which is still a very proactive message in the African American community today. So they're pulling on those greatest hits, conspiracy theories, far-right extremism, the collapse of capitalism. You know, this is all going down, so you need to tack to a different system. It's happening for countries that are going to be holding elections, not just in the U.S. You know, I'm watching very closely, you know, Croatia's elections and Georgia's elections, and you know, these themes are going to play out.

So look, there is an enormous amount at stake for the U.S. election and delegitimizing those results and voter suppression. But the global implications of this are pretty significant. And we have to also keep our eyes on that as well.

TONER: Great. Thank you so much, Heather.

Q: Thank you.

TONER: Great, thanks, Dinilla (ph).

I think we have another question. Sylvia Brown (sp). Are you able to ask your question?

Q: Good morning. Can you hear me?

TONER: Good morning. I certainly can. Go right ahead. We hear you.

Q: Thank you. So I was interested in learning more about what other countries are doing with media literacy, especially for younger children and going through grade school, and what's been the holdup with legislative proposals in Congress.

TONER: That's a great question, actually. Thank you so much for asking that question.

CONLEY: I could just offer a reflection on media literacy. I think the Swedish government has one of the best media literacy programs that are targeted to young people, making them in some ways information detectives, making sure they understand where that information source is coming from. How do you verify it? How do you challenge it? Is it true? Is it not? I think that is a model. So I'll just offer that as one excellent foreign example of a great media literacy program that is very much targeted to young people.

JANKOWICZ: I also love the Swedish example. Finland also has a great example, where they're targeting kids from the age five or so in kindergarten, when they're teaching them about how advertising works, for example, how, you know, you shouldn't necessarily trust every message that's coming to you from a toy advertisement. Ukraine has now over the past three or so years integrated media literacy into their secondary education curriculum. So it's not just that kids are going to media literacy classes, but when they're doing history, when they're doing art, when they're doing Ukrainian language, these components of media literacy are incorporated into that curriculum.

But I would also add I think it's really important to also target voting-age populations, because these are the people who are making decisions. And there's a lot of psychological and cognitive research that shows because our older populations have always dealt with a curated news environment, they don't necessarily have the same fitness in terms of information literacy on the internet. They've always had things that they could trust, and now all of this information is coming at them not curated. And they need a little bit of extra help. So we've seen some programs – another one in the Czech Republic where it teaches older folks, grandmas and

grandpas, how to use their iPads to talk to their grandchildren, but also gives them basic media literacy heuristics.

So I think we should be looking at stuff like that. I would love to see grant programs established through the Department of Education where if you have a curriculum that is developed in concert with experts and you're a civil society organization, a library or a state education program, you can roll that out in your schools and other organizations. And what the holdup has been so far in Congress, a lot of these media literacy efforts have been tied to election security efforts, and unfortunately have been, in what staffers have referred to me as the election security graveyard. So I would encourage those efforts to be decoupled from the rest of our election security efforts because they are for the betterment and health of our democracy overall.

TONER: Sure. That's a great answer. And really when you're talking about that kind of media literacy, it almost goes back to kind of, you know, teaching, as you said, young people about just good habits when they're – whether it's an advertisement for, you know, cereal, or whatever, or what they, you know, ingest in terms of the news on the internet, just to know what is good, what is bad, what to be suspect of. And that doesn't seem that that should be politicized at all. That's a great question.

Great. I'm not sure we have any questions, at least queued up at the moment, unless I'm missing something. I wanted to ask – so this gives me an opportunity – I wanted to ask, and this is a general question. Maybe start with Heather, but anybody can jump in. Is there are some examples – I'm thinking of Ukraine last year, I'm thinking of France 2017, where they were really able to overcome primarily Russian but also domestic interference of efforts, and disinformation efforts? I'm thinking specifically of Macron's campaign. But maybe you can start, Heather, and maybe, Nina, you could talk a little bit about Ukraine.

CONLEY: Yeah, absolutely, Mark. So the French presidential election in 2017, in some ways it was it was in part because there was so much learning and observation of what occurred in the runup to and during the U.S. presidential election. So the Macron campaign itself was very proactive in preparing for what they believed would be inevitable, and their own attack very similar, which was a hacking of the campaign's emails. So they had very cleverly, in some ways extraordinarily cleverly, had sort of already sort of baked that in. And so they had some emails that once there was a penetration of the campaign's emails and they were attacked, they had already laced them with false emails. So it actually put the burden on the hackers to explain what was legitimate and what was illegitimate. So it was quite an extraordinary and very elaborate development.

But I would also say, there were some intricacies to the French system itself. And this is where every approach is in some ways tailored. The French have a very unique system. They go through a period – talk about strategic silence – they go through a 48-hour period of strategic silence before their presidential campaign. And it really forces the media not to reveal information. And a lot of the documents were dumped during that 48 quiet period – hour quiet period. So it wasn't as effectively, quite frankly, as it could be.

And, again, the U.S. – sorry – the French presidential system has this very unique second-round system where, in some ways, it's very hard to ultimately know who the last two finalists will be. And so they – it always is a little bit hampered by it. But we learned from each other. We learned what's happening in Ukraine. Then we know some of those tactics are imported and experimented in other systems. So the French were able to benefit from, tragically, the U.S. experience. And they were able to prevent it from happening themselves.

TONER: Right. Self-inoculation. Heather – rather – Nina, do you have something to add about maybe Ukraine, or whatever else?

JANKOWICZ: Sure. Yeah, so I think Ukraine in 2019 is a little complex. SO we didn't see as much foreign interference as we perhaps expected. And I think that speaks to Heather's earlier point about, you know, disinformation being laundered, essentially. I think there is so much rancor in the Ukrainian presidential election in 2019 between Poroshenko and Zelensky that bad actors were able to just drill down on those preexisting fissures that the Ukrainians were, you know, making themselves, and their own rhetoric.

I will say that there was good effort by the security services to detect some malign information campaigns. So for instance, thanks to work by the SBU, Ukraine's internal security service, we know that there was ad-muleing happening; so, essentially, the rental of Facebook accounts by bad actors, we think Russia, renting authentic Ukrainians' Facebook accounts in order to place ads. That was quashed. And as a result, I think there's been a lot more attention to that specific issue. But it also exposed some of the cracks in the enforcement on the social media side of the coin.

So Facebook rolled out its ad restrictions, similar to what we have here in the United States, only two weeks before Ukraine's first-round presidential election. And those restrictions were enforced very spottily. So folks that weren't disclosing the necessary information were still able to place those ads. They weren't consistently showing up in the ad library. Things like this. And so it shows how difficult it is to really have a transparent solution. But again, I think this is where we need some laws on the books. And the United States, I think, has a real duty to the rest of the world as the headquarters of these companies to set the standard for what those look like. So we need that transparency, enforceable by law, so that the companies are more responsible to their users.

TONER: Sure. Sophia, you spoke – or, rather wrote about – or touched on it in your report about the Brexit referendum, the leaving the EU, and really the role that really domestic players had in that effort. And maybe you can elaborate.

IGNATIDOU: Yeah. And actually we have seen – we saw increasing disinformation campaigns during the last general election. Like, obviously everybody's aware of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, but during December in 2019 all of the political parties to some extent got involved in something that resembled disinformation or was outright disinformation. One of the positive things of that experience was that you could actually see the role that the press can play, because the actors that were actually holding the political parties accountable at the end of the day were the newspapers, who were actually keeping track of online digital – online ad libraries.

They were also the first to point out, like, really, like, extreme cases of disinformation. Like, I don't know if you are aware, but at some point the Twitter account of the Conservative Party doing a debate between the opposition and the current prime minister adopted the image of a fact-checking account, and pretended to be fact-checking the statements of the leader of the opposition at that point in time. So that – so it's as if disinformation has become endemic right now in the British political environment, I hate to admit it. But that's why we do need regulation, because none of these actions were basically unlawful because we haven't had electoral reform for ages. So yeah, I mean, until we see actually some proper regulation coming in, I don't think this kind of behavior will change.

TONER: Well, that's very true. I mean, you're right, it's not necessarily illegal because there's no regulatory system that's – or regulations, in effect, to address some of these aspects.

Sorry, I'm just looking – I think we have another question. And I'm trying to ensure – Andrei (sp) – I'm sorry, Andrei (sp) – Andrei Razmadze (sp). Sorry, I'm not pronouncing your name. But can you hear us, Andrei (sp)? Or are you able to ask your question? I saw you were in the queue. No? I'll try to fix this if I can. (Laughs.) I apologize.

So before – the question I want to get in is talking about – you know, in my introductory remarks I talked a little bit about, you know, the fact that one of the bread and butter priorities for the OSCE is election monitoring. They do look at media freedom. They do – and they do factor that into their evaluation. I just wondered, from your experience – I know, Nina, you've got some thoughts on this – are they doing enough? And what is some constructive criticism and ways they could be doing that job better in monitoring disinformation when you've got a group of people who are landing, you know, at best, you know, two to three weeks before the election and trying to wrap their arms around an information space that might be somewhat alien to them?

JANKOWICZ: Sure. And I – you know, this comes from a former election monitor. I used to work for the National Democratic Institute. I really strongly believe in the mission of election monitors and have monitored in Georgia, and Russia, and Ukraine. I think what is lacking is – you know, there's a recognition that this is a problem. And that's great. But we really need some more technical expertise and technical details. So taking into account in initial reporting about the things that have gone on in the leadup to the election period. Because often, as you mentioned, OSCE monitors are often on the ground for, you know, a maximum of three months. And we know that disinformation campaigns exist much more – (laughs) – broadly than that.

But on a more technical level, I think it's important to look beyond the traditional media space. So in the Ukrainian election, for instance, the reporting focused mostly on Ukrainian traditional media, TV and print. And a lot of the disinformation that we saw was, again, on social media. It was in many cases being spread through encrypted messaging apps like Telegram. And there wasn't really a systematic overview of how that disinformation was being spread. And I think there was a recognition that it existed, and was probably mentioned in the

final reports, but I think the OSCE has the capacity to bring on expertise in monitoring and analyzing that information in real time.

And that would be a huge service, not only to folks on the ground who are trying to combat it, to the platforms who are trying to provide a more equitable space for democratic discourse, but to researchers as well. And they have the capacity to do it, and I would encourage them to bring on that technical expertise because the way disinformation operates is different than the traditional media sphere.

TONER: Yeah. Hundred percent agree.

Go ahead, Heather.

CONLEY: And I think we're also – again, this is the challenge of when you have existing ongoing disinformation campaigns, this is not happening three weeks before the election. This is part of a process. And I think this is also where, again, where does the disinformation and government action take place? So if governments are changing their laws, making it harder for media freedoms, making it harder for opposition leaders and parties to express themselves, to making changes in laws, it's almost the election – all the work happens before. And you're not going to monitor that. So it's too late.

So somehow – and OSCE plays such a critical role. This is the Good Housekeeping seal of approval that everyone seeks. But the problem is, it doesn't happen at the election. We have to have some sort of a continuous process. And exactly as Nina was saying, the action happens across the media space. It's the laws. It's the responsibility of both opposition parties and governing leaders and parties to take this very, very seriously. And what increasingly happens in some ways is the OSCE process gets a bit weaponized in this because it's so valuable because everyone seeks that legitimacy. So it's so important – it's so important. But I think it needs updated and modernized to make sure we – you're understanding the complexities domestically, as well as the foreign interference.

TONER: Thank you.

I do want to give an opportunity – I know we have one of our commissioners on the line. Representative Cohen, I don't know if you want to say a few words. I wanted to acknowledge your presence and invite you to take the floor if you'd like to. Please go ahead, sir.

COHEN: Well, I just had one question. Usually when I think of political interference, I obviously think of Russia and the 2016 election. It's happened in Ukraine. It's happened in France. It's happened in other places. Have there been instances where countries, powers such as Russia and China, they have taken different sides in the same election and interference? Or is it always just one country? When we hear a Russia, is it always just a – generally most interference is one country getting involved, or sometimes it's a battle of different countries using, in essence, proxies or surrogates?

TONER: It's a great question. Heather, do you want to?

CONLEY: Well, I would say sometimes it's a bit of all of the above. I would say we are increasingly seeing in the Russian example much more use of proxies and organic internal messengers that makes it even harder to prevent, because of First Amendment protections. But then you also see sort of – again, Russia is the most advanced in its use of these materials because, quite frankly, they've had decades and decades of experience of understanding how this works. But others have been watching their successes, as well as their failures, very carefully.

And so you start to see some replication. It's cumbersome. It's not necessarily as savvy as I would argue the Russians have been in adapting their techniques. But others are following, which is why it's so critical that it's – in some ways, it's not the – it's the foreign influencers that we are focusing on, but it's the internal cleavages that they are feasting on. And we have to heal the internal cleavages to make this disinformation work a lot less successfully than it has.

COHEN: So we do we have an example of an election – let's just use the perfect example. China's not too happy with Trump and Pompeo, et cetera. I could see China wanting to get involved in our election against Trump, and Russia being for Trump, and the election not being so much Biden versus Trump as China versus Russia. Has that ever happened, do you know?

JANKOWICZ: I actually have an example that's fairly similar to that in the Macedonian – North Macedonian naming referendum that happened a couple of years ago. Not only did you have alleged Russian interference, you had Turkish influence playing very strongly at hand, Serbian, as well as the Macedonian diaspora that was messaging as well. So there's define proxy wars happening, as Heather was saying. And one other thing that I'd add is that Russia in particular is not always choosy about who it supports politically.

Even in one country, even in the United States, we've seen influence tactics that are pitting Americans against each other. So not only necessarily supporting President Trump, but we've also seen influence campaigns happening on the left side of the political spectrum as well. So again, I think it's important to underline that the goal here is to turn us against each other, to cause distrust and fatigue in the entire process. And certainly, you know, those fissures in societies are used by bad actors however they can be. It's certainly extremely opportunistic.

COHEN: Thank you.

TONER: And I don't mean – sorry. Please, thank you, sir. And just to add onto that, or to – but are we seeing China – and I recognize none of you are, quote/unquote, “China experts,” but are we seeing China sort of dip a toe or take a step into the water more in terms of active disinformation? I mean, we were talking a little bit before the call about China always playing this kind of long game soft power diplomacy, and now we are starting to see that shift certainly in response to COVID-19. Are we seeing a shift here? Is this something new we need to watch? Or is this something that's been out there. Just your assessments?

CONLEY: Well, Mark, we're actually – CSIS is embarking, and we're just at the final throes of this research and we look forward to presenting it in July – we're actually doing a

comparative analysis of Chinese disinformation and influence operations as they have been working in Asia. And we've case-study countries, Australia and Japan. And we're looking at Russian disinformation operation in the U.K. and Germany. And we're trying to understand similarities of tactics and tools, campaigns. How are they similar? How are they different? And so we're trying to get at that question of how are these two – are they interacting? What are their objectives and goals? To see how they are working either in tandem or perhaps working at opposite ways.

But we're just at the beginning of this research and understanding this. But we're very grateful to the Global Engagement Center for helping us think through and giving us the support to be able to come to those conclusions. I look forward to sharing that with you in July.

TONER: That sounds great. Thank you so much.

And, Sophia, I think you also spoke about kind of – not the mistake – but the error of kind of going after agent, if I'm putting that correctly, like, who's behind the disinformation rather than kind of building that resiliency to all disinformation within a system, because it's going to be more interspersed. You're going to have domestic. You're going to have China. You're going to have different actors in that space. Go ahead, I'm sorry.

IGNATIDOU: Yeah. No, exactly. So basically, I do believe that even though there are specific agents that are the main vectors of disinformation, it's really important to have, like, a more broad perspective on the issue. I don't see it as an agent problem, per se, because if you were honest about it foreign influence was always – it's not a new thing. It has always been taking place. The difference is that the channels of communication across borders will not – were regulated to some extent. You could not influence the public opinion of your – of another country as easily as you can right now.

So I do think by focusing too much on the Asian perspective you might miss the fact that the problem we have is an ecosystem that's open for abuse. And because of that very fact, you have actors that are abusing it. So there is the question, are you going to focus on the abusers or are you going to try to actually fix the system?

TONER: Right.

IGNATIDOU: Yeah, that was my –

TONER: Right. Thank you. That's a great point.

I want to turn to – and I know we're running up against the time limitations. So I apologize. I wanted to take one more question from the audience. I see Sylvia Brown (sp) is in the queue. Sylvia, if you could just tell us your affiliation as well, which I've forgotten to ask for the others. But, Sylvia, are you able to speak? No? OK. Hmm. OK, well, look, I don't see her popping up. So me try that one more time. I apologize, folks. No. Let me try, I see also Andrei (sp) as well is back. I'm trying to figure out how to do this correctly folks, and I apologize. I'm trying to unmute your mic. But I don't think I've successfully – OK, well, my apologies.

MCCUISTON: Mark, are you just going to read the question? I'm happy to read the question.

TONER: Yeah, of course. Oh, yeah, please do. Thanks, Jennifer. Yes. If you could just read the question, yes. I'm sorry, yes. I'm unable to see the question. That's probably the difficulty.

MCCUISTON: OK. Andrei asks: Can you please recommend top three to five ways to combat disinformation from local non-government level, when especially are targeted by Russia or Russia-backed bots and trolls?

TONER: Great. OK. That's a great question. Thank you, Andrei. Who wants to take a whack at that?

JANKOWICZ: I can – I can try to – I'll give one of my interesting ways that I've uncovered in my research that's being employed in Georgia by some groups. They use influencers in their communities. So by identifying, for instance, comedians or musicians who are from local communities, they train them on disinformation, and then they end up using some of that material in their sketches and performances. And they send them back to perform in their – in their hometowns. I think that's a really interesting and creative way to send a message from a perhaps more trusted messenger than government or some civil society groups might be.

TONER: That's actually brilliant.

CONLEY: That's actually been our research as well. It's really about trusted voices. And this gets back to sort of every – it's everyone's job to make – you know, to protect our democracy. And so community leaders, religious leaders, civic leaders, cultural leaders to understand that we all have to protect ourselves from disinformation and bringing the community together, that's why this bipartisanship message is absolutely essential. But everyone – it's not just at the federal level, or some distant bureaucrat's job to do this. Everyone has a responsibility. We have to protect ourselves. And the most important thing we protect is our democracy. And hopefully more local leaders around the world can be engaged in this, because local issues are being used as tactics, which means local leaders have to be part of the solution.

IGNATIDOU: Yeah. No, I totally second that. I think you have to address trusted sources. You have to call on actors that have a communication with the community. And at the same time, you can actually be creative. I remember the example of a police officer in India that was trying to tackle the issue of disinformation, especially when you had lots of lynchings happening a couple of years ago, because of disinformation disseminated on WhatsApp.

And she realized that the best person – the best way to communicate with the rural communities in India was to create a song, a folk song, talking about disinformation. And that's how she kind of, like, instilled resilience in her local community. So there isn't, like, one example that fits very context. It's just you have to be – it's really context-specific. But it has to be a communal effort, I think.

TONER: Well, I couldn't think of a better way to kind of end it on a positive – three positive examples, locally oriented, which is, you're right, is absolutely key. Sometimes we're thinking so globally, and so big picture, that we forget the impact of local efforts. And, as you said, those trusted sources of information.

Look, I want to thank all of our panelists for joining us. Heather, Sophia, Nina, thank you so much. It's always an education for me to listen to you guys share your views, and opinions, and thoughts about this difficult, complex issue. I also wanted to thank Alex Johnson for joining us. Certainly, Representative Cohen, thank you for your question. And thank you to all our participants.

Alex, last word, or?

JOHNSON: Just to reiterate the interest of our commissioners and political leadership. You will see a series of follow-up events. And we want to thank all of our panelists and speakers for taking the time to join us today. Thank you so much for your excellent moderation, Mark. And we'll see you all soon.

MCCUISTON: Before we leave, I believe we have one other congressional member on the line. Congresswoman Lee, are you there? Francois, is she unmuted and added as a panelist or participant?

HERNANDEZ: She is on the line, but I received word from her staff that she doesn't want –

MCCUISTON: OK, great.

TONER: Well, thank her – thank you very much for joining us, Representative Lee. We appreciate it.

Great. Everybody have a great day. Continue to do what you're doing in these trying times, and self-isolating, and information isolating too. (Laughs.) All right, guys. Take care, everybody. Thanks for joining us today.

[Whereupon, at 11:34 a.m., the briefing ended.]