



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

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Subcommittee Hearing Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Republicans Love Disinformation “Hearing” Part II

December 13, 2023

Today, I am pleased to be here to set the record straight on a dangerous and unfounded conspiracy theory that my Republican colleagues continue to promote: the notion that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) engaged in government censorship.

In 2016, Russian information operations targeting our elections caught the United States flatfooted and caused alarm across the Intelligence Community and among State and local election officials. During both the 2018 and 2020 election cycles, foreign adversaries continued to disseminate false claims to undermine U.S. elections and stoke division between political parties.

In response to requests for assistance from election officials, then-President Trump’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) forwarded messages from election officials – both Republicans and Democrats – to alert social media platforms to election related mis- and disinformation that was spreading widely on social media. During the 2020 election cycle, State and local election officials increasingly began to flag posts that would mislead voters on where, when, or how to vote, as well as threats to intimidate or interfere with voters.

CISA served as an intermediary between election officials and the social media platforms, each of which had their own rules regarding the labeling and removal of mis- and disinformation. To be clear, every message CISA forwarded from election officials to social media companies included a disclaimer at the end that read, in part:

“CISA affirms that it neither has nor seeks the ability to remove or edit what information is made available on social media platforms. CISA makes no recommendation about how the information it is sharing should be handled or used by social media companies. Additionally, CISA will not take any action, favorable or unfavorable, toward social media companies based on decisions about how or whether to use this information.”

A small number of posts flagged by election officials and forwarded by CISA were removed by the platforms, and others were labeled as false information. The *vast majority*, however, went unabated. Ultimately, decisions regarding flagged content were made by private companies un beholden to CISA or any other government entity. I cannot emphasize enough that these efforts to protect America’s elections, and CISA’s involvement, were hardly a secret. Representatives from CISA sat before this very Committee in 2019 and told Members in public hearings exactly what CISA was doing.

At an October 2019 field hearing, CISA’s then Senior Cybersecurity Advisor stated, “We don’t recommend any actions to take on the activity, but we are able to pass it on and say, ‘Here is activity that’s been reported to us. Here is the contact for the state or local election official reporting.’”

Mr. Chairman, I ask unanimous consent to submit the hearing transcript from October 2019 into the record.

It was not until Donald Trump lost the 2020 election and refused to uphold our country's tradition of peaceful transitions of power, that Republican Members of Congress took issue with CISA's well-known activities. As soon as CISA officials refused to go along with the "Big Lie", Republican Members of Congress began to slander the Agency and initiate baseless investigations.

Despite CISA's transparency about its activities, Republicans have used a twisted version of the facts, promoted by a fringe alt-right conspiracy theorist, to justify these allegations. This conspiracy uses out of context quotes and blatant lies to promote the idea that CISA engaged in censorship, or censorship by proxy, directed at conservative posters. Yet, the countless pages of documents and witness testimony provided to this Committee over the last year do not show anything more than what the agency told us back in 2019.

While CISA may have shared information with various social media platforms, those companies were not working at the direction of any government agency. Any decisions made to remove social media posts were made by the companies themselves, according to their terms of service. My Republican colleagues, and the conspiracy theorists who feed them this false narrative, have not once been able to show that CISA engaged in censorship against Americans. But that has not stopped Members of this Committee from spreading disinformation about CISA's activities.

In the Subcommittee's May hearing on this topic, Republicans continued to spread this false narrative by inviting a witness who claimed that the U.S. government censored his posts on social media. However, when pressed by a Member, the witness admitted that he had no idea why the social media companies removed his posts, and had absolutely no proof that the Federal government, let alone CISA or DHS in particular, was involved in any way. Meanwhile, as my Republican colleagues waste time trying to prove something that didn't happen, the threat that the rampant spread of mis- and disinformation poses persists.

Following the devastating wildfires in Maui earlier this year, researchers found what they believe to be a Chinese-directed campaign to spread disinformation that the fire was caused by the U.S. government itself. These kinds of rumors make FEMA's job to assist communities with resources following disasters more difficult.

In another example, Customs and Border Protection contends with the results of lies spread by cartels and human smugglers everyday, as migrants are fed false information to encourage them to cross the Southwest border.

And as we look ahead to the 2024 election, the Federal government's efforts to counter dangerous election-related disinformation will be severely hobbled by Republicans spreading this dangerous conspiracy theory about CISA. Already, these attacks have had a chilling effect on those who were previously studying ways to combat mis- and disinformation. Unchecked mis- and disinformation will affect all American citizens, regardless of political party.

I hope that today, with the opportunity to hear from CISA and DHS officials directly, we can finally put these baseless allegations to rest once and for all.

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