Congressional Testimony

Statement of Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss

Professor, School of Public Affairs and School of Education, American University

Founding Director, Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL)

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"Censorship Laundering:

How the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Enables the Silencing of Dissent"

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Chairman Green, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee: I would like to thank you for your service to our country and for calling attention to the critical issue of disinformation. My name is Cynthia Miller-Idriss, and I am a Professor in the Department of Justice, Law, and Criminology and in the School of Education at the American University in Washington, D.C., where I also direct the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL)— an applied research lab in the School of Public Affairs. I have been studying education-based solutions to the prevention of violent extremism, including through early prevention related to disinformation and propaganda– for over twenty years. I want to acknowledge the support of my research team at PERIL, whose assistance was invaluable in preparing my testimony today.[1]

The Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab, PERIL, develops evidence-based initiatives- such as, short-form videos, trainings and train-the-trainer programs, research studies, community toolkits and guides- to build social cohesion, reverse political polarization, and prevent violent extremism. Utilizing a public health framework and multi-disciplinary, pre-preventative approaches, we design, test, and scale up evidence-based tools and intervention strategies to help people recognize and reject harmful online and offline content, propaganda, supremacist ideologies, conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation while safeguarding their freedom of speech. As widely recognized experts and leaders in the field of preventing extremism and radicalization, we have created effective, evidence-based resources to inoculate against propaganda and extremist content, as well as empower individuals to intervene and interrupt early radicalization and keep their loved ones safe from online manipulation– all as an alternative to security-based approaches that rely on surveillance, monitoring, censorship, or banning.

PERIL's work focuses specifically on equipping people with tools to recognize online manipulation in order to protect themselves and their loved ones from disinformation that seeks to harm them (see below for definitions of disinformation and related terms). We do not teach people what to think; our work is nonpartisan and rooted in evidence. Our focus is on responding to community needs and on providing resources to help people understand the kinds of persuasive techniques that bad actors often use to manipulate others. For example, foreign influence operations, domestic and international extremist and terrorist groups, and scammers seeking a profit will often use rhetorical strategies, propaganda, and emotional tactics that are designed and used to convince others to believe, think, or act in a specific manner. These persuasive techniques manipulate observers for the purposes of grooming, recruiting, and building support for violent ideologies, tactics, strategies, or actions. Our research has demonstrated with consistent statistical significance that people can learn to recognize persuasive and manipulative tactics in order to make more informed choices in their lives, especially online.

SCOPE AND SCALE: COMMUNITIES IN NEED

The national crisis facing communities across the country is all too evident. Over the past three years, PERIL has fielded a constant stream of emails and calls from individuals and communities across the country– all asking for help confronting the impacts of disinformation and propaganda in their lives. In Michigan, a grandfather and military veteran wrote to ask what he could do about his grandson, who had joined an armed militia. In Texas, faith leaders asked for ways to support pastors whose congregations were torn apart by partisan polarization and conspiracy theories. In Washington State, a local government needed training for city employees

to prevent polarization and reject online manipulation. In Vermont, a local entrepreneur asked if the school system could do more to ensure that his future employees– most of whom he hired straight from the local high school– would stop espousing so much propaganda and conspiracy theories, which had become a problem for his business. A local mom wanted help with her middle school son, who during the pandemic had consumed so much online misogyny that he said he did not need to respect her authority as a parent, because she is a woman.

These stories illustrate what research evidence has also demonstrated: we face a national crisis rooted in the rampant circulation of propaganda, dis/mis and malinformation, and other harmful online content. American communities are coming to us because they feel threatened by online disinformation. Some fall prey to hostile foreign influence operations by people who try to manipulate Americans for profit or to disrupt our democratic process. People give their bank information to scammers pretending to be from the IRS. Teenagers share intimate details of their lives with people online who they think are friends their own age, but who are not. Others come to believe propaganda and disinformation that lures them into what they think is heroic action to save their racial or ethnic group after going down rabbit holes of antisemitic conspiracies about demographic change and a supposed orchestrated replacement of white people.

The data on this is clear. The pace, scope, and scale of violent extremism have probably increased and are escalating rapidly. The Anti-Defamation League reports that white supremacist propaganda efforts are at the highest level they have ever recorded, jumping 38% above 2021 levels to 6,751 reported cases in 2022.[2] These incidents include distribution of racist, antisemitic, and anti-LGBTQIA+ fliers, graffiti and posters, stickers, banners, and laser projections that have heavily targeted houses of worship and other community institutions.

The repercussions of so much circulation of propaganda, conspiracy theories, and disinformation are abundantly clear. Between 2013 and 2021, the number of open domestic terrorism-related cases in the U.S. jumped 357% to 9,049 cases, with the most violent incidents being committed by racially or ethnically-motivated violent extremists during the same years.[3] Of the 444 people killed by extremism in the U.S. between 2013 and 2022, the significant majority of deaths were at the hands of right-wing extremists (335 deaths, or 75%).[4] Of those killed by right-wing extremists in 2021, 73% were affiliated with white supremacy, 5% with incel/toxic masculinity extremism, and 17% with anti-government extremism.[5] The 2022 racist shooting that killed 10 people in a grocery store in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Buffalo, motivated by the false Great Replacement conspiracy theory, is just one tragic recent example.

Non-lethal attacks have also risen significantly. More than 50 bomb threats were made to HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) and predominantly Black churches in 2022. And the problem goes well beyond white supremacist extremism.[6] Antisemitism, conspiracy theories, anti-LGBTQ+ hate, and misogynistic content has spiked across online platforms. Before he was banned from social media platforms in mid 2022, violent and deeply misogynistic videos from one content creator were viewed 12 billion times on TikTok alone.[7] Violent outcomes often show a toxic mix of ideological hatred. Just this week, eight people lost their lives at a Texas shopping mall at the hands of a man with a swastika tattoo who had posted both violent misogynistic and neo-Nazi content online.

In October 2020, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under President Trump issued a threat assessment report declaring domestic violent extremism in general and white supremacist extremists (WSEs) in particular the 'most persistent and lethal threat in the

Homeland.'[8] The Biden administration issued a similar assessment in spring 2021,[9] followed by the first ever national strategy to counter domestic terrorism, noting the rising threat from white supremacist extremism and anti-government and unlawful militias that threaten civilians, elected officials, and democratic institutions.[10] Much of this violence is motivated by disinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories. According to the Global Terrorism Database, terrorist attacks motivated by conspiracy theory extremists were responsible for 119 attacks in 2020– a jump from 6 attacks the year before– in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Germany.[11] Meanwhile, hate crimes in the U.S. are at the highest level in decades,[12] despite persistent underreporting. In sum, the U.S. and our allies have seen rising violent extremism and hate-fueled and political violence fueled by antisemitism, conspiracy theories, propaganda, disinformation, and other harmful online content as a pattern of violence that has been escalating for years.

WHAT WORKS TO PREVENT AND COUNTER DISINFORMATION

The good news is there is a growing body of evidence about what works to equip the public with tools that shore up their capacity to intervene in pathways to violent extremism, while protecting their right to free speech and reducing the need for security-based approaches. We have found that it only takes 7-12 minutes of reading one of our intervention guides for its audience to be significantly better informed about harmful online content and the risks of radicalization to violence; to feel more empowered and confident about intervening; to build their own capability to intervene; and to know where to get more help.* This is the case across our research with parents and caregivers, including grandparents, uncles, and cousins; with

educators and youth mentors; with local governments and small businesses, and more. For example, in just 12 minutes of reading one of our intervention tools, 85% of our participants understood the process by which youth become radicalized, and 83% felt that they knew where to get help if they suspect a young person to be engaging in extremist ideas.

Importantly, across our work, we found that both prior to and after reading our parents and caregivers guide, Democrats and Republicans did not significantly differ in their knowledge of extremism. Republicans scored significantly better (5% better) than Democrats did in terms of knowledge of extremism after having read the guide, and members of both political parties reported being satisfied with the guide's contents and equally willing to intervene with a young person they suspect is coming into contact with radicalizing content. We have also found that education alone doesn't solve our problem of disinformation. Our research has shown that higher levels of education do not necessarily mean people have the skills to consistently recognize harmful manipulation tactics online. On the contrary- we found that parents with higher levels of education were overconfident in their ability to help children distinguish trustworthy and untrustworthy news sources. After reading our guide, their confidence went down as they realized how tricky online disinformation and harmful content can be.

There is also strong emerging evidence that even short interventions can have a lasting impact on local communities. We are currently studying a group of 1500 parents and caregivers in three-month intervals for a full year after reading our intervention tool. Three months after reading our guide for parents and caregivers, over 11% (135 individuals) of respondents said that after the intervention, they either joined or created a group that discusses issues of youth radicalization and extremism. Six percent of our participants, or about 75 people, told us that within the three months after reading our guide, they used what they learned to take direct action

to prevent youth from radicalizing further or being recruited through additional online manipulation. Overall, three months after reading our guide, parents and caregiver retained the vast majority of the knowledge and skills they had learned. Seventy five percent of participants reported understanding the process by which youth become radicalized online - a 23% increase from the initial survey - and 70% felt prepared to talk with youth about online extremism - only a 5% drop from the initial survey. Over a third of participants told us they had shared or used the information with their biological children, while nearly 13% shared it with other young people in their family, including grandchildren, nephews and nieces, and cousins.

Taken together, our evidence shows that it is possible to provide communities with tools to be safer online. Parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, mental health professionals, and others deserve help confronting an unprecedented amount of harmful online content and being more confident and capable to keep their families safe and protected from harmful online content. All communities need information and tangible action steps for how to help their loved ones resist manipulative rhetoric, propaganda, conspiracy theories, and disinformation they are exposed to online and offline in ways that help them make better choices while avoiding censorship, surveillance, monitoring, or other security-based approaches.

ADOPTING A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH

PERIL advocates for a holistic public-health mode of prevention consisting of investments at the primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention levels to prevent violent extremism and the components that contribute to it, including disinformation and propaganda. Primary prevention refers to efforts to address radicalization before it takes root, including

through broad civic education and media literacy focused on helping the public build resilience in ways that do not infringe on their right to free speech or free association, and that work as an alternative to security-based approaches that surveil, monitor, censor, or ban content. Secondary prevention refers to efforts to mitigate the impacts of already radicalized people and groups, primarily through surveillance, monitoring, arrests, and interruption of plots. Tertiary prevention refers to focused deradicalization efforts, including through prison deradicalization programs and "exit"-type counseling services that help radicalized individuals disengage from extremism.

An effective public health approach to countering disinformation builds prevention and intervention across all three of those levels—with the significant majority of efforts and resources on the primary prevention side—and would require four things. First, it must be nimble and responsive to communities' needs depending on regional areas of concern. Second, it must be holistic and whole-of-community in ways that broaden engagement of a wide range of government offices, agencies, and organizations beyond the security and law enforcement sectors, such as the education, health and human services, and mental health sectors. It would include primary prevention efforts through the arts, community organizations, faith communities, or other community-based non-profits. Third, an effective public-health prevention model rests on evidence at all levels of intervention. This means moving beyond outcome evaluations that describe only outputs, or the numbers of people trained, the numbers of downloads of a particular tool, or other descriptive metrics that do not actually provide evidence of impact. Finally, a holistic public health approach focuses on building resilient systems as well as resilient individuals. Resilience to propaganda and disinformation is not merely a technical skill, in other words: it is also rooted in national and community values and commitment to an inclusive democracy that must be reinforced, emphasized, and modeled in all aspects of life across the life

course. The aim is to reduce the fertile ground in which disinformation, propaganda, hate and anti-democratic ideas thrive.

This is a vision of a public health-style prevention system that works to prevent violence and counter harm while simultaneously promoting concrete steps toward inclusive equity, respect, coexistence, and real and symbolic recognition of difference. Such a prevention system gives us the best chance of building community social cohesion, reducing violent outcomes, and strengthening our democracies.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Invest in a holistic, community-based, public-health approach to preventing the spread of supremacist ideologies, mis/dis/malinformation, conspiracy theories, and propaganda. This includes creating avenues to fund both pilot testing of innovative approaches, followed by national scale-up of what is proven to be effective in primary-level prevention strategies, including digital literacy and civic education that equips educators, parents and caregivers, youth mentors, faith leaders, coaches, mental health counselors, and others with better tools to recognize and "offramp" individuals who are persuaded by disinformation from further radicalization to violence. The federal government can support the creation of impact driven networks that bring together government agencies from well beyond the security sector; civil society institutions like schools, mental health professionals, sports leagues and after school programs; local NGOs and advocacy efforts that enhance community wellness; and others. At the local level, people need to hear and see pathways for their own engagement, to spark their imaginations about ways to act, to

be moved to change their behaviors, to know there are resources to support their learning, and to want to know more in ways that make a difference in their families' and communities' wellbeing.

2. Incentivize and prioritize rigorous impact assessment and evaluation frameworks to ensure policies and programs are implemented as intended and are effective beyond descriptive metrics. Evaluation frameworks and results funded with public dollars should be made publicly available to ensure transparency and reduce the need for every initiative to reinvent the wheel.

3. Ensure that prevention initiatives focus on equipping the public with better tools for their own decision-making, while not interfering with any individual's freedom of speech, conscience, or association. We cannot repeat the mistakes of historical civil liberties violations or promote censorship as a solution to disinformation.

4. Continue to work with the tech sector to remove harmful and dangerous content, while understanding that banning and content removal is an after-the-fact solution that does not, on its own, solve the crisis of disinformation and propaganda. Addressing the problem of disinformation must begin with upstream prevention that reduces the production of and receptivity to harmful content to begin with.

5. Create a central, national, nonpartisan center for prevention to provide federal, state and local governments and all local communities with tools, resources, training, capacity-building, and evidence about what works.

DEFINITIONS

We define **disinformation** as false, untrue, or incorrect information spread to intentionally deceive, manipulate, misinform and erode an individual or group's belief of established facts, often with a specific interest or goal. This includes efforts from hostile foreign influence operations, profiteers, and international extremist and terrorist groups who aim to harm American democracy, U.S. elections, or scam unsuspecting Americans for profit. It also includes domestic efforts that undermine inclusive democracy, such as antisemitism or anti-immigrant conspiracy theories, or compromise the physical health and wellbeing of communities. Disinformation is similar but distinct from **misinformation**, which is the unintentional sharing of false or incorrect information or untrue claims spread without the aim to deceive, manipulate, or harm. It also differs from **malinformation**, which refers to true claims spread with the intent to deceive, manipulate, or harm. **Propaganda** refers to manipulative persuasive techniques that seek to make people believe true or untrue information, or values and opinions, sometimes using dis/mis/malinformation, persuasive narratives (stories that help audiences imagine themselves as heroes, villains, victors, or victims), or rhetoric (emotionally-stirring language, image and sounds), which lend manipulative power. **Extremism** is the belief that one group of people is in dire conflict with other groups who don't share the same racial or ethnic, gender or sexual, religious, or political identity. This "us" versus "them" framework positions the 'other' as an existential threat and calls for total separation, domination, or other forms of violence.

Notably, terrorist violence from domestic violent extremists does not usually link back to specific groups. Instead, it's most often perpetrated by individuals who have experienced

networked online radicalization through exposure to propaganda. Groups are still an important source of much of the propaganda that circulates in extremist scenes and subcultures, including online. Finally, it is important to note that the spread of online propaganda and disinformation is fueled by how people spend time online. Online radicalization happens in part when people spend time in echo chambers, where extreme content is self-reinforcing across platforms. There is also significant algorithmic radicalization through recommendation systems that suggest content that is related, but more salacious or more extreme than the content the viewer just watched. This can lead to "rabbit holes" of disinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda consumption that are difficult to climb out of.

CONCLUSION

The crisis of domestic violent extremism that is fueled by disinformation and propaganda cannot be solved by law enforcement and security-based approaches. We must invest in upstream strategies to keep communities safe from online harms. We seek a world in which every community is equipped with the tools they need to reject harmful online propaganda, conspiracy theories, and manipulative content without the need for censorship, surveillance, banning, or security-based solutions. Thank you for your attention and I look forward to your questions.

ENDNOTES

1. With gratitude to researchers and staff at American University's Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL) who helped prepare this written testimony: Dr. Pasha Dashtgard, Dr. Brian Hughes, Laura Kralicky, Wyatt Russell, and to colleagues at the Southern Poverty Law Center for their support and partnership on many of the intervention tools and guides cited above.
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*Findings from the lab are included in the following works:

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