

**Questions for the Record from Senator Charles E. Grassley
To Ms. Nina Jankowicz, Global Fellow, Wilson Center
U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary
“Election Interference: Ensuring Law Enforcement Is Equipped to Target Those Seeking
to Do Harm”
Submitted to the Committee on June 29, 2018**

1. *You testified that we cannot simply fact check or label disinformation efforts. As social media companies grapple with giving citizens the tools to discern for themselves when something is disinformation or fake news, these companies are ever mindful of the need to provide a free and open forum for political discussion, and a desire to give our citizens helpful tools to identify what is real and what is not online.*
 - (a) *In those instances where malicious actors place misleading or inflaming content on Facebook, or another social media site, what best practices can the companies employ to help users recognize and combat those efforts?*

To begin, social media companies cannot rely solely on Artificial Intelligence to identify malicious content. They must employ human content reviewers to assist in identifying it, at the very least. Malign actors often use positive messaging or information based on kernels of truth, rather than patently false information, which would be more difficult for AI to detect.¹ Furthermore, this information is not always spread by botnets or other automated means that AI is more likely to detect; often it gains prominence through key influencers, some of whom may be false amplifiers, and others of whom may be real people. Again, these sources are much more difficult to catch for AI than for a human content reviewer.

Once content is identified, it is important for platforms to label it in as plain and accessible a fashion as possible. If an article has been proven to be false by a third-party fact-checker, for example, it should not be labeled “disputed” by platforms, but should be labeled as false. Similarly, rather than clicking through to a Wikipedia page to find out more about a publisher, platforms should consider a hover-over or similar feature that includes basic information about the publication, including founding date, editor-in-chief, owner, etc.

Finally, once false, inflammatory, or malicious content is labeled, it should be suppressed, not promoted, within the platform’s algorithm. There were multiple instances on Facebook’s ill-fated trending news section in which the algorithm promoted absolute falsehoods simply because they were generating engagement. The section has since been removed, but similar trends remain within the platform’s underlying algorithms.

¹ <http://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/blog/2018/05/15/top-three-trends-we-miss-when-discussing-russian-ads>

(b) Are there approaches that social media companies have taken in the past or are taking now that are less effective than they could be in that goal, and, if so, why were those efforts not successful?

In January, I published an op-ed in *The New York Times* that addressed some of these issues;² the main argument of the piece is that tech companies have spent far too much time playing “Whack-a-Troll,” attempting to remove problematic content from their platforms and devolve responsibility for content to users. Both of these practices accomplish little in the long term; false accounts are easy to create, more are located every day, and users are sadly poorly equipped to identify malicious content. Platforms, for better or worse, are arbiters of the news and as such, publishers. They should focus on making quality content more accessible to users as well as updating and enforcing their own terms of service and platform structures to ensure democratic principles are respected.

The main problem with social media companies’ efforts to inform and educate users thus far has been that these solutions have not been designed in a way that users will actually interact with them. For instance, Facebook’s ad transparency archive is buried on the platform; locating it would be difficult for any normal user, and it pulls users away from their News Feeds. This, of course, is exactly what Facebook wants: more time on the platform, interacting with content, in particular monetized advertising content. Rather than make it easy for users to understand an ad’s provenance, users have to click through multiple pages to access information to which they have a right.³

Furthermore, social media companies’ decisions often fly in the face of logic and research. Famously, Facebook decided to label “fake” stories as “disputed,” a label that was found to reinforce rather than correct falsehoods, which tracks with decades of psychological research on fact checking.⁴ Instead, as indicated above, social platforms should demote within the algorithm content that is found to be false or in violation of terms of service and ensure that it is not further amplified.

2. *Who is in the best place to implement voter education solutions: government actors, civil society, or private actors such as social media companies?*

There is no single individual, entity, or institution that is best placed to implement voter education solutions; like democracy itself, effective voter education requires the participation of many parts of society.

Currently, government actors such as state and local election commissions are not

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/opinion/russian-trolls-fake-news.html>

³ As I write this, [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) have both launched expanded ad transparency efforts and have expended a modicum of effort to educate users about how to utilize these new tools. More time and observation is necessary to gauge their impact.

⁴ <https://techcrunch.com/2017/12/20/facebook-will-ditch-disputed-flags-on-fake-news-and-display-links-to-trustworthy-articles-instead/>

predisposed to proactive communication with the public and the press. They must develop working relationships with the press in order to communicate the steps they are taking to protect election infrastructure in the face of malign interference, as well as communicate in accessible terms the sometimes complex and impenetrable election process. However, this communication must extend beyond simply providing quotes and information to the local press; government actors must meet constituents where they are, whether that is an online forum like Facebook, Twitter, or NextDoor, or a neighborhood voter education open house, with the understanding that voters may not seek this information out on their own.

Civil society, to include the press, must act as the nervous system of our democracy, interpreting governmental decisions and actions for local citizens. In addition to this function, NGOs should continue to run trainings on activism and the democratic process in order to help citizens understand how to make their voices heard, both via organizing and volunteering, and through the crux of our democracy, in the voting booth. By encouraging citizens to operate within the system, they will better understand it.

Private actors, especially those like social media companies with an unprecedented and nearly ubiquitous level of access to Americans' lives, also have a duty to educate. They should – and in some cases, have – partnered with civil society and government actors in order to create voter education and media literacy campaigns, though in my view, they have fallen short of their mark. They may register voters by creating eye-catching pop-up graphics and gamifying the act of voting, but they have not gone as far as to help voters better understand a complex primary election system or identify informational manipulation.

In short, there is a necessity for all of these actors to step up and begin proactively educating citizens about their civic duties; this will create a more functional government and more prosperous society that is less likely to fall victim to malign influence.