

Open Letter to the Biden-Harris Administration: *Treating Disinformation as an Intersectional Threat*

December 21, 2020

Dear President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris,

As a diverse coalition of leading advocacy organizations, we write to urge the Biden-Harris administration to treat disinformation as a fundamental and intersectional threat – one that stands as a barrier to progress on every issue the undersigned groups are devoted to advancing.

Your administration faces urgent and unprecedented challenges, from steering us past a deadly pandemic to reversing the decay of our democratic institutions. It's a daunting to-do list, and our intention is not to add new items. Rather, we encourage you to recognize disinformation as a ubiquitous and foundational impediment to tackling those challenges.

Our broken information ecosystem – with unaccountable tech giants serving as gatekeepers – poisons the public discourse and corrodes our capacity for progress. Indeed, President Obama recently [identified](#) the lack of a common baseline of fact as “the single biggest threat to our democracy.” And this crisis of truth is not merely a long-term problem; it is one with immediate implications for your administration’s [top priorities](#) and governing agenda.

We have already seen the tragic role disinformation is playing in exacerbating this pandemic. Beyond the harrowing anecdotes about individuals who believed the virus was a hoax until they fell ill, there is hard data. The [National Bureau of Economic Research](#) found that localities exposed to content downplaying the severity of coronavirus saw more cases and deaths because residents simply ignored public health precautions. From the politicization of masks to viral conspiracy theories about the forthcoming vaccines, our toxic information infrastructure is undermining the pandemic response and [every American is paying the price](#).

Similar dynamics jeopardize your other key priorities. Climate denialism is [running rampant](#) as our window of opportunity to protect the future of the planet closes. The deluge of election lies is not only [sowing chaos and division](#), but being used as [pretext](#) for new voter suppression laws. Racist and misogynist disinformation has incited acts of [domestic terrorism](#); it is weaponized to [silence and threaten women](#), thwart [police reform](#), and justify cruel [immigration](#) policies. Anti-choice extremists have spread blatant [lies about abortion](#) to roll back reproductive rights. No issue is untouched by disinformation.

It will be exceedingly difficult to build consensus and enact the administration’s ambitious agenda when the American people are not merely polarized, but living in disparate realities with warring sets of facts.

There is no panacea for the information crisis – no simple bill or regulation that will alone cure its noxious society-wide impacts. We must instead fight it with government-wide strategies. Similar to your administration’s [approach](#) on climate change, combating disinformation demands intentionality, expertise, and integration across departments and agencies. We hope you will think in these terms as you move forward with everything from staffing decisions to policy-making.

Make no mistake: leadership from your administration can reshape this playing field. We were pleased to see your [campaign proposal](#) for convening a national task force on online harassment

and abuse, and support taking immediate steps along these lines to establish disinformation as a cross-cutting priority.

Below we have outlined additional proposals for your consideration – options that would elevate these issues and lay the groundwork for real change, without getting [mired](#) in the most contentious tech policy debates.

We believe you have a unique opportunity to begin repairing our broken information ecosystem – and that seizing that opportunity is essential to the health of our democracy, the success of your national agenda, and the progress this coalition seeks on the many issues we represent.

Proposals:

- Appoint a disinformation expert to the COVID-19 task force and empower them to regularly brief the public and coordinate a whole-of-society response to the infodemic.
- Launch a website modeled on CISA’s “Rumor Control” resource that serves as a hub for real-time debunking of viral disinformation likely to cause harm, and encourage major platforms and/or NGOs to aid in the threat detection process.
- Establish an interagency task force to study the harms of disinformation across major social media platforms and present formal recommendations within six months.
- Push Congress to revive the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) as a mechanism to facilitate nonpartisan research and analysis into emerging tech issues, including the impact of social media and online disinformation on democracy.
- Begin putting online voter suppression on equal footing as offline, including by directing DOJ to address it under the Voting Rights Act.
- Direct the Department of Education to develop standards for digital and media literacy programming and launch an initiative incentivizing public schools to participate.
- Immediately begin working with the EU to bolster [transatlantic coordination](#) on approaches to key tech policy issues, including disinformation.
- Elevate the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) – which has a legislative mandate to serve as America's nexus for countering disinformation that threatens our democracy or allies – including by swiftly appointing a high-profile Special Envoy to lead the GEC and sit on the National Security Council.
- Pursue and advance the antitrust cases against the major platforms from the FTC and the DOJ Antitrust Division – requesting increased funding for each agency – and the competition policy proposals from the House Antitrust Subcommittee, including the recommendations to (1) restore competition in the digital economy, (2) strengthen the antitrust laws, and (3) reinvigorate antitrust enforcement.
- Request funding for additional enforcement lawyers at the FEC and encourage stronger coordination between the FEC and other federal agencies, including at DOJ and Treasury to investigate foreign interference, and with the FTC to investigate deceptive practices in the form of election disinformation in digital ads.

- Launch a White House "Social Media for Social Good" Codeathon in which participants showcase innovative platform tools, algorithmic options, information labels, browser extensions, etc. designed to foster healthier public discourse.

Sincerely,

#VOTEPROCHOICE

Access Humboldt

Accountable Tech

Avaaz

Center for American Progress

Center for Humane Technology

Center for Media and Democracy

Clean Elections Texas

Common Cause

Defend Democracy

DemCast USA

End Citizens United / Let America Vote

Action Fund

Free Speech For People

Fix Democracy First

Friends of the Earth

Generation Justice

Global Exchange

Government Accountability Project

Greenpeace USA

Guns Down America

In the Public Interest

Indivisible Media City Burbank

Indivisible Plus Washington

Jewish Women International (JWI)

Just Democracy

League of United Latin American Citizens

(LULAC)

Mainers for Accountable Leadership

MapLight

Marked by COVID

Media Matters For America

MoveOn

NARAL Pro-Choice America

National Conference on Citizenship

National Equality Action Team (NEAT)

Native Public Media

New America's Open Technology Institute

ProgressNow Colorado

Public Citizen

Public Knowledge

RepresentUs New Mexico

Secure Elections Network

Stop Online Violence Against Women Inc.

SumOfUs

Tax March

Tech Transparency Project

The Social Dilemma

Transmit Media

UltraViolet

Vote In Or Out