~~FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY / SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED / USG INTERNAL~~

INFORMATION MEMO FOR ADMINISTRATOR POWER

Date: **July 11, 2022**

From: **Johnny Walsh, DDI/DAA , DDI's Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DDI/DRG)**

Subject: USAID Initial Response to Disinformation and Related Issues

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- DDI/DRG organized a full-day pan-USAID workshop on how we can better respond to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (sometimes abbreviated at USAID as MDM). The exercise gathered roughly 50 participants, and reflected a shared judgment that MDM has become a pervasive problem for USAID, the broader U.S. government (USG), and the world. It poses significant risk to USAID and its staff, partners, and programs, especially in the field.
- Key takeaways from the workshop included a shared perception that we are not set up bureaucratically to programmatically or operationally respond well to MDM. Internally, we need to share information, clarify roles, and tighten our operations. Externally, we need more strategic and comprehensive partnerships with interagency leads on MDM, the technology sector, and academia, among others.
- Moving forward, DDI/DRG will shepherd a process to better define the problem, produce a framework document for our efforts moving forward, explore some form of intra-agency entity on MDM, and use these tactics to strengthen USAID's response to the needs identified above.

BACKGROUND:

On May 25th, DDI/DRG organized a strategic planning workshop with approximately 50 participants from each of the USAID Regional Bureaus, CPS, PPL, LPA, SEC, and DDI. Prior to the workshop, DDI/DRG conducted an Agency-wide survey to gather feedback from USAID/Washington and Missions, which solicited more than 100 responses. Below is a list of key takeaways from those consultations:

- **The need to share and learn from what different parts of the Agency are doing:** USAID requires Agency-wide guidance to address MDM. We need to systematically share information on our programmatic and operational work streams across the Agency (e.g. on security and reputational risk, strategic communications, cybersecurity, etc.). USAID has considerable tools to counter MDM, given its global presence, local

partnerships, and work across diverse sectors, but the Agency must take a more systematic approach to deploying those tools.

- **The need to clarify roles, responsibilities, and response mechanisms within USAID:** MDM is a whole-of-Agency problem, but roles, responsibilities, and response mechanisms are largely undefined — both within respective Missions, Bureaus, and Independent Offices (M/B/IOs) and Agency-wide. While some M/B/IOs (e.g. DRG, OTI, or GH) are tackling MDM through targeted programming and by measuring the MDM-related impact of their programs , other M/B/IOs are less intentionally engaged on MDM, and might benefit from institutional expertise on how MDM impacts their work and best practices to address it. The respective roles of Legislative and Public Affairs (LPA), Office of Security (SEC), Innovation, Technology, and Research Hub (ITR), Office of Acquisition, and Assistance (OAA) and others are also important to define in USAID's overall approach to combating MDM.

- **The need to assess our operations in order to respond to reputational and security risks:** Information theft and manipulation affects USAID's reputation and security as well as those of its staff and local partners. USAID has not adequately assessed reputational and security risks to USAID mission staff and implementing partners stemming from MDM campaigns, or the direct risks MDM may pose to its operations. USAID also lacks communication guidance on how to best prepare to respond to targeted MDM campaigns that affect its programs, staff, implementing partners, and civil society. Further, there is no information sharing or reporting mechanism between USAID missions and Washington Headquarters, creating gaps in information and awareness of threats that could help reduce operational risks. A solution would entail clarifying USAID's policies, organizational structures, training, resources, budget, contracting, and personnel to document these instances - and more importantly, to better respond.

- **The need to strengthen interagency coordination:** USAID could benefit from more intentional interagency coordination both in DC and in the field. USAID employees (leadership and working level) are not systematically made aware of or know how to deploy the tools available across the USG that may help them in their response to MDM. For example, the Global Engagement Center's (GEC) Insights Quantified (GEC-IQ) platform offers analysis and social media analytics tools to track MDM campaigns. Moving forward, USAID can better partner with the interagency in DC and in the field, and through NSC processes like the "information integrity and resilience" and "sensitive messaging" IPCs to strengthen the coordination. Our contribution will draw on our programs and localized knowledge; we can also revisit applicable lessons learned from the USG coordinating mechanisms for counterterrorism, countering violent extremism, and atrocity prevention.

- **The need for localized and contextual solutions to understand the information and media environment:** USAID's local knowledge and partnerships are a substantial comparative advantage. We are well positioned to fill gaps that the interagency and the tech sector often struggle to handle, especially by strengthening a society's resilience to disinformation before any specific campaign takes root. For example in Georgia, USAID

is implementing a one of a kind "whole-of-society" program to address disinformation and strengthening the resilience of the information environment at the local level by providing targeted trainings to media and civil society, and working with local data scientists, emerging technologists, religious figures, artists, and anthropologists addressing MDM.

- **The need to strengthen our relationship with the tech sector:** USAID should coordinate and expand partnerships with both established digital platforms and emerging technology firms, particularly with an eye to places where these companies lack significant local presence and operations to address MDM. Such partnerships could seek to strengthen the information environment by supporting independent media, digital literacy, and cyber hygiene training, as well as ways for local media, civil society, democratic host-government counterparts, our missions, and implementing partners to track, report and elevate MDM-related concerns more strategically and systematically.

- **The need to elevate USAID's focus and capacities related to the cybersecurity of programs:** There is growing evidence that insufficient cybersecurity contributes to the success of MDM campaigns directly harming our programs. In one recent instance, the Nicaraguan government launched a two-year disinformation campaign against a local civil society organization funded by USAID, to pave the way for a legal attack on the partner and the media sector at large (lawfare) that resulted in prison sentences of 9-13 years for members of the local CSO. These campaigns are spread by coordinated troll groups trained and funded by the government, as well as with technical support from third country malign governments. During that disinformation campaign, the government conducted cyberattacks on several media outlets that attempted to report on the government's disinformation campaign. These incidents and broader trends strongly indicate these types of attacks are more widespread and will continue to accelerate in pace, scale, and sophistication. This could create an existential threat to USAID's ability to ensure the security of local partners and to implement programs, especially in unstable or otherwise closing spaces.

Elements of a Stronger USAID Response

At the workshop and in subsequent discussions, the Agency B/IO and DRG representatives have identified several key things we as an Agency seek to accomplish en route to a more coordinated, integrated, potent USAID capability to address MDM.

- **Define the problem and our objectives.** We will agree upon a definition that captures the scope, scale, and distinctive challenge of disinformation at USAID. We will survey USAID's existing efforts on MDM, identify gaps and opportunities, and develop a manageable set of strategic objectives.

- **Develop an interim framework document.** This should address the challenge, provide guidance to USAID Missions and B/IOs, and propose a manageable number of strategic priorities on MDM, including identification of a few countries for cross-sector interventions.

- **Set up a USAID entity to lead on disinformation.** This requires further thought, but we are exploring a number of models for a Whole-of-Agency body to coordinate MDM efforts. Key to this effort will be the ability to bring (depending on the situation) senior leadership and working-level representatives from relevant regional and functional B/IOs across the Agency, who can give a portion of their time to this challenge, to ensure we get whole-of-agency, cross-sector representation. We envision this entity will be led by DRG, but initially, will not be a full-time standing body or have its own budget. We want to remain flexible as our needs to address this challenge evolve.
    - Even such an internal body is sensitive right now because of the recent backlash against DHS' "Disinformation Governance Board." To guard against any similar backlash (against what would be a very different enterprise from DHS'), we will work closely and transparently with the NSC, State, and others to ensure we are avoiding all foreseeable pitfalls.

- **Assess and Expand Programmatic Responses:** We will catalog existing programs that are addressing MDM, identify gaps and opportunities for innovation, and establish mechanisms to share best practices. From this exercise we will develop strategic objectives for USAID's overall programmatic response to this challenge.

- **Reform USAID Operations**: We will consult across the Agency, including with PPL, LPA, SEC, ITR Cybersecurity, and HCTM, to identify needed operational changes, such as best ways for the missions to respond to reputational, security risk, and employee resilience. From this exercise we will establish clear strategic communication guidelines, in collaboration with LPA. We will similarly identify MDM issues for our implementing partners, and how we can respond.

- **Strengthen External Partnerships:** We will solidify external relationships with the tech sector (social media and emerging technologies in Silicon Valley and in developing countries where we serve), implementing partners, NGOs, and local institutions to elevate and share MDM related challenges and best practices. One way that USAID can lead in this arena is to support the formation of locally led independent coordination bodies, inclusive of civil society, the tech sector, and relevant government stakeholders to elevate and prioritize concerns, promote accountability, and facilitate cooperation.

NEXT STEPS:

I have asked Vera Zakem, our newly-arrived Senior Advisor for Tech and Democracy and a broadly recognized expert on disinformation, to spearhead planning on this effort: defining the problem, developing an interim framework document, planning for a cross-Agency entity to lead on these issues, and mapping initial steps the Agency should take to begin reforming USAID operations and strengthen external partnerships. Other experts across USAID will support Vera, and we will work closely with interested bureaus at every turn. In the next month or two, we

will follow up with an Action Memo for your approval to launch some or all of these efforts in earnest.

Attachment:

- External views on the DHS disinformation governance board

CLEARANCE PAGE

Drafter: Vera Zakem, DDI/ DRG vzakem@usaid.gov and Diana Parzik: DDI/DRG/DRI dparzik@usaid.gov

Approved: DDI/DAA: LMarr for A-AA: KFickenscher 6/16/2022

Bureau Level Clearances	**Clearance Status**	**Date**
DDI/DRG: JWalsh	Clear	6/12/2022
CPS/AtA: RJenkins	Clear	6/15/2022
CPS/OTI/Dir: BBrown	Clear	6/14/2022
LPA/ Rebecca Chalif	Clear	6/6/2022
LPA/Lauren Shaw	Info only	6/8/2022
PPL/A-AtA: SWalter	Clear	6/8/2022
PPL/SPP: GYang	Clear	6/6/2022
EE/S. Maguire	INFO	6/9/2022
SEC: Brian McGill	Info Only	6/6/2022
DDI/DRG/Dir: RTucci	Clear w/edits	6/3/2022
DDI/DRG/Dep Dir: DBlack	Clear	6/8/2022
DDI/DRG/DRI: MKaran	Clear with edits	6/3/2022
DDI/DRG/CSM: MDouglas	Clear	6/3/2022
DDI/DDI/ITR/A-Dir: AContreras-Donello	Clear w/edits	6/8/2022
DDI/ITR: JO'Bryan	Info Only	6/8/2022
DDI/ITR/Dir: TJones	Info Only	6/8/2022
NST: Sophia Lalani	Clear w/edits	7/1/2022
ES: BBeiler	Clear	7/1/2022
ES: KWilliams	Clear	7/1/2022
ES: JBernton	Clear	7/5/2022
DCoS: SKorde	Clear	7/12/2022

The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/06/business/disinformation-board-dc.html

Disinformation Has Become Another Untouchable Problem in Washington

Numerous federal agencies agree that widely promoted falsehoods threaten the nation's security. Doing something about them is another matter.




By Steven Lee Myers and Eileen Sullivan
July 6, 2022

WASHINGTON — The memo that reached the top of the Department of Homeland Security in September could not have been clearer about its plan to create a board to monitor national security threats caused by the spread of dangerous disinformation.

The department, it said, "should not attempt to be an all-purpose arbiter of truth in the public arena."

Yet when Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas announced the disinformation board in April, Republican lawmakers and conservative commentators denounced it as exactly that, calling it an Orwellian attempt to stifle dissenting views. So did some critics from the left, who questioned the powers that such an office might wield in the hands of future Republican administrations.

Within weeks, the new board was dismantled — put on "pause," officially — undone in part by forces it was meant to combat, including distortions of the board's intent and powers.

There is wide agreement across the federal government that coordinated disinformation campaigns threaten to exacerbate public health emergencies, stoke ethnic and racial divisions and even undermine democracy itself. The board's fate, however, has underscored how deeply partisan the issue has become in Washington, making it nearly impossible to consider addressing the threat.

The failure to act, according to experts, has left openings for new waves of disinformation ahead of November's midterm elections — and even for violence like the racist massacre at a Buffalo supermarket in May, which was motivated by a baseless conspiracy theory that global forces aimed to "replace" white Americans with immigrants.

"I think we're in a really bleak situation here in this country," said Nina Jankowicz, who briefly served as the board's director before resigning when the controversy boiled over.



Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas has put the disinformation board on pause, pending a review. Doug Mills/The New York Times

A prominent author and researcher in the field of disinformation, who once advised Ukraine's government, Ms. Jankowicz became a focus of the furor, targeted online by false or misleading information about her role in what critics denounced as a Ministry of Truth.

"It's hard to imagine how we get back from this," she said in an interview, "when this is how our elected representatives are behaving — when we can't agree on, you know, what is the truth."

Daily business updates The latest coverage of business, markets and the economy, sent by email each weekday. Get it sent to your inbox.

The threats from disinformation today involve issues that not long ago might have transcended partisan politics. Instead, disinformation has become mired in the country's deepening partisan and geographical divides over issues like abortion, guns and climate change.

Even during the Trump administration, the Department of Homeland Security recognized the threat. The agency, along with the director of national intelligence, commissioned a 2019 study that concluded that disinformation could, among other things, "aggravate existing societal fissures" and "cause panic that reverberates through financial markets."

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, the State Department and the Pentagon warned repeatedly of threats from foreign sources of disinformation. The Federal Election Commission held a symposium before the 2020 elections to address the issue as well.

By then, however, a partisan divide over the issue had already begun to take shape.

Its roots began in Russia's interference in the 2016 election of President Donald J. Trump, which he and his allies repeatedly denounced as fake despite evidence compiled by federal investigators about Russian complicity.

Disinformation that continues to swirl around Covid-19 and the 2020 election of President Biden — which Mr. Trump continues to insist, against all evidence, was a fraud — has made many Republicans view the very fight against disinformation as a partisan assault.

"You can't even use the word 'disinformation' today without it having a political connotation," said John Cohen, a former top intelligence official at the Department of Homeland Security, who participated in discussions about addressing national security threats fueled by the internet-enabled rapid spread of false information.

By all accounts, the department failed to anticipate the furor that the creation of the advisory panel would cause — as well as the ease with which critics would tar it with the very kind of campaigns it was meant to monitor.



A Republican rally in Greensburg, Pa., before the Pennsylvania primary in May. Kristian Thacker for The New York Times

Mr. Mayorkas announced the board, offhand, at a budget hearing in April, followed by a Twitter post from Ms. Jankowicz. By then, the board had already been operating for two months, though it had not yet met formally.

In addition to its new director, its staff included four officials detailed from other parts of the department. It did not yet have a dedicated budget or enforcement authority. Even so, conservative commentators, including Jack Posobiec, pounced, joined by conservative media and Republican officials.

The board quickly became a new foil in an old Republican campaign narrative that overbearing Democrats want to intrude deeper and deeper into people's personal beliefs — "canceling" conservative values. Ms. Jankowicz's prominence in the discussion of Russia's actions made her a particular target for the Republicans.

"The right recognizes it is a way to whip up people in a furor," Ms. Jankowicz said. "The problem is there are very real national security issues here, and not being able to talk about this in a mature way is a real disservice to the country."

Opposition came not only from the right, however.

Three rights organizations — Protect Democracy, the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University and the Electronic Frontier Foundation — welcomed the department's recognition of the scale of the problem but cited the department's "history of flouting the Constitution in flagrant ways" as reason enough to be wary.

"In the wrong hands, such a board would be a potent tool for government censorship and retaliation," they wrote in a letter to Mr. Mayorkas, calling for the department to reconsider the board.

The damage was done, forcing Mr. Mayorkas to reverse course. He put the board's work on hold, pending a review from the department's advisory council that is expected to be completed by Aug. 1.

He asked a bipartisan pair of former officials to review the issue of fighting disinformation: Michael Chertoff, the department's secretary under President George W. Bush, and Jamie S. Gorelick, deputy attorney general under President Bill Clinton. Few expect the board to be reconstituted in anything like its intended form.

The rising polarization of disinformation — like so many other issues — has hamstrung the search for solutions by Congress and the Biden administration.

Legislation like the Honest Ads Act, which would regulate political advertising online the way it is on television or radio, has been stalled for years. The United States has failed to act on privacy or other matters to rein in the power of social media giants even as Europe, for example, has moved to force them to disclose how their services amplify divisive content and stop targeting online ads according to a person's ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation.

In Washington, there is not even agreement on the threats, with Republicans seizing on the fight against disinformation as an effort to silence conservative voices.

According to internal Homeland Security Department documents that established the board, they include crises ripped from today's headlines: Misinformation that undercuts public health emergencies. Human traffickers who sow falsehoods to steer immigrants on dangerous journeys across the southern border. Conspiracy theories that beget violence against state and local election workers.

The documents were made public by two Republican senators who vocally attacked the board, Chuck Grassley of Iowa and Josh Hawley of Missouri. They cited them as evidence not of the need to combat disinformation but rather of the board's nefarious aims, even though the memorandums all emphasized the principal need to protect free speech. Among the documents, though, were talking points that Mr. Mayorkas had received for a meeting with officials from Twitter to address disinformation, which the senators characterized as an effort "to suppress disfavored content."



Senators Marsha Blackburn and Josh Hawley have criticized the Department of Homeland Security and its board. T.J. Kirkpatrick for The New York Times

Mr. Grassley did not respond to a request for comment. A spokeswoman for Mr. Hawley, Abigail Marone, said President Biden was "intent on leading the most anti-First Amendment administration in American history."

"His idea of 'disinformation' is parents speaking out about their kids being taught critical race theory or concerned Americans asking legitimate questions about Covid vaccines," she added. "Biden's aim is to use the power of the federal government to shut speech down."

The Department of Homeland Security added the threat of false information to its periodic national terrorism advisory bulletins for the first time in February. "The United States remains in a heightened threat environment fueled by several factors, including an online environment filled with false or misleading narratives and conspiracy theories," the warning said.

Foreign and domestic actors, the bulletin added, "seek to exacerbate societal friction to sow discord and undermine public trust in government institutions to encourage unrest, which could potentially inspire acts of violence." At that time, Senator Marsha Blackburn, Republican of Tennessee, declared that the department was "policing the speech, thoughts and opinions of American citizens."

The department reiterated that warning in a bulletin last month.

"We're basically at this point unable to have a calm discussion about this problem," said Paul Barrett, the deputy director of the Stern Center for Business and Human Rights at New York University. "And there's a weird, circular, looping-around effect. The problem itself is helping make us unable to talk about the problem."