

HOUSE PERMANENT SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE

Statement by Cindy L. Otis

I am honored to appear before this committee, especially during this critical time in our nation's history. I am here today to lay out the threats as I see them from the range of actors, both foreign and domestic, who are doggedly working to influence and manipulate the American people by sowing and amplifying false information. My analysis of these threats are informed by the decade I spent at the CIA as an officer in the Directorate of Analysis, serving our country under both Republican and Democratic administrations, and the years I have spent since leading disinformation investigations in the private sector.

Almost four years ago, the Intelligence Community publicly released its unclassified assessment on Russian interference. In the report, the IC stated that, "Russian efforts to influence the 2016 US presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow's longstanding desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order, but these activities demonstrated a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations."

Since the release of their report in January 2017, I have seen a failure to take the necessary actions to combat foreign and state-sponsored interference itself. As a result, and perhaps inspired by Russian efforts, more countries than ever are using false information to advance both their domestic and foreign policy goals, such as China and Iran. These foreign actors are actively targeting political divisions in this country to manipulate and influence American citizens and to degrade America's standing in the world and the credibility our institutions. The failure to act is an abdication of responsibility that must be taken seriously and amended expeditiously.

In the last nearly four years, I have also witnessed a rise in the number of both foreign and domestic commercial entities and financially-motivated individuals who sell disinformation services under names like "social media influence" or by providing vast amounts of data of Americans they have collected online to the highest bidder. Like foreign governments, they too see an America more divided than ever, and these for-profit actors are more than happy to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories to fan the flames if it lines their own pockets. In a largely unregulated space, what Americans see is at the whims of those who own or purchase their data.

Threat actors know that peddling disinformation and conspiracies works. It has become an effective tool and it is cheap to produce. There are no meaningful consequences for those spreading disinformation and no real recourse for those who fall victim to disinformation.

We are also now witnessing a rise of nefarious activities by political campaigns in democracies around the world, including ours. They embrace and deploy tactics that sound much more like foreign influence operations than the tactics of good digital campaigning. Stoking political division with false information or conspiracy theories may win a candidate some votes, but it also makes our democracy an easier target for foreign adversaries, promotes broader distrust by Americans in the institutions that should be working for them, and discourages people from engaging in democratic processes. It pulls our country further apart, making it harder to have the meaningful debate and compromise that enables democracy.

Be it a foreign government, a domestic group, or a for-profit entity, we are seeing in real-time the impact of an American information space cluttered with voices trying to mislead and manipulate. And in a global pandemic when facts and truth are the difference between life and death, the situation could not be more dire. We are living in the biggest period of false information in history, and we Americans are doing it to ourselves.

The technology platforms continue to go largely unregulated and have failed to adequately address the problem. Lies can go viral instantly on social media, and the platforms even curate them into menus tailored to their users' particular appetites to ensure clicks that make easy targets for disinformation actors to sow and spread content. Rumors, hoaxes, and conspiracies flood social media every day—and not to the benefit of the American people.

Dangerous conspiracy theories and groups, such as QAnon and anti-science voices, are on the rise. In just three years, QAnon went from being a few posts on a fringe forum that primarily attracts white supremacists to being a mainstream talking point by elected officials and political candidates running for office. Many of us may have discounted conspiracy theories as harmless before the pandemic, but we are seeing these beliefs translate into real world harm, such as violence, threats to marginalized communities, and refusals to follow public health recommendations.

These are the consequences to the lack of regulation that is long-term and ultimately damaging to our ability to sustain our democratic society. Americans are losing trust in what they read and see online each day. We are desperate for information, but certain groups feel they cannot trust the traditional institutions upon which they used to rely, including the media who are now regularly threatened and blamed for the events that they cover. As a result, Americans are gravitating toward more extreme ideas and sources.

We can still win this fight, but the longer we stall the more difficult it will be. Threat actors are taking the time we have given them to build and hone their capabilities and tactics. We must act now by responsibly regulating social media platforms so that they protect users from nefarious influence. We must address the threat actors using disinformation against us and hold them accountable for their actions. We must support society-wide resiliency, by arming Americans with the information they need to know to protect themselves against this threat and showing them that they can in fact trust those institutions that are meant to serve them.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.