# National Council on Election Integrity Speaker Series:
# Disinformation in our Democracy: The 2020 Election, Current Threats, and the Path Forward

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*(Transcript may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.)*

Elise Wirkus (00:00:00):
Good afternoon everyone, my name is Elise Wirkus, I am the legislative affairs manager here at Issue One. We are so happy that you could join us for our second event in our National Council on Election Integrity Speaker Series in 2021. As many of you know, the National Council on Election Integrity was formed last summer, in the lead up to the general election, to be a bipartisan center of gravity for some of these contentious election issues. It is made up of 41 Democrats and Republicans from across the political spectrum who are former military leaders, former members of Congress, and also heads of major outside groups - who bring a lot of expertise and strength to our mission here at Issue One.

Elise Wirkus (00:00:52):
We are hosting this speaker series to offer an honest, bipartisan, and productive lens to some of the most contentious election issues. We are excited that these four esteemed panelists can join us here today to help us tackle this massive issue and threat of disinformation. A couple of administrative notes at the top of the webinar that I want to note. We do have a transcription service available today, so if you would like to activate that there's a button at the bottom of your screen to do that. We'll reserve the first 35 to 40 minutes for the discussion and then we would be excited to welcome questions from all of you via the chat. Please put your questions for the panelists and Nick in the chat and I will manage that about 35 or 40 minutes through. Thank you again for being here and with that I'm going to hand it over to Nick Penniman - Issue One's CEO and Founder.

Nick Penniman (00:01:43):
Thank you Elise! Disinformation is among the greatest threats facing our democracy today. It has the power to destabilize governments, sow discord, and undermine the truth. How we fight the spread of disinformation in the world of social media platforms and others should play in solving the problem, pose complex questions. The one thing that's for certain is that we know the current ecosystem of information isn't helping American democracy flourish, nor democracies around the globe. For the purpose of today's conversation, and because we only have an hour, we will be focusing disinformation through the lens of democracy - hopefully with a more specific focus on election integrity.

Nick Penniman (00:02:22):
To set the stage, some of you may have already known that we launched this $15 million dollar campaign at Issue One called Count Every Vote. It was anchored by our bipartisan National Council on Election Integrity; the purpose of the campaign was to counter the coordinated disinformation campaign, led largely by the president, that sought to sow distrust in our elections and their outcomes. We combatted the fraud narrative with a positive message to assure people that our elections are indeed safe and secure.

Nick Penniman (00:02:52):
The damage of the fraud narrative was not just the faith of voters have in our democracy - it also manifested itself in the violent and deadly attack on our Capitol on January 6th. And, the damage of the narrative is fueling the proliferation

of bills across the states, now more than 360 bills and 47 states, to restrict voting. Not all the provisions in all these bills are bad, of course, but many are, and they are trying to solve problems that no one has yet to prove exist, meaning that there was widespread fraud in the election.

Nick Penniman (00:03:26):
We also know that this inflammation contributes to polarization. It's difficult to hold a pluralistic Republic like America together when you can't agree on a common set of facts, or when disinformation is spreading faster than journalism online. Confronting this crisis of disinformation and misinformation means that we have to beef up media literacy initiatives, expand the reach of organizations that work on steering people - and advertising dollars - toward journalism and away from disinformation, forcing social media companies to provide greater transparency about what they do and how they do it, and a whole lot more.

Nick Penniman (00:04:03):
Today we've convened the leading experts to discuss these root causes driving disinformation, and to discuss the bold solutions that our government and corporations can take to combat the growing crisis. So I'm going to quickly introduce the four, then they're going to give some opening comments and then we'll go into questions that I'll ask them and then we'll turn to the audience. So we're joined today by Chloe Colliver she is the head of digital policy and strategy at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Vanessa Cárdenas, the president of CárdenasStrategies who has a long history of working in both media reform and voter mobilization efforts. Most recently, with the Biden campaign. Ben Scott, who is the executive director of Reset. Also the policy and advocacy advisor for Illuminate, which is an organization founded by Pierre Omidyar. And, Gordon Crovitz the co-founder and Co-CEO of NewsGuard. He was also the former publisher of The Wall Street Journal. Full disclosure, I helped NewsGuard get off the ground. Early on in its existence. So let's first turn to Chloe for opening remarks.

Chloe Colliver (00:05:11):
Thank you very much, Nick and thank you all for being here today. I'm going to try and set the scene a little bit in terms of the big picture of the threat that we've seen over the past year and how that manifests. I think the first thing to say is when we're talking about the disinformation threat as we see it today. This is not any more just about false information, but also looking at systems that enable false identities. False behaviors and post popularity, which can skew a free and fair information system around an election.

Chloe Colliver (00:05:42):
Digging into kind of the actors at play here on the field of disinformation around the election in November. Whereas back in 2016 a lot of attention was obviously granted to the role of hostile foreign states in promoting deceptive information practices online. We've seen the kind of broadening of the church of actors involved in quite coordinated and coherence disinformation activities. And that really came to a head, as you mentioned Nick, on January the sixth where we saw this collaborative group of extremist conspiracy theorists and political campaigns groups all rallying around a major disinformation narrative.

Chloe Colliver (00:06:20):
But if we look from states towards extremist and hate groups, through political campaigns, even dark PR companies, the bar of entry to this kind of activity online now is extremely low and the tactics and toolkit to disinformation are out there for all to pick up and utilize their ease. I think thinking about the actors that we see here it's worth thinking about the kind of matrix of both motivation and resources that we need to be aware of and how we're considering how threatening some of these different actors are playing might be. Those that should concern us most are those that have both high motivation to promote this information, or do some activities, but also the most resources to do that. So here we might be thinking about hostile foreign states but also well resourced political groups or extremists with highly motivated agendas, to address and public safety or security.

Chloe Colliver (00:07:16):
In terms of the issues and the targets that we've seen over the past year and disinformation, obviously, we all sadly have been witness to the political this information angle of this around the stock the steel narrative, and it's broader precursor from early 2020 of undermining faith in the vote by mail system itself. But this is hybridised with a much broader conspiracy and disinformation ecosystem that has also tackled issues of public health and COVID-19 disinformation, commerce and business, climate change in the environment, but also that targets individuals and communities with defamation and this information as well. So not only missing a broadening of the actors at play, but the issues in the targets of that activity as well.

Chloe Colliver (00:08:01):
Finally, it's not just the kind of democracy in elections narratives we've seen targeted but this information around the election, but also the harassment and defamation of individuals involved in the elections process. We saw concerted a tax levied against those who were poll workers, those who are working in the systems of vote counting. This is an equally damaging and detrimental trend in terms of protecting democratic processes, and something that we are not yet well set up to protect against either in terms of the security protection of individuals or the systemic narratives that try to attack companies or processes themselves. Finally, I just wanted to move onto scale and structures, so you know how big this problem is and what it looks like. And I think it's hard to put across quite how grave the situation is and how systemic a problem this is in the area that we sit in now. Just a few ideas to give a sense of this, and looking at COVID disinformation last year for example we did some research that looked at the scale of interaction with this information sites that were sharing false information about COVID, versus official outlets like the CDC and the WHO. We saw a massive gap of between 18 million interactions with disinformation sites compared with about 6 million for the CDC and WHO on sites like Facebook. So a huge gulf in terms of engagement that disinformation networks are managing to get, that they are coordinating, and that are being amplified by social media companies' algorithmic systems.

Chloe Colliver (00:09:38):
In terms of the election focus itself, research from groups like Avaaz showed that disinformation – known disinformation about the election – was receiving over 140 million views on sites like Facebook running up to October last year. So we are talking about scales of engagement here that are kind of mind bending in that enormity and the potential impact they could have on election outcomes but more broadly on public safety and security as well. And I just finished thinking a little bit I suppose about implications, and we're an organization that works very internationally in our research and our policy work. I look ahead this year to the German federal elections in September, to the French elections in 2022, a number of other global elections; the playbook from the disinformation activities that occurred in the US last year has already been picked up and shared with international compatriots in extremist movements in populists political parties and beyond. We will no doubt see a mirroring of the attempt to undermine faith in democratic processes and other democracies, that is built off the supposed success at the scale that was engendered in the US, in this past year. But even more concerning and regimes where there isn't a democratic process in place to begin with. And so we have this whole selection of contextual vulnerabilities to think about. And to add to that an old tech ecosystem that is now emerging to fuel disinformation and misinformation actors, beyond the purview of many researchers and the media. So it's not to set to grim a stage on it, I suppose, but the worrying pictures we haven't yet got had a grip on the systems and the processes that are enabling the proliferation of this scale of disinformation targeting not just democratic processes themselves but all of the policy issues and agendas that surround them as well. So I will leave it there for now.

Nick Penniman (00:11:42):
Great, thank you Chloe. Vanessa?

Vanessa Cárdenas (00:11:46):
Yes. Hi. Thank you so much for inviting me to this conversation. I'm not going to repeat a lot of the stuff that Chloe

laid out but I think that in the last year we have seen how real this problem is and sadly how it's not going to go away. The fact is that I think every person that cares about democracy and cares about our government and cares about social cohesion needs to start thinking about how to address disinformation. I think from my perspective, what has been more troubling from what we saw in the last year and the last couple of years, mainly last year, where the, how Trump and others were sort of inflaming racial tensions in our communities, and how that contributed to the sense of distrust, as well as sort of the attacks on their government – that you cannot trust their government – and I think those are two very dangerous attacks. In the end I think for us to really address some of this, we really need to be thinking through what we need to do to sort of empower organizations groups on the ground, but just also thinking as Americans what's the meaning of sort of our governments, our democracy, our values, and what do we need to do to sort of foster a sense of unity and really do the local the work to really build up our validators or even our local elected officials. I think part of the part of the efforts of this information was to really create this trust right like you cannot trust anyone. So I think that's one bucket of sort of a conversation that we need to have as a society.

Vanessa Cárdenas (00:13:35):
I think there's a huge problem when it comes to the sources of information, which is why you know a lot of people are now relying on social media. And I think the vacuum of really good sources of information whether it's print, whether it's radio – it's really creating havoc particularly in vulnerable communities in articles on Facebook or news that are distributed on Facebook or or even YouTube videos. Those are still taking over. So I think we need to have a conversation about the investments that need to be made sort of on other legitimate sources of information, and how we build that up. And then obviously we need to have a conversation about what the platforms are doing. One of the things that I always say, when I talked to the platforms, because you know, they often talk to civil rights groups, is that their response needs to be proportionate to the harms they're creating and their response should not be that the onus is on groups to flag disinformation. The onus has to be on them to act in a responsible manner and be held accountable. I think the other thing that I will also need to remember is that this platforms are private enterprises. Therefore, they have a responsibility to control what is happening on that front.

Vanessa Cárdenas (00:15:00):
So, you know, those are some of the things that in the work that I've done in the last year so I think are really important to focus on. I'll end by saying that this problem is not going to go away. I think everybody needs to be thinking about how to fight back, how to make sure that they have sort of the tactics and the ideas and sort of the messaging to really fight back against disinformation, so I'll stop there.

Nick Penniman (00:15:28):
Ben.

Ben Scott (00:15:30):
Thanks so much. I appreciate the opportunity to be here. I want to say a few words about what we can do about this problem. It's often overwhelming when you look at the evidence of harm. And I've spent the last couple of years working with governments around the world to try to answer the question of what's to be done. Because the platforms, the big technology platforms that are primarily responsible for distributing disinformation – also happened to be some of the most valuable corporations in the history of the world. They have a business model that is enormously profitable. They are not going to give it away because we see some arms that are put off onto the public instead of internalized into the business. We have to change the rules about how these markets operate in order to convince them that they either change the way they behave in the public, or they go out of business. That's a tall order for companies with this size and power, but that's what we have to do.

Ben Scott (00:16:37)
So how do we do that? The problem we face is that you can't delete your way out of this problem. So, let me use the example of January 6th, the event that scarred and all of our minds. You have on that day hundreds of people engaged in the organizing and incitement to violence against the government live on social media. The posts on social media

encouraging others to commit violent acts, documenting violent acts, and celebrating violent acts. Those are illegal. That is that is a content type of content that we already have laws to deal with, we can identify that as illegal content and demand that the platforms remove it; all well and good. The problem, of course, is that 99.9% of the content does not rise to that level of illegality. What do we say about the months and months and months of conspiracy theory about so-called election fraud that led hundreds of people to believe that that kind of violence was warranted. None of that is necessarily illegal, in fact most of it is clearly not illegal. It's not illegal to say something stupid or false or offensive online happens every day, all day long. So we can't delete our way out of this problem. We can't as a government say we're creating a ministry of truth, and from now on these kinds of things cannot be said online, none of us would want that. But that doesn't mean we throw up our hands and walk away. Because what's happening here is not that there's people saying crazy things in the media, that's always been the case - that's democracy. The problem is that these extreme views, the conspiracy theories, have come from the margins of the public sphere, they've been dragged into the middle, and they've been distorted vastly out of proportion to what to the views that are actually held in the real world.

Ben Scott (00:18:39):
How does that happen?  Well, that's because that's the business of these companies, what they're doing is they're, they have a business model of selling advertisements, and they sell advertising by capturing all of our attention how do they capture our attention well they put things in front of us that are hardest to look away from what's hard to look away from really sensational, provocative, outrageous content. So what do they do? They take really provocative sensational outrageous content like "the election was stolen" and they move it into the middle of the public sphere, and they show it to us over and over and over again. It captures our attention, and makes them money, but what it also does is it normalizes those extreme views. Because when you see something hundreds of times, after a while you think well it can't be a crazy conspiracy theory because I've seen it 100 times this week, and lots of people I know are talking about it, and they seem to think that is reasonable so why shouldn't I think that it's reasonable. And after a while, I started to think well that's pretty much normal and I stopped paying attention to it. Then what does the algorithm do it says right, this guy's not paying attention anymore.I'm losing advertising dollars I need to go back out to the extreme to the internet I need to bring in something even crazier to grab his attention. Rinse and repeat. And what you get after a while is a large number of people who believe in an alternative reality. And that is driven by this business model.

Ben Scott (00:20:00):
Well, back to where I started, you have a right to say something stupid and false and offensive online, but that doesn't imply that you have the right to have an amplified and distorted vastly out of proportion to the views that are actually held in society; freedom of speech does not mean freedom of reach. And so what we can do is we can say to these companies, "Look, we're not asking you to delete individual posts, we're asking you to stop amplifying them artificially in order to pad your bottom line at the expense of the public." And we can do that by, number one, reminding you that you companies have rules against this kind of amplified conspiracy, it's not illegal under the law, but it's not allowed on your product. So you are offering a product to the public and you're saying it does a certain number of things including it stairs clear of conspiracy theory about elections because that's harmful to the public, but you're not enforcing your own rules. Why is that? You're going to be held accountable for that. Second, we can open up the black box of this amplification works, how does this artificial distortion happen? We need independent researchers, looking at that question. Right now all we can do is look at shadows on the wall because Facebook and YouTube, they don't let you in to look at how their business works. They can answer lots of these questions for us tomorrow if they wanted, but they won't let anyone else look at those systems either - that has to change. We need to study these problems that are very serious. And when you identify ways to begin to reduce those harms, not through censorship or the deletion of content that we object to, but by identifying this problem of artificial amplification and distortion as the root of the problem that is purely about making money for a small number of companies at the expense of the public interest. That is the fundamental challenge for policymakers, it is not an easy challenge, but it is one that we can address and we have to if we're going to get to the bottom of this.

Nick Penniman (00:22:05):
Thanks, Ben. Gordon? Demute.

Gordon Crovitz (00:22:11):
Thank you very much. Thank you for including me and thank you for the reminder about the mute and Nick in your case, thank you for the idea of NewsGuard. I think one way of trying to explain this issue and I'm echoing much of what we have heard from a slightly different angle is, as I did to ask, what was it that drove so many people on January 6th to storm the capital. Some of them were, you might call professional provocateurs or something worse. Many of them were not. And for those of us who followed the media coverage of them the biographies of them. They all had something in common, which was they didn't grow up to be believers and conspiracies or even extremists; many of them were quite moderate. Then they discovered sites like info wars. And they started using Facebook and they went to Facebook groups that raise doubts about elections, or maybe they raise doubts about the cause of COVID, or maybe they raise doubts about vaccines, and people who joined groups and one of those areas were then recommended by the social media companies for the reasons Ben described, to go down some other rabbit holes as well. If the business model of the largest digital platforms in the world, is to turn over the way they operate their platforms to algorithms that are optimized for engagement. It's exactly as Ben says, the craziest, most extreme stories will get attention, and people over time will believe there must be some truth to it, or perhaps even a lot of truth to it. At NewsGuard we see this from a particular lens which is that we have rated all of the news and information sources that account for 95% of engagement in the countries in which we operate which is the US, UK, Germany, France and Italy. Every news source gets a rating from zero to 100 based on nine basic apolitical criteria of journalistic practice. Every site gets a red or green rating, red meaning proceed with caution. We were quite surprised when we looked at our data, after doing this work, to see that in the US market, 40% of those most popular sources of news got red ratings from us. And you have to be pretty bad to get a read. Many of these were healthcare hoax sites. In the case of the Stop the Steal, we identified over 160 sites that had published election faucets. We've identified over 400 websites around the world publishing COVID–19 hoaxes of one kind or another. So none of this is a secret to the digital platforms.

Gordon Crovitz (00:25:18):
I think one of the opportunities here, to end these introductory comments on an optimistic note, is to understand that the digital platforms were born to be irresponsible. And what I mean by that is in the US, with good intentions, in the mid 1990s when the internet became commercialized Congress took the decision not to hold the digital platforms accountable for content on the platforms, whether libelous or creating harm and some other way. In other words, there's an industry that's grown up that's not under the duty of care of the common law of a chemical industry or an oil company. The pollution that they've created is something that they were born told they were not going to be held accountable for. So in that way it's not surprising that it's been so difficult for them to behave responsibly. The good news, as several of the panelists have indicated they are working on, a government solution is simply to end a particular immunity for an industry. For those of you like me, who are skeptical of regulation; think of this as not an end to regulation, but applying centuries old common law to an industry that for the last 25 years has been exempt from basic, common law duties. There are lots of solutions being discussed, we can get into them. An arms [audio cuts out] approach would essentially reform section 230 in the US, which gave immunity to the platforms by creating a duty of care, by putting them under the common law. Political scientist, Francis Fukuyama has identified a quite practical solution which is required of the platforms to be opened up for what he calls no- [audio cuts out]. There are dozens of companies, the UK Government identified several dozens of online safety companies in many different areas on protecting kids, stopping hateful attacks to misinformation. So there are solutions in the market, but it will take either threats by government or actual regulatory legislation, to restore what after all is simply the basic common law to these digital platforms.

Nick Penniman (00:28:04)
Thank you, Gordon. Chloe, I want to go back to you. As Ben said, you know, you can't outlaw people saying outrageous things online or linking to outrageous websites online. And yet, we've got to figure out ways of recentering the

conversation on democracies or even on emerging democracies – on facts and on journalism, especially when it comes to our democracy. Have you seen good examples of this occurring anywhere? How do you actually drive online engagement back towards journalism facts, you know, shared facts and common narratives? Because as you said, the playbook that was unleashed here in the states last year, is now going to be replicated around the country. And part of that replication is you know enabled by the fact that journalism is no longer at the center of the national conversation.

Chloe Colliver (00:29:08):
It's a great question, and I'll refer to an example that often gets wheeled out with that kind of question in mind, and which is that there are types of platform design, which are not built for the same type of commercial endeavor and that don't necessarily have the same systematic effects of promoting sensationalist content that is close to the line of violating community standards. So Wikipedia is an example that is often spoken about as a model of somewhere where while back in the day, it may have been teased as potentially not the most reliable source of information – it has actually become one of the most reliable sources of information in the modern world. And that's partly because the platform design enables community based betting and moderation of content, rather than a black box approach to either AI based content moderation, or to kind of outsource content moderation that is low, kind of low paid work, and that is sent out to many different companies around the world by Silicon Valley's tech giants. And so I think it's an interesting example of thinking about how platform design itself can alter the incentives that there are for this kind of content to proliferate. There are bigger picture ideas out there as well about how we can support a shared reality again. I think we also have to step back and think about what public service media means in an internet age, and how we can support public service media online. That requires some new thinking, you know we're not just going to have, you know, natural public service media that have a website – that's not that's not enough. We have to think about other actual social platforms and communication platforms that can be supported and built for the public good, for civic discourse – that is measured by the same standards that we measure the BBC, or other global examples of public service media. So, there is some kind of platform design and private sector approaches that could be used as examples of how we can try and promote those kind of models for information sharing. But also some kind of much bigger questions around the long term of this and how we can build a journalistic system that also makes the most of the internet and the connectivity that we have rather than suffering from it.

Nick Penniman (00:31:28)
Yeah, Vanessa let me pass that over to you because you've been involved in your past with trying to create independent media – especially on behalf of marginalized voices, you know alternative media outlets. What do you think about the idea of public service media and also how we reset or facts and common narratives in our democracy?

Vanessa Cárdenas (00:31:50):
Yeah, no, that's a really good question. I think a couple of thoughts here. I think we've also have to recognize where people are. Right? People think that for example, most DC folks think that people are on Twitter, when we know most, most of the American public is on Facebook or YouTube. Right. So I think it's really important for us to, to go where people are. And then provide people with credible information. As someone who works in communication, one of our basic rules is to make sure that you have validators who are legitimate in the communities that you're trying to engage with. So I think sort of these local voices; this is regardless of party right like people trust who they know whether those are community leaders, whether they're local elected, whether they know their state voter registrar. So I think, at least in those voices, it is really important because that creates that personal connection.

Vanessa Cárdenas (00:32:54):
I think that this time calls for a new investment in innovation to be frank about how we communicate better, right. So I think again going to different platforms, creating different mediums to talk to communities, creating messaging or communications in language is really important. And also educating folks about, "where did you get that information", asking folks about you know what would be the motivation behind that news that you saw that sounds a little crazy, right. So I think it's a process of, again, really understanding where your audience is, nurturing validators or authentic

people that can speak to them, but also doing a little bit of the, what we call the inoculation, right, It's a little bit of critical thinking. Helping people become better consumers of media. So I think those are some of the things that we can all do to help facilitate sort of this a better sort of understanding of the media and what it actually means for the type of news that we're consuming.

Nick Penniman (00:34:03):
Ben I gotta ask you about section 230. In my conversations with you previously you made it clear that the European governments are ahead of the American government and thinking about regulation and what that entails. Do you think that the conversation around 230 is red herring, maybe and maybe describe it a little bit for the hundred plus people who are listening right now, in case they haven't read into it and we didn't get to 230. And then what examples can we learn from what some European countries are doing in terms of regulation?

Ben Scott (00:34:39):
So 230 has become a kind of strange buzzword in this debate. It refers to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which, years ago, ruled that companies that offered services to the public over social media platforms, were exempt from liability from users who posted illegal content on the platform. So if I went on Facebook, and I encourage someone to commit an act of violence, it's on me, not on Facebook. Facebook, because of that protection from liability, has freedom to go and moderate content and, by acting to take my content down, they do not become liable for my content because they took action against it. This idea of intermediary liability, protection freedom from liability for the actions of users on your platform, is something that's in the law in most countries. This is not an unusual thing, this is a standard rule that was applied to the internet in its early days, and in broad strokes, it's a reasonable idea. What has happened, however, is that the companies have taken this protection against liability and they've expanded it to basically protect them from everything. They claim that they have no liability for anything that I do. But this ignores the fact that they're not neutral platforms, they don't just post whatever people put up and stand in out of the way. They're not telephone companies who just collect people who make phone calls. As we were describing before – a piece of content gets posted and they decide they're going to make sure millions of people see that content, they amplify it for their own reasons they recommend it to people, they suggest that you join this group or that group. And that act of amplification, in my opinion, is very different from just hosting content in the early days of the Internet, and the act of amplification is at the core of their business. So I think it is no longer reasonable to say you shouldn't have any liability despite the fact that you're playing a very serious role in what content gets seen, and how often it gets seen by how many people, what time of day, and that that this is the debate, we're having right now as to what level of liability protection these companies should have. That's 230.

Ben Scott (00:37:20):
In my opinion, the 230 debate in American politics has devolved into a food fight over who's side gets biased more by the social media platforms. And that's a completely unproductive debate because liability implies illegality bias. Bias, based on my political view is, is not it doesn't imply illegality I can say what I want to them on social media, as long as it's not illegal, they're not going to be liable for it no matter what – even if they amplify it. So the debate over liability is really only relevant for that narrow slice of content, which is illegal. All the rest of it, the artificial amplification problem of harmful but not illegal content, that doesn't really get implicated in a debate over liability. We need a separate conversation to talk about how to deal with the problem of distortion. The problem of manipulation of deception, of an information market built on surveillance of every internet user to determine what pushes their buttons into feed them that kind of content. None of those issues are going to be addressed just through this narrow lens of Section 230 the communications decency act. So in my view. Yes, it's important to have a debate about illegal content and who's liable for it. But the bigger question is got to be outside of that construct and, and that is a question that the Europeans, and the British, and the Australians, and the Canadians are engaged with right now. We're not much talking about that in American government and I think that's a real problem.

Nick Penniman (00:39:02):
Gordon over to you because you were kind of the one who hinted at the 230 earlier and NewsGuard does, I know, have operations abroad. Are you seeing greater uptake with approaches like the NewsGuard approach like sending signals kind of warning signs, and green lights or red lights abroad? And what are the issues back here? Specifically, one thing I want to ask you about too is that, you know, when we were launching our Count Every Vote campaign at Issue One, we were listening to a lot of advice from people who have done focus groups and message testing online about how to send the reassurance message and the one thing they said is that sometimes in fighting disinformation, if you are bringing up the disinformation itself your, your ostensibly amplifying the disinformation. And, that is better instead of saying, x is wrong just to say, y is true. But I know that you guys at NewsGuard have experimented with what it means to send red and green signals to people and whether or not that encourages them or discourages them.

Gordon Crovitz (00:40:07):
I think Ben's absolutely right that the UK and Europe, Canada, and Australia are having a different kind of debate, then we're having in the US and I think potentially a more fruitful one. And there's certainly more focus on this issue. The largest broadband provider in the UK, British Telecom BT, actually makes NewsGuard available to all of its broadband subscribers, saying, we're not the company that creates misinformation, we're not the company that promotes misinformation. But we are the company that brings broadband into your homes, so here's a tool to protect yourself and your family from misinformation and hoaxes. So there's a broader acceptance of responsibility, I think is the way I would put it including internet service providers who are not even part of the discussion in the US, although they could be a bigger part of the solution.

Gordon Crovitz (00:41:01):
Your question Nick about what's effective and what's not effective is it an excellent question. We do a lot of research on that question. What we've found is that giving people tools for them to make up their own minds is far superior than a kind of heckling fact checking. So in other words, if people routinely see in their Facebook feed icons indicating "this is generally trustworthy, this is generally not trustworthy". And if crazy uncle Willie shares a conspiracy theory and family Facebook feed some member of that family can learn about the source of that misinformation, and tell uncle Willie, you know, that site that said that 5G the telecom you know the broadband technology and 5G caused COVID-19. Six months ago that same site was claiming the 5g causes cancer. And neither one of them is true. So I think it's these kinds of practical tools to nudge people to focus on the source, the credibility of the source, who is the source. We continue to see, by the way, even though, you know a lot of misinformation now is spread on individual social media accounts, or even on TikTok, that ultimately almost every example of misinformation and hoaxes is traced back to what looks like an authoritative source that people thought must be accurate. It looks like a news website. It looks like a healthcare side.

Gordon Crovitz (00:42:50):
But these are quite serious problems and very difficult for people to resolve on their own. It's impossible to tell the difference between cancer.net and cancer.info. One of those is the website of the American Cancer Society and the other one will sell you a monthly subscription to peach pits to cure your cancer, looking at them they look very professional, the peach pit one actually looks a little more professional. Unless you have some sense of that site, you are unarmed to be able to tell what you should take it as a credible source or not a credible source. So there are a lot of tools that are available. The great challenge is how to break through the walled garden of digital platforms, so that middleware solutions - as Francis Fukuyama puts it - can be offered to consumers so that they have choice, and they can choose to arm themselves with information from sources - by the way other than the digital platforms who, among other things are certainly not trusted to rate the credibility of news sources. They have generally speaking terrible news judgment.

Nick Penniman (00:44:06):
Elise I know there's a lot of questions coming up in the audience. and so why don't we open up to the audience and also

if any of the panelists want to feel free to just kind of pop in, go for it. I wish we had more time; we have like 15 minutes left, or so.

Elise Wirkus (00:44:19):
Of course, the first question here is from Miles Parks, he's from NPR, he said "I'm wondering if the panelists can talk a bit more about the social media companies relationship with researchers. Do you all feel like the companies want to know more about how their companies are affecting democracy or affecting the health of individual users, or are they standing in the way of learning more?"

Chloe Colliver (00:44:42):
I'm happy to take that one from a perspective of having worked on this for quite some time. The picture of this has changed quite dramatically over time and sadly the picture of the relationship between researchers and tech companies, the major largest tech companies has deteriorated quite rapidly over the past 18 months to 24 months I would say. There is definitely a spectrum, between the different major technology companies, some of them remain more open to working with researchers, and therefore also sharing data. Look at a company like Twitter which, for all its many problems still does provide a much greater amount of data access to independent researchers than almost any other major social media company which does enable at least some form of independent review and oversight and it therefore gets a lot more PR flack often than any other companies despite it's much smaller size because people are able to look in under the bonnet. And there is a real difficulty, I think, in having even a critical, but productive relationship between researchers and companies at this stage which is detrimental to our solving this problem. And there is a PR firefighting attitude, for the most part, from companies dealing with these issues, and therefore there is very little incentive for them to offer up data that might end up in resultant kind of exposures of bad practices on their platforms. So really, we're seeing a very defensive posture for most of the major tech companies towards research as an investigative journalist at this stage, often a threatening one to some extent in some circumstances. It's difficult to try the line of trying to engage the companies directly and productively and constructively on some of these issues. Which is a shame because you know, productive policy change can be one through debate and conversation and the exposure of the harms if there's an open door there. So I would say it's deteriorated quite rapidly over time. And it's a difficult one to see mending anytime soon.

Nick Penniman (00:46:53)
Go for it, Elise.

Elise Wirkus (00:46:55)
Does anyone else want to weigh in on that? Otherwise I'm happy to jump to the next question.

Ben Scott (00:46:59)
I will say one thing about that, which is, I find this one of the most frustrating parts of this debate over what to do about the problem of digital media platforms and democracy. They could answer questions that we desperately need answered anytime they want and they just won't do it. So for example, it would be great to know how many people have seen fraudulent information related to COVID-19 or vaccines, who saw it and how many times they see it, how big is the problem, with which communities, was it in English was it in Spanish, was it in another language was a targeted in a particular city or particular state? Is it correlated with anti-vax activity in a particular place, they can answer all these questions for us. Or they could make that available to researchers to do it and they just won't.

Gordon Clovitz (00:47:54)
Hey Ben, on that exact question, we worked with the World Health Organization and a slew of ad-tech companies, to figure out how many people around the world had been exposed to COVID-19 misinformation, so that the WHO could deliver medical messaging to those people. The number was 2 billion. So that's why the platforms don't want to share the information.

Ben Scott (00:48:21):
Right so they know that the answer to those questions are damaging to their business and they chose in public relations reasons not to participate in helping the public interest because it might undermine their credibility and their brand identity. That is outrageous and should not be acceptable for a public dealing with a pandemic.

Nick Penniman (00:48:39):
Are there examples and other industries of corporations being compelled to provide certain information about their customers for the sake of something like public health? Would the social media companies say well this is unfair and no one else has to provide this kind of information about their customers or their customer interactions so why should we?

Gordon Crovitz (00:49:00)
There are enormous regulatory regulatory apparatus around the pharmaceutical companies and you can hardly imagine a more regulated industry because it has a direct impact on people's health. As to the digital platforms.

Ben Scott (00:49:14):
Imagine if you know Johnson and Johnson and AstraZeneca knew exactly which people were having reactions to the vaccine, and had which symptoms and what places, and they just said you know what, we're just not going to tell you.

Nick Penniman (00:49:30):
Right. No one needs to know. Right.

Vanessa Cárdenas (00:49:34):
Just to pile on here with another perspective. One of the biggest frustrations for civil rights groups has been, last year around the elections, you know when we are flagging this information that was targeting different communities, the question from platforms was like just flag it to us and we'll take it down. But the problem is, by the time we see it, and by the time it gets elevated to sort of the civil rights community - it's already too late. This information is spreading already in communities, and you know it is hard to believe that, given how big these platforms are, how resourceful they are, that they can hire enough people to monitor, right. So just a big question that I think it's something that they could do something about yet, they're not even doing it on that front. In spite of the fact that civil rights groups have been asking for this sort of information for a long time.

Elise Wirkus (00:50:32):
The next question I think would also be great to talk about so we haven't really talked about the former president since the beginning of the hour, but how do you balance the decision between banning someone from a social media platform, which might amplify or martyr their ideas, versus strategically refuting their ideas? A short way of asking that is what's been the impact of deplatforming for President Trump?

Vanessa Cárdenas (00:50:58)
I think it's a good thing that he was deplatformed. I mean he was such a big driver of disinformation and really harmful disinformation. So I think in terms of the impact, I will tell you that even as someone who regularly debates political issues on TV, ever since he's been gone from the platforms, the conversation has been more focused on policy focused on solutions versus what the latest tweets have been. So you know I think that it's been a good thing that he's been deplatformed. Having said that, we know that Trump is a symptom, not the cause, in that he has really unleashed sort of this new way of communicating and really creating havoc in this trust, and the harms are real, right. Not just when it comes to the vaccine disinformation but also when it comes to the, the legitimacy of our election, which really again goes back to the questions about whether people are trusting our democracy. I will say one thing that I think is ready to that question Elise, and something that Gordon said earlier. While it is important to give people tools to fight back this information, I think one of the biggest things that we need to do is drive an affirmative message that really speaks

about our democracy and what we believe in. So our response should not be in trying to debunk disinformation, but talk about our vision, and our values in an open affirmative way. So it's not just about trying to address the problem and respond to the problem, it's more about what is it that we believe in, in that those notions of Democracy or values of sort of a unity of of what we have in common, it's really important for us to be asserting that message, day in and day out.

Chloe Colliver (00:52:54):
And if I could maybe just add really quickly on that. There's actually some interesting research on deplatforming and the impact of deplatforming, and we've done a lot of research on extremism at ISD. Obviously this back in the day was quite a big issue with ISIS related content for example you know. What is the impact of removing terrorists related groups for major platforms, does it mean that they radicalize more quickly in smaller spaces, what are the effects of that? And this is an area where the lack of platform data makes it very difficult to conduct kind of robust research but there was some really interesting papers looking at Reddit, for example, from a couple of years ago when they ban certain very harmful subreddits, which looked at whether users then moved to other subreddit, and also what the nature of the language shift was if they did that. And actually they found that, and there wasn't just to kind of mirror wrangle escalating of that toxic language and other places. Most people didn't actually find a new home together and actually the language receded toxic extent when they were dispersed from the original kind of place where they were together. So largely anecdotal, but there are some really interesting studies that look at the fact that if deplatforming is done in a way that is coherent and transparent with policies - that actually it can be beneficial to ensuring that the general level of discourse and community standards is upheld.

Gordon Crovitz (00:54:22):
I think by the same token, though Chloe, if the digital platforms are deplatforming based on secret, inconsistent, and potentially one-sided decisions, then it inflames conspiracy. Maybe not among 80% of the people, but even if it's among 10% of the people. It's very hard to say that that was necessarily the right thing to do, I think the jury is still out.

Elise Wirkus (00:54:51):
There's another question here from a funding perspective. With relatively limited funds, given the space, what are the most catalytic entry points for philanthropy and what do you all need to do your work?

Gordon Crovitz (00:55:12):
I'm going to make a quick argument against interest, which is to say what really needs funding is old fashioned journalism in many areas, particularly local news, not just in the US but now around the world. Local news serving particular communities of interest, whether it's the black community Hispanic, Asian, LGBTQ+ communities. These are the places where news is increasingly difficult to fund or to get. And by the way, these are also the sites that are effectively being boycotted by advertisers who are terrified of their ads ending up on terrible misinformation sites, they tend to tell their ad agency just keep me off new sites all together. We have a product to try to get advertisers to focus on quality sites but it's an enormous problem. And if I could just say one last thing about it. What we've seen instead, in too many cases, is philanthropy funding will look like local news sites that are actually funded by PACs or other politically oriented groups, and that purport to be regular old local news sites but actually are pushing an agenda, one side or the other. There's a website, my favorite one in Arizona, called the Copper Courier, which sounds like a must have been founded in the 1860s during the copper, gold rush and the copper rush you know of that time period. It was actually started I think last year by a secret pack, whose fundraising materials said it would be a lot better, to promote our point of view, in this case, left wing, if we pretended to be news, and instead just published things that supported our side. So misleading people, further reducing their trust in the media, that's the kind of philanthropy that I hope people don't do.

Elise Wirkus (00:57:15)
Anyone else want to weigh in on the role of philanthropy?

Vanessa Cárdenas (00:57:20):
I'm happy to aim for a minute here.You know, I think it's important to remember that this information is not like a tools problem, it's a communications problem. I think investments in sort of communications infrastructure including obviously digital it's really important. This is the sort of this is the future we already know, seeing this and it's only going to grow so I think really investing in creating mechanisms within organizations so they can communicate effectively is really important. You know, I think that having more researchers and investigators that are diverse is a huge problem. We have wonderful researchers and investigators but we need those people that come from those communities, so they can actually make sure that their investigations and research is culturally competent so that's another big piece. I think that as Gordon said the media landscape is very poor and is what is when it comes to especially vulnerable communities so investing in that it's a really, I think, huge gap. I think the biggest piece, to me, is that there's no silver bullet to this. Everybody has a role to play on disinformation. So we have the power, sort of all of the groups in organizations that care about democracy. And because the solutions have to be tailored - the local voices the state level work is actually really important to this.

Nick Penniman (00:58:55):
Well it is two o'clock, and I kind of wanted Ben to take it away because he kind of works in philanthropy. But I think that we've got to have another one of these conversations, that's the big answer here, because this has been fantastic! I know we've only scratched the surface of many topics. This is going to be ongoing. This is not something like a rash that is magically going to go away. So we look forward to having you guys back, probably in a couple of months and continuing this with the audience. So thank you all for attending. Thank you to our panelists for your insight and all of the work you do on this problem. Thank you to Elise for co-hosting with me. Thank you to the Issue One staff for mounting this and other efforts like it. See you all later.