Federal Register Notice 87 FR 15274, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/03/17/2022-05683/request-for-information-on-federal-priorities-for-information-integrity-research-and-development, May 15, 2022

Request for Information on Federal Priorities for Information Integrity Research and Development

Academic Researcher from Boston University

Re: RFI Response: Information Integrity R&D

This letter is in response to the request for information from the NIRTD, NCO, and NSF regarding Federal priorities for research and development efforts to address misinformation and disinformation.

As a researcher at Boston University, I have published extensively on the topic of misinformation – a broad term that also encompasses disinformation. Drawing upon my expertise on this topic, I am pleased to address the ways the federal government might enable research and development activities to advance a) trustworthiness of information, b) mitigate effects of information manipulation, and c) foster an environment of trust in which individuals can be discerning consumers of information.

Regarding question 2 of the RFI, preserving information integrity and mitigating the effects of information manipulation, I have previously written the following with co-author Chris J. Vargo from University of Colorado, Boulder that specifically addresses key barriers for conducting information integrity research and development:

> Social media platforms, including Facebook, have entered into agreements with third parties to provide fact-checks of content circulating on their platforms. Despite having partners around the world (Goldshlager, 2020), misinformation continues (Robertson, 2020). Fact-checking partners **don't know how well their efforts perform at reducing the spread of misinformation** (Lu, 2019). Our dream research, consequently, centers around the transparency and accountability of social media efforts to address misinformation. **We need an API [application programming interface] endpoint that shows the specific actions platforms take once a message is identified as containing misinformation, including removal, warning labels, and downranking.** When considering downranking or shadow banning, even more unknowns exist. **Who still sees downranked content? How does that vary across demographics and psychographics? How do mitigation tactics affect the way audiences respond (liking, sharing, commenting, etc.)?** Researchers need visibility into these actions to assess how political ideology, media use, and media literacy interact with the steps platforms are taking to correct misinformation. Furthermore, content on social media is narrowly targeted to specific audiences. Both political and commercial ads are targeted to users

based on their pre-existing attitudes, beliefs, and fears (Borden King, 2020; Young & McGregor, 2020). While Facebook and Twitter have robust APIs, there is no way for researchers to identify ads in real-time. We also desire the ability to assess the damage targeted influence has on platforms and believe that researchers and platforms can work together to understand these consequences and ultimately build better systems.

Moreover, regarding question 1 and understanding the media ecosystem: it is not just social media platforms with which we need to be concerned. Corporate and political actors have leveraged mainstream news media to shape citizens' views of public issues – such as climate change – through advertising. An especially deceptive form of digital content that has become ascendent over the last decade is called "native advertising," a form of sponsored content (an informational video can be found here). These native ads mimic the format of news articles and are common in nearly all US legacy news outlets including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. My research (as well as that of many other academics) has made clear that most readers do not recognize the difference between the paid native ads and genuine journalistic articles. In fact, a native advertisement from ExxonMobil that ran in *The New York Times* – and was created by their T Brand Studio – is an exhibit in a lawsuit against the fossil fuel company brought by the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office for deceptive advertising claims about climate change. While Boston University is providing focused research grants to study this type of covert disinformation, the government should be funding more research that investigates the nature and extent of this sort of practice, as well.

Pertaining to question 3, information awareness and education: media consumers are not equally influenced by deceptive content. My research indicates people who are older and less educated have more difficulty identifying online disinformation. However, my research also shows that those who are more news media literate – understanding news media operations and procedures – are more likely to identify disinformation efforts and are less likely to amplify it online. Thus, government should also be funding media literacy education efforts. A good example of this is the recent appropriation from Congress to fund a task force within the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to develop guidance, instructional materials, and a national strategy on information literacy (page 142, here: https://appropriations.house.gov/sites/democrats.appropriations.house.gov/files/BILLS-117RCP35-JES-DIVISION-H.pdf). This national strategy should include media literacy education programs for local communities through public K-12 schools, higher education as well as public libraries and even post offices.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my expertise on this important issue. I am happy to continue this dialogue in the future.

Sincerely,
Academic Researcher from Boston University