

House Panel Targets Universities, Scholars

House Republicans investigating the “weaponization of the federal government” want information from several disinformation researchers who were recently accused of being part of the “censorship industrial complex.”

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Representative Jim Jordan, who chairs the House Judiciary Committee and the select subcommittee on weaponization of the federal government.

Disinformation researchers at several U.S. universities are getting swept up in House Republicans’ investigation into the “weaponization” of the federal government.

ProPublica reported Wednesday that Ohio representative Jim Jordan, a Republican who chairs the select subcommittee overseeing the investigation, sent requests for information to Stanford University, the University of Washington and Clemson University seeking records related to the moderation of social media content.

Inside Higher Ed did not obtain a copy of the letters sent to the university and the think tank the German Marshall Fund of the United States. *ProPublica* reported that the letters sought information about how

“certain third parties, including organizations like yours, may have played a role in this censorship regime by advising on so-called ‘misinformation,’” according to the letter obtained by *ProPublica*.

At this point, the letters are just requests, though the subcommittee does have subpoena power. Jordan’s office did not respond to a request for comment.

The subcommittee wants records from as far as back as January 2015 between faculty or staff at the universities and the federal government or social media organizations pertaining to the moderation of social media content, *ProPublica* reported. Centers at the three universities research disinformation online and how to stop it from spreading. Researchers at the University of Washington and Stanford worked with two other organizations to form the Election Integrity Partnership, which worked to identify and counter misinformation during the 2020 election cycle. Some conservatives have criticized that partnership’s work as a form of censorship—a claim researchers rebut.

“We disagree with the framing of the EIP’s work as ‘censorship’—and are troubled by broader efforts to equate research about misinformation and disinformation with ‘censorship,’” University of Washington researchers wrote in a fact sheet addressing false claims about their work.

The University of Washington declined to comment beyond the fact sheet, which was released earlier this month following a hearing of the House subcommittee.

Jon Fansmith, senior vice president of government relations at the American Council on Education, said the requests are not a surprise, but they are also not typical.

“It’s always concerning when institutions and researchers get pulled into something that is such a highly charged partisan fight, especially even when there was already a lot of public attention and noise around this that was being directed at those campuses and those researchers, and this will only exacerbate that,” he said.

He added that academic research often gets cited in policy debates, and that the requests shouldn’t have chilling effect on disinformation research.

“This is a little bit different than the norm in some ways, because it is such a national, politicized debate,” said Fansmith, who has not seen the letters from Jordan. “I think it’s pretty telling that they’re not asking about the research itself. They’re asking about the coordination or the communications between the researchers and other entities.”

House Republicans formed the Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government this year in order to investigate violations of civil liberties. So far, that has included numerous document requests and a hearing on the so-called Twitter files, which some Republicans have said showed that the social media company intentionally silenced conservatives online, and how Twitter dealt with government requests to review posts, among other activities.

Testimony at the March 9 hearing on Twitter accused the Election Integrity Partnership of being the “seed of the censorship industrial complex.”

“They aren’t asking for a national debate over the limits of the First Amendment,” the witness wrote. “Rather, they are creating blacklists of disfavored people and then pressuring, cajoling, and demanding that social media platforms censor, deamplify, and even ban the people on these blacklists.”

University of Washington researchers at the Center for an Informed Public wrote in the fact sheet that the criticism of their work is part of a larger effort to undermine efforts to understand and dress online misinformation.

“This effort aims to equate work to understand and address these challenges with ‘censorship’—functioning to cast doubt on research investigating mis- and disinformation and to undermine interventions that attempt to create more trustworthy information spaces,” they wrote. “The rhetoric is similar to that employed in support of attempts to reframe the events of January 6, 2021, and to counter the findings of the U.S. House’s select committee that investigated what led to the violent attack that day on the U.S. Capitol.”

The Center for an Informed Public started in December 2019 as a way to bring together an interdisciplinary team of researchers “to translate research about misinformation and disinformation into policy, technology design, curriculum development, and public engagement.”

“Unfortunately, some of the projects CIP researchers have contributed to have become the subject of false claims and criticism that mischaracterizes our work, a tactic that peer researchers in this space are also experiencing,” the researchers wrote in the fact sheet. “As mis- and disinformation researchers, it’s distressing—though perhaps not surprising—to see some of the very dynamics and tactics we study being used to disrupt and undermine our own work and its impact.”

The Stanford Internet Observatory, another target of the information requests, was founded in June 2019. The nonpartisan research center is focused on the study of abuse in current information technologies, according to its own fact sheet released after the Twitter hearing.