

'A surreal experience': Former Biden 'disinfo' chief details harassment

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Legal

Nina Jankowicz casts herself as an object lesson in how conspiracy theories can turn a person into a meme.



On Fox News, Nina Jankowicz became such a fixture that, when DHS paused the board, Rep. Jim Jordan thanked anchor Sean Hannity for “the work you’ve done in helping get rid of this governance board.” | Wikimedia Commons

By Heidi Przybyla

03/08/2023 04:30 AM EST

In a Valentine’s Day court hearing in Arlington, Virginia, Nina Jankowicz finally got to face a man who’d been stalking her for nearly a year and secured a restraining order against him.

Jankowicz, 33, is a researcher and author of two books whose stint heading the Biden administration's Disinformation Governance Board lasted a few weeks last spring before the board itself was dissolved by the administration following an outcry by GOP lawmakers that it was going to censor the free speech of conservatives.

But that was just the beginning, she said, detailing for the first time a year of intense public and online harassment spurred, she said, by conservative media attacks and emblemized by the self-styled citizen-journalist who repeatedly stalked her, doxxing and recording her without her consent.

"It was a surreal experience to be forced to confront this guy," Jankowicz told POLITICO in an interview. In one video, she says, the man said her newborn should be put in "baby jail."

Now, it looks like Jankowicz will be back in the spotlight. Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) plans to make Jankowicz a star witness before his new Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of Government, which Republicans say will investigate alleged abuses of federal authority. On Monday, Jordan issued a subpoena compelling Jankowicz to sit for a deposition and Jankowicz says she will abide by it.

Rep Jordan says 'Big Tech is out to get conservatives'

Jankowicz says her story shows what can happen to any private citizen or government official who gets cast as a villain in a far-right conspiracy plot. "I didn't intend for my entire career to be lit on fire before my eyes by taking this job," she said.

The now-defunct initiative that Jankowicz briefly headed was aimed at developing government-wide recommendations to stop the flow of disinformation sponsored by China, Russia and violent domestic extremists. Jankowicz, who managed programs on Russia and Belarus for the National Democratic Institute and has advised the Ukrainian government, was chosen for her expertise in online disinformation, according to the Department of Homeland Security, under which she served.

Jordan says she has refused several requests to testify voluntarily. Jankowicz and her attorney say that's because the assumption behind his demand — that she was tasked to police speech — is false. In his subpoena letter, Jordan said she is "uniquely situated" to provide relevant information about the board.

Jankowicz, who is a new mother, says she plans to file a lawsuit against Fox News and launched a crowdsourcing campaign to support her legal fees.

"Fox News irrevocably changed my life when they force fed lies about me to tens of millions of their viewers," she says in a video accompanying her GoFundMe. "In addition to the deferral of my dream of serving my country, I've lost something irreplaceable: peace with my son during his first year in the world," she says in the video.

Fox News did not respond to multiple emails to company spokespersons seeking comment.

McConnell disses Fox News' coverage of Jan. 6 footage

On Fox shows including those hosted by Laura Ingraham, Tucker Carlson and Sean Hannity, she's been called a "conspiracy theorist," a "useful idiot," and "insane."

When she was eight-months pregnant, said Jankowicz, strangers online were calling her a Nazi and ugly and said she should die.

Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) decried her "history of spreading disinformation." Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-N.Y.) repeatedly said the board was akin to the "Communist 'Ministry of Truth.'" Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) even said she "appears to be mentally unstable." Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) said she felt sorry her child has to "have that kind of mother."

For a time, she says, her blood pressure spiked. She wore a hat, sunglasses and a mask to prenatal doctor appointments, hired a private security consultant to monitor the situation and relied on yoga and meditation to calm her nerves. A few weeks before her due date, the consultant advised her and her husband to leave the house for safety reasons, which they ultimately deemed not practical.

Republicans objected, from the start, to the premise of the board and the idea that the government should play any role in defining disinformation, according to a spokesman for Jordan.

"The very idea of 'disinformation' involves policing speech. Period," he said.

A number of GOP lawmakers likened it to an Orwellian plot and took aim at Jankowicz for statements she made on social media prior to her government appointment — mostly expressing doubt about the origins of Hunter Biden's laptop, but also about coronavirus disinformation and Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter.

Regarding the blowback Jankowicz encountered, the Jordan aide said she agreed to serve as the board's public face, and should thus be held accountable in public.

"She's the top person and a public figure. Any assertion otherwise is ridiculous," he said. Jordan "has only ever referred to her or wrote to her in her official capacity," he said.

Jankowicz counters that Jordan has "repeatedly referenced my statements as a private citizen."

Taking credit

When she stepped down in May, Sen. Josh Hawley, (R-Mo.), took credit.

Hawley was among the loudest critics claiming the board was "policing Americans' speech." He also called Jankowicz a "human geyser of misinformation," citing tweets about Hunter Biden's laptop in which she suggested it could be part of a Russian disinformation campaign.

“Only when a patriotic whistleblower came forward with documents did we learn the truth,” he tweeted about board-related paperwork that he says shows the administration’s plan for the board was more extensive than publicly revealed.

Jankowicz, however, says the documents — which Hawley and other congressional Republicans have had since last June — contradict many of the claims he, Hannity, Carlson, Jordan and numerous other figures made in public and on Fox’s airwaves about the board’s mission.

“It’s hard for boring truths to outpace inflammatory lies,” said Jankowicz. “They’re saying the opposite of what’s on paper. Everything is disproven by documents they have in their possession. They’re just assuming nobody is going to read them.”

A response from DHS to a letter Hawley sent in late April seeking answers states the board “is an internal working group that does not have operational capacity.”

Both Jordan and Hawley have zeroed in on an April 28, 2022 draft talking points memo for a meeting with Twitter executives that Jankowicz says never came to pass. It proposed Twitter become involved in “analytic exchanges” with DHS and that the board would serve as a “coordinating mechanism” for outreach to industry, civil society and international partners. Hawley’s office expressed alarm about plans for a similar meeting with Facebook’s Meta.

Hawley blasts tech companies' coordination in fighting online misinformation

“Those are remarkably outward facing activities for a supposedly internal working group that lacks operational capacity,” said the Jordan spokesman.

Yet the “analytic exchanges,” says Jankowicz, refer to a pre-existing DHS initiative titled “Public-Private Analytic Exchange Program” that spans a number of industries and aims to help government analysts working on, for instance, threats to supply chains and ransomware.

Further, the next sentence says the board’s initial work would center on “domestic violent extremism” and “irregular migration,” and said Twitter should be “thanked” for its engagement with an existing cybersecurity agency created under President Donald Trump. During the 2020 election, it ran a “Rumor Control” website that sought to “prebunk” incorrect claims with factual information, reads page 3 of a Sept. 13, 2021 memorandum.

The materials, spanning between September of 2021 to January of 2022, also stipulate the need for protocols to “protect privacy, civil rights and civil liberties.” Its mission would be information sharing and prescriptive in nature. The department “should not attempt to be an all-purpose arbiter of truth in the public arena” but focus on disinformation “impacting DHS core missions,” it continues.

“It’s been extremely frustrating that these documents haven’t been covered at all,” said Jankowicz.

In an email response, Hawley's office said emails he obtained show Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas misled him about when the board first began meeting. The emails Hawley cited as proof pertain to preparatory meetings of lower level "steering group" aides — not the board itself.

Hawley also seized on an email that a DHS cyber security official sent Jankowicz and others regarding an opinion piece that ran in the Washington Post arguing that tech companies should block a Kremlin propaganda symbol. Hawley said the information behind the op-ed was funded by a "liberal dark money group."

In a statement, Hawley spokeswoman Abigail Marone said: "Conducting rigorous government oversight and holding Biden Administration officials accountable is what Missourians expect Josh to do. And it's great news for the American people that Biden's Disinformation Board was dissolved because of it."

Marone also cited language from the board's charter stating that board members would "ensure that their respective components implement, execute and follow board decisions."

Fox Fixture

Meanwhile, on Fox News, Jankowicz became such a fixture that, when DHS paused the board, Jordan thanked anchor Sean Hannity for "the work you've done in helping get rid of this governance board."

During this year and last, she's been featured in more than 250 broadcast segments on Fox, whose hosts and guests have repeated false "assertions of fact" about her more than 400 times, she alleges. Hannity called her "one of the biggest perpetrators and purveyors of disinformation in the entire country."

Convinced the firestorm would not end unless she stepped down, Jankowicz said she chose to exit the department. "It just felt like they completely rolled over to Republican lies," she said of the Biden administration.

"What has been shocking is the extent to which it [the harassment] has continued," said Jankowicz, citing at least two incidents of men snapping photos of her and posting them to social media.

She blames the continued focus of Fox News primetime anchors and their guests.

Jankowicz "will come after you," Jordan said on Hannity's show, alleging "the left" wants to make people who disagree with them "not allowed to talk." He retweeted a (now-deleted) video taken out of context claiming she wanted to edit tweets. Numerous Fox segments featured a Tik Tok video she'd made more than a year before in which she did a parody of a "Mary Poppins" song.

Jankowicz, who has been involved in community theater most of her life, said it was "openly campy" and one of several educational spots on disinformation she did on the platform.

Hunter Biden and the Dossier

Republicans also criticized statements Jankowicz had made prior to taking her position about Hunter Biden's laptop. Jankowicz holds that "the [Steele] Dossier was real and the Hunter [Biden] laptop story was false," Jordan said on Fox last April.

She did repeatedly express skepticism about the laptop's origins, which she says was because it was Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, who handed it to authorities. More than 50 former senior intelligence officials also called it "deeply suspicious" at the time, and Jankowicz says there is no record of her declaring the laptop itself wasn't real.

Comer says Joe Biden is focus of House investigation into Hunter

One tweet went viral without the context that it was her live tweeting an Oct. 20 presidential debate in which she paraphrased Biden referencing that same letter. Another cited an intelligence report concluding that the Kremlin "used proxies" to push unsubstantiated claims about Biden, which she called "a clear nod to the alleged Hunter laptop."

POLITICO itself has not authenticated all the Hunter Biden hard drive files cited in media reports, but POLITICO reporter Ben Schreckinger confirmed the authenticity of some emails on the drive in a 2021 book.

Jankowicz says she never assessed the veracity of a now-infamous dossier compiled by the former British spy Christopher Steele that made explosive claims linking Trump to the Kremlin. Rather, she praised its author in an unrelated matter and debated its origins in a couple of tweets. In 2019, a special counsel investigation concluded that it could not determine a criminal conspiracy between Moscow and the Trump campaign.

She also supported Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election, praised efforts to crack down on coronavirus misinformation and expressed concern over Elon Musk's plans to buy Twitter.

Ex-Twitter lawyer on Hunter Biden's laptop: 'I did not act unlawfully'

Personal Toll

Perhaps ironically, in April of 2022 amid the fury, a book Jankowicz had in the works was published. Its title: "How to Be a Woman Online" and survive threats and harassment. It was based on her knowledge of how Russian disinformation is often presented through a gendered lens.

Since then, she says, she's received tens of thousands of harassing online posts and hundreds of violent threats. One anonymous poster – who called her a "Tranny Jew" on April 28 – said: "I can't wait for the open violence phase of this war to kick off."

As the taunts peaked last spring, she says she pleaded with her superiors to allow her to speak to the media to "defend myself." Fox shows were showing her picture and talking about her being pregnant so she could be easily identified, she said.

“It was about my life, it was about threats to my family and it was clear the administration was mostly concerned about how to put the fire out and not how to protect me,” she said.

When she finally was notified that DHS would pause the board, she was offered an opportunity to remain in the department but felt she had no choice but to leave. “I said ‘I’m not going to stay if I can’t speak to media,’” she said. Jankowicz also questioned the commitment to the project because they’d “abandoned” it so quickly.

Further, because she’d “become toxic,” Jankowicz said “It just didn’t seem worth it.”

DHS cited instances in which both Mayorkas and White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki defended Jankowicz’ work. Mayorkas has told the Washington Post that the agency “could have done a better job of communicating what it [the board] is and what it isn’t.”

The board’s “purpose was grossly and intentionally mischaracterized,” a DHS spokesperson said in a statement to POLITICO, and Jankowicz “was subjected to unjustified and vile personal attacks and physical threats.”

About two weeks later, she gave birth to her first child.

The attacks kept coming. Jankowicz recalled that it was during a middle-of-the-night bottle feeding when her husband informed her that Hawley had begun touting the documents he’d obtained from a whistleblower and Freedom of Information Act request. Two months after her resignation, Jankowicz sent a letter to Hawley and Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, citing ongoing “aggressive, sexualized, vulgar and threatening messages” she was receiving online, on the phone and even at home.

Hawley reacted to her plea to “stop amplifying these lies” by tweeting that Jankowicz should testify under oath. By that time, he had been in possession of the board’s internal documents for a number of weeks, having received them in June, she said.

Today, Jankowicz continues to juggle diaper changes, pumping breast milk and other aspects of life as a new mother with consultations with her four sets of attorneys — to address her protective order; to respond to Jordan’s probe; for a “frivolous” lawsuit alleging she is censoring someone; and a tax adviser for her GoFundMe.

When she sues Fox, that will require a fifth lawyer, she says.