



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight Hearing:
Online Imposters and Disinformation
Thursday, September 26, 2019

Thank you Madam Chair, and I would like to join you in welcoming our witnesses this morning.

I'm glad we're holding this hearing today. It's worth acknowledging just how deeply the phenomenon of online disinformation affects most of our lives these days. As long as there's been news, there's been fake news. But the American people are far more connected than they used to be. And the new tools that enable fake images, misleading public discourse, even long passages of text are alarming in their sophistication. Maybe we all should have seen this coming, the explosion of disinformation that would accompany the information age.

I suspect my colleagues here in the House are already taking this matter seriously, because in a way, online imposters and twisted facts on the internet present a real and active threat to the way we do our own jobs. We all use social media to connect with our constituents and to hear about their concerns. My staff want to read the comments and the posts from the people in Dallas and hear what they have to say. If I am to believe that a large percentage of the comments on Twitter are coming from "bots" or some other source of disinformation, the waters get muddy very quickly.

We have to acknowledge the serious legacy of disinformation is in this country. In the late 1970s, I was working under President Carter as a Regional Director for the Department of Health. Around that time, the Soviet Union's KGB kicked off a campaign to plant the idea that the United States government invented HIV and AIDS at Fort Detrick. The KGB wrote bogus pamphlets and fake scientific research and distributed them at global conferences. It sold a complex narrative in which the United States military deliberately infected prisoners to create a public health crisis -- biological warfare against our own people. The KGB's efforts were so pervasive that by 1992, 15% of Americans considered it "definitely or probably true" that the AIDS virus was created deliberately in a government laboratory. Decades later, a 2005 study found that a substantial percentage of the African American community believed that AIDS was developed as a form of genocide against black people.

How absolutely devastating such disinformation can be. It is clear that information warfare can have such profound, destructive effects. I think it is long past time to recognize how vulnerable we are to the next generation of hostile actors.

As Chairwoman Sherrill said, the first step in addressing a big problem is understanding it. Not every Member of this Committee, myself included, is well-versed in what a “deep neural network” is or how a “GAN” works. However, we have a sense already that the federal government is likely to need to create new tools that address this issue.

We also need to have a serious conversation about what we expect from the social media platforms that so many of us use every day. These companies have enjoyed a level of growth and success that is only possible in the United States. They were created in garages and dorm rooms, but they stand on the shoulders of giants like DARPA, which created the internet, and the National Science Foundation, which developed the backbone of computer networks that allowed the internet to blossom. The American consumer has been overwhelmingly faithful to social media over the past decade. We will need those companies to help combat disinformation. It can no longer be ignored.

I am pleased to welcome our witnesses today, and I’m also pleased that we had bipartisan agreement in yesterday’s markup on a bill that would enable more research on deep fakes. These issues require a bold bipartisan response. I thank my colleagues on both sides of the aisle for working together to address these important issues. With that, I yield back.