U.S. SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE

"Foreign Threats to Elections in 2024 – Roles and Responsibilities of U.S. Tech Providers"

September 18, 2024 – 2:30 PM

OVERVIEW

On Wednesday, September 18, the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence held a hearing titled, "Foreign Threats to Elections in 2024 – Roles and Responsibilities of the U.S. Tech Providers." During the hearing, Members and witnesses discussed: targeted disinformation; platform security, including foreign ownership; election effects, including threats to election workers; and content moderation.

OPENING STATEMENTS

- Chairman Mark Warner (D-VA)
- Vice Chairman Marco Rubio (R-FL)

WITNESS PANEL

- Kent Walker – President and Chief Legal Officer, Alphabet
- Nick Clegg – President of Global Affairs, Meta
- Brad Smith – Vice Chair and President, Microsoft

QUESTION AND ANSWER SUMMARY

Targeted Disinformation

Chairman Mark Warner (D-VA) inquired how disinformation and misinformation reaches U.S. consumers through online platforms, how extensive the issue of disinformation is, and how tech companies can ensure they are flagging fraudulent information for consumers in real-time. As an example, he noted two recent articles that appeared to be from legitimate American news sources but were found to be Russian disinformation. Mr. Clegg affirmed it is a hallmark of Russian interference in the democratic process to generate artificial intelligence (AI) stories resembling legitimate media. He confirmed Meta banned Rossiya Segodnya, the organization that spawned the disinformation referenced by Chairman Warner because their Editor in Chief publicly stated the company's goal is to conduct guerilla projects in the heart of American democracy.

Chairman Warner requested ways for the everyday consumer to identify disinformation online and asked how quickly fake news stores can be flagged. Mr. Clegg argued the only way to prevent the spread of

disinformation is to disrupt and remove the underlying network of accounts that produce the content. He believes the tech industry has made significant progress in discussions about interoperable standards for watermarking and metadata. Chairman Warner requested the number of Americans who have been shown disinformation so far this election cycle and sought an explanation about how fake content is penetrating existing safeguards. Mr. Walker highlighted YouTube's ad campaign "Hit Pause," which reminds consumers not to believe everything they see online. Mr. Smith described efforts around the European Union (EU) elections to encourage voters to approach online content with skepticism. He emphasized the importance of publishing information through alternate technologies like radio and television to ensure the American public is properly informed.

Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ) highlighted a fake North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) website being used to cast doubt on Russian atrocities, spread lies about suppression of peaceful protests, and invent controversies. Sen. Kelly inquired how the tech industry is addressing disinformation in news sources. Mr. Walker reported that Alphabet launched "About This Image" and "About This Result" tools to show the first time an image was detected online. He argued this context is valuable because much of the disinformation related to the war in Gaza has involved using pictures of atrocities from different wars. Mr. Walker added that AI-generated content is increasingly able to be watermarked or examined by the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA), both of which are helpful tools for identifying and removing disinformation.

Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM) asked about policies to remove fraudulent news articles. Mr. Smith affirmed terms of use to prohibit fraudulent news are nearly universal across industry, and asserted the political nature of the disinformation is irrelevant when counterfeit sites are using trademarks of accredited news organizations without their permission and in a way that deceives the public.

Sen. James Lankford (R-OK) expressed concern about the quality of recommendation algorithms, asserting the importance of re-establishing trust among the American people to address skepticism about the content they receive. Mr. Clegg believes the way to address skepticism among the public is to instill confidence that algorithms are working in favor of consumer interests. He called for transparency on signals used in algorithms, public financial disclosure, and content audits. Mr. Walker confirmed Alphabet cares deeply about building trust in its services and does so by promoting information users find valuable and consistently enforcing transparent policies.

Sen. Angus S. King Jr. (I-ME) questioned the technical ability of companies to detect information from a foreign entity due to advancements to distort and disguise sources online. Mr. Smith affirmed the source can often be identified but warned about the sophistication of disinformation schemes by maligned actors, emphasizing that the Russian government is highly sophisticated in both technology and social science. As an example, he noted that two days before the Slovakian parliamentary election a Russian group released deepfake audio that purported to be a conversation between a mainstream journalist and the leader of the pro-European Union political party using the private account of the spouse of a Slovakian official.

Sen. King highlighted the importance of educating the public about disinformation to increase vigilance. Mr. Smith agreed and noted Eastern Europeans who have lived their entire lives in the shadow of Russia are constantly on alert for disinformation online. Mr. Walker raised the increased ability to use AI to detect patterns of disinformation and stressed the importance of high-quality, authoritative distribution of accurate information as a key part of the democratic process.

Sen. Jon Ossoff (D-GA) noted his constituents in Georgia are targets of disinformation related to the election because they live in a swing state. He inquired about the role of tech officials and elected leaders in building resilience for society to recognize online manipulation. Mr. Clegg stated voter skepticism is the greatest tool to combat fake election information and argued political leadership has a responsibility to foster this curiosity.

Platform Security

Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) cited reports that China is focusing disinformation campaigns on races at the state and local level and inquired how companies are working to help safeguard down-the-ballot races. Mr. Clegg stressed the importance of constant vigilance and confirmed Alphabet has seen coordinated inauthentic behavior networks conducted by China, some of which target specific demographics of Americans. He emphasized Alphabet's security analysis is related to foreign actors' underlying behavior rather than individual pieces of content.

Sen. Collins inquired about watermarking posts to indicate their origin, for example using an "R" for content that originates in Russia. Mr. Smith affirmed watermarking is being considered across the tech industry. He reported this practice puts American organizations in a position to use metadata to show the origin of the content, and noted the Republican National Convention (RNC) in July used metadata to protect their content from distortion. Mr. Smith acknowledged industry should question how and when to identify foreign sources of information, and stressed the importance of first protecting metadata against tampering before considering public forms of identification.

Sen. Kelly asked if Alphabet can take action to prevent customers from coming across fake content. Mr. Walker affirmed content that is demonstrably false or harmful is removed, as well as content that breaks copyright law or general manipulated media policies.

Sen. Bennett inquired about the technology industry's responsibility to the American people to safeguard election information online. Mr. Clegg replied about 40,000 employees at Meta work on platform security. Sen. Bennett requested the total capital expenditure. Mr. Clegg reported about $5 billion has been spent on safeguarding election information in the last year, with $20 billion total spent over the last several years. Mr. Clegg asserted cooperation between stakeholders in the industry and work with global partners is essential to manage the scale of information monitoring. Mr. Smith stated belief that the American tech sector is an engine of economic growth and is the "envy of the world." He confirmed the tech industry has an important societal responsibility to protect elections. Mr. Smith argued no individual should be considered above the law and advocated for increased bipartisan decision-making to legislate content moderation policy.

Sen. Ossoff asked about Alphabet's capacity to independently monitor foreign covert influence on their platforms. Mr. Walker confirmed monitoring foreign actors is a challenge as their methods grow more sophisticated but highlighted how more than 500 analysts and researchers work on Alphabet's threat intelligence team to track over 270 different foreign cyberattack operations. Sen. Ossoff asked if Mr. Walker feels Alphabet cannot fully monitor foreign actors. Mr. Walker confirmed complications because adversaries are constantly innovating. Sen. Ossoff inquired if Alphabet uses machine learning (ML) or algorithmic tools to identify foreign actors and ensure Americans' First Amendment rights are protected. Mr. Walker explained Alphabet shares information across platforms where possible to assess the nature of the content, network activity, and behavioral signals. Mr. Smith emphasized the importance of acting with humility and noted a high level of certainty is necessary before action is taken to remove content. Due to the increased use of crowdsourcing and AI to identify disinformation, Mr. Smith posited companies are well-equipped to address fake information on their platform. Mr. Smith highlighted the importance of alerting the public and promoting well-informed conversations when disinformation is identified. He questioned how systemic strategies may be developed to address disinformation at scale.

Foreign Ownership

Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) asked if ByteDance should be required to divest from TikTok for the app to operate in the United States. Mr. Walker deferred to Congress, stating Alphabet's priority as a technology company is ensuring entities owned by foreign governments are not distributing malware. Mr. Smith noted the President signed the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act into law and said he would not substitute his judgment for what Congress has already brought to bear. Mr. Clegg noted the uneven global playing field online, highlighting how Meta's services are not available in China.

Election Effects

Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) noted California Governor Gavin Newsom recently signed three laws to criminalize the use of deepfakes and inquired how the witnesses plan to comply with these laws leading up to the November election. Mr. Clegg noted "playful" and "innocuous" use of AI is very different than "dangerous" and "egregious" use of AI. Sen. Cotton questioned the sources that distinguish harmless content from disinformation.

Sen. Ossoff asked about specific policies to address deepfake content attacking a candidate for office which can be demonstrated to be inauthentic but cannot be attributed to a foreign actor. Mr. Clegg said Meta would flag the information for consumers as being under review and its circulation on algorithms could be demoted. Mr. Smith argued the importance of quickly notifying the public and labeling questionable content. Mr. Walker added Alphabet would notify the Combating Foreign Influence task force at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to ensure the government is aware.

Chairman Warner inquired about actions taken to stop targeted paid advertising from foreign adversaries. Mr. Walker reported an extensive series of checks and balances in Alphabet's advertising networks designed to identify problematic accounts, particularly election advertisements. Chair Warner requested specific details from the witnesses about the number of Americans that have been subject to disinformation campaigns from foreign actors on their platform, expressing concern that disinformation is infiltrating their networks despite existing security measures.

Threats to Election Workers
Sen. Heinrich noted that New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver testified to the House Administration Committee that years of disinformation to discredit election systems has led to increased threats to election workers, and inquired how companies are striving to improve their ability to detect and remove content that threatens or harasses election workers. Mr. Walker confirmed Alphabet's policy against incitement to violence, direct threats, and bullying. He stated the importance of protecting election officials through tools like Google's Advanced Protection Program to ensure their information is not being hacked or made public. Mr. Walker added Alphabet has worked with several election officials and agencies to make their technology more resilient to cyberattacks. Mr. Clegg explained how Meta encourages local election officials to use their platforms to communicate with voters and stated over 650 million voting alerts have been issued through the platform by state and local election officials.

Content Moderation
Vice Chair Marco Rubio (R-FL) inquired about current policies regarding content moderation, specifically in speech. He highlighted Mr. Clegg's opening remarks that Meta has the largest independent fact-checking network of any platform and questioned who determines what is true and not. Mr. Clegg acknowledged information can change and develop over time, and confirmed Meta relies on an independently vetted group of fact-checkers to identify disinformation. Vice Chair Rubio asked for specifics about the vetting entities. Mr. Clegg reported they include a variety of organizations that specialize in examining a reliable way of asserting what is true or false and pledged to provide a full list of vetting organizations employed by Meta. Mr. Clegg asserted Meta learned its lesson during the pandemic; when governments around the world exert pressure on the company about particular classes of content, independent evaluation is needed to ensure information is not removed based on public perception or panic. He confirmed Meta's prior policy to reduce or demote information within algorithms when under review by fact-checkers.

Sen. Heinrich inquired why it takes time to identify and remove fraudulent sites and asked if Microsoft has used AI proactively to identify fake news outlets. Mr. Smith confirmed Microsoft is increasingly using AI to detect fraud, and noted AI is particularly good at detecting the use of AI to create content. He stated this technology allows the company to detect disinformation more quickly and argued a goal across the industry should be to pursue faster detection and action where appropriate.

Sen. Cotton inquired why Google did not autofill results when people searched for the assassination attempt of former President Trump in July. Mr. Walker reported a longstanding policy of not associating terms of violence with political officials unless they had become a historic event; whereas the assassination of Abraham Lincoln would have been allowed, he asserted it would have been problematic to autocomplete "assassination" after a search for "Donald Trump." He confirmed that following an assessment, autocomplete now associates the two terms.

Sen. Cornyn inquired if older forms of communication like newspapers and radio can provide guiding principles in the age of social media. Mr. Smith posited it is easy to spend time on issues on which Americans disagree, but argued it is vital to build consensus across the political aisle and industry to address foreign adversaries and build a foundation for future success.

Sen. Ossofff inquired how fact-checking teams are using editorial judgment to remove harmful information while protecting the value of free speech. Mr. Clegg explained systems seek to ensure every person's feed is unique to them, and noted only about 3 percent of content on Facebook is defined as political in nature.

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Please click **here** for the archived hearing.