

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 12, 2023

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary
U.S. Department of State

Dear Secretary Blinken:

News reports have indicated that State Department funding was used for the suppression of conservative and religious speech by a foreign organization, the Global Disinformation Index (GDI).¹ The funding for GDI was provided through two State Department-funded groups: the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which Congress funded to the tune of over \$300 million in 2021,² and Disinfo Cloud, a now defunct counter-disinformation platform that was used by federal agencies, “foreign partners,” and technology companies, and which was reportedly funded through the State Department’s Global Engagement Center (GEC).³ GEC is an arm of the State Department that claims to focus on, “addressing foreign adversaries’ attempts to undermine U.S. interests using disinformation and propaganda.”⁴ It is important for Congress to better understand the steps the State Department has taken to oversee how recipients and subrecipients use funding provided by the taxpayer.⁵

GDI is a self-appointed arbiter of what may be said and not said online, including domestically, which it accomplishes by blacklisting conservative outlets that run afoul of its speech codes, and by providing lists of disfavored web sites to ad agencies, such as Microsoft’s Xandr.⁶ As a result, ad agencies have declined to place ads on those GDI-flagged sites.⁷ Every

¹ Brian Flood, State Department funds ‘disinformation’ index targeting non-liberal and conservative news outlets: report, Fox News (February 16, 2023), <https://www.foxnews.com/media/state-department-funds-disinformation-index-targeting-non-liberal-and-conservative-news-outlets-report>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*; U.S. Dep’t of State, Technology Engagement Division, Defeat Disinfo, <https://www.state.gov/defeat-disinfo/>.

⁴ U.S. Dep’t of State, Global Engagement Center, Mission & Vision (accessed April 5, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/global-engagement-center/>.

⁵ National Endowment for Democracy, About the National Endowment for Democracy (accessed April 6, 2023) (noting that both Congress and the State Department have responsibility for oversight of the use of NED’s grant funding), <https://www.ned.org/about/>.

⁶ Brian Flood, *supra*.

⁷ *Id.* (Microsoft has now agreed to stop this censorship of conservative sites by its ad arm); *see also*, The Global Disinformation Index, @DisinfoIndex, Twitter feed (last accessed March 22, 2023) (stating that GDI is “disrupting

single outlet on GDI's top ten "riskiest" sources for disinformation all happen to be conservative or right-leaning sites.⁸ Simply put, taxpayer money shouldn't be used to assist foreign entities in suppressing speech in the United States based on viewpoint or religion.⁹

As an example of GDI's taxpayer-funded bias, shortly before the 2020 election, outlets such as NPR effectively censored legitimate coverage related to the Biden family, dismissing such reporting as "stories that are not real stories," and a "waste [of] listeners' and readers' time."¹⁰ NPR also falsely claimed that reports about Hunter Biden's laptop were, "discredited by U.S. intelligence and independent investigations by news organizations."¹¹ NPR is listed by GDI as one of its "least likely" sites to be engaged in disinformation. Notably, after years of false coverage that the laptop was Russian disinformation, the New York Times, Washington Post, and CBS have confirmed the authenticity of the information on Hunter Biden's laptop.¹² Many other examples exist of disinformation by news organizations listed on GDI's "least likely" sites to be engaged in disinformation, from two years of unfounded claims that President Trump had ties to Russian interference in the 2016 election, to repeating unfounded allegations in the Steele Dossier, to criticism and suppression of the Covid-19 "lab leak theory," which is now accepted as a real possibility by the FBI and Department of Energy.¹³

Rather than defining disinformation as widely spreading claims of fact known to be false and causing some degree of imminent and tangible harm to the community, GDI widened the definition to include a broad array of legal speech, including opinions they deem offensive. They define disinformation to be "adversarial narratives, which are intentionally misleading; financially or ideologically motivated; and/or aimed at fostering long-term social,

the business model of disinformation," i.e., trying to economically cripple these sites to disincentivize speech GDI disagrees with), <https://twitter.com/disinfoindex?lang=en>.

⁸ Gabe Kaminsky, Disinformation Inc: Meet the groups hauling in cash to secretly blacklist conservative news, Washington Examiner (February 9, 2023), <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/technology/disinformation-conservative-media-censored-blacklists>.

⁹ See, e.g., Global Disinformation Index, Ad-funded LGBTQIA+ Disinfo, Study, identifying article as disinformation that called for a boycott of DC Comics for having "Gay Superheroes," which in the opinion of the author was, "the subversion of a society that began as the result of deeply held religious beliefs that included the sanctity of marriage" (June 24, 2021), <https://www.disinformationindex.com/disinfo-ads/2021-06-01-ad-funded-lgbtqia-disinfo/>.

¹⁰ NPR, @NPRpubliceditor, Tweet message, posted October 22, 2020, <https://twitter.com/nprpubliceditor/status/1319281101223940096?lang=id>.

¹¹ Brian Flood, NPR under fire for claiming Hunter Biden laptop story was 'discredited' by US intelligence, media, Fox News (April 1, 2021), <https://www.foxnews.com/media/npr-hunter-biden-laptop-story-discredited-intelligence>.

¹² Katie Benner, Kenneth P. Vogel, and Michael S. Schmidt, Hunter Biden Paid Tax Bill, but Broad Federal Investigation Continues, New York Times (March 16, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/16/us/politics/hunter-biden-tax-bill-investigation.html>; Cristiano Lima, Hunter Biden laptop findings renew scrutiny of Twitter, Facebook crackdowns, The Washington Post (March 31, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/31/hunter-biden-laptop-findings-renew-scrutiny-twitter-facebook-crackdowns/>; Catherine Herridge, Copy of Hunter Biden laptop data appears genuine, independent experts find, CBS News (November 21, 2022), <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/copy-of-hunter-biden-laptop-data-appears-genuine-independent-experts-find/?intcid=CNM-00-10abd1h>.

¹³ Michael R. Gordon, Lab Leak Most Likely Origin of Covid-19 Pandemic, Energy Department Now Says, Wall Street Journal (February 26, 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-origin-china-lab-leak-807b7b0a>.

political or economic conflict; and which create a risk of harm by undermining trust in science or targeting at-risk individuals or institutions.”¹⁴ This definition offers an array of ways to suppress constitutionally-protected speech. If you wanted to design a definition that would allow you to include almost anything within it, this would be it. It is not the government’s role to suppress speech properly protected by the First Amendment. It is equally wrong to fund a private entity that targets protected speech in a manner the government could not suppress under our Constitution.

While I am glad to hear that State Department-funded groups have ceased funding of the GDI—clearly the right call—questions remain about why the funding was provided in the first place. U.S. taxpayer dollars funding such partisan and biased activity by a foreign entity is unacceptable. It is important to determine the extent to which the State Department conducted oversight of the use of these funds for organizations that suppress domestic speech.

So that Congress may conduct thorough and independent oversight of this funding and the State Department’s efforts regarding what it deems as misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information more broadly, please provide the following information no later than April 26, 2023:

1. All records¹⁵ related to the State Department’s funding of GDI through NED and the Department’s Global Engagement Center.
2. All records where State Department personnel, or others communicating with the State Department, raised concerns about this funding.
3. All communications between and among the State Department, the National Endowment for Democracy, and GDI relating to GDI’s funding.
4. All records related to any efforts the State Department has undertaken, is undertaking, or plans to undertake related to so-called misinformation, disinformation, and/or mal-information.
5. Will the State Department assure Congress and the taxpayer that it will not engage in any activity, including grant funding, that targets legal speech, directly or

¹⁴ Global Disinformation Index, Brief: Disinformation Risk in the United States Online Media Market, October, 2022 (October 21, 2022), <https://www.disinformationindex.org/research/2022-10-21-brief-disinformation-risk-in-the-united-states-online-media-market-october-2022/>.

¹⁵ “Records” include any written, recorded, or graphic material of any kind, including letters, memoranda, reports, notes, electronic data (e-mails, email attachments, and any other electronically-created or stored information), calendar entries, inter-office communications, meeting minutes, phone/voice mail or recordings/records of verbal communications, and drafts (whether or not they resulted in final documents).

indirectly, including funding private organizations like GDI that target constitutionally-protected speech for suppression or removal? If not, why not?

If you have any questions, please contact my staff at (202) 224-0642.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley
Ranking Member
Committee on the Budget

cc: The Honorable Diana Shaw
Deputy Inspector General
U.S. Department of State