Interim Report

Commission on Information Disorder

Letter from
the Co-Chairs

We are living in a time of increased polarization, a rise of propaganda, extremism, distrust of institutions and of each other, racially- and ethnically-driven attacks, embrace of conspiracy theories, skepticism towards expertise, disbelief in evidence-based reality, and online and media filter bubbles that obscure or confuse uncomfortable facts and truths.

No single one of these conditions is unprecedented; any one of them would constitute a significant challenge. What is unique about this moment in American history is the collision of all of these crises that, together, form a dire threat to communities, to livelihoods and economic well-being, to public health, and to democracy itself. These threats are amplified–and sometimes created–by malicious actors, some of whom are driven by profit, and by others who weaponize divisions for their own objectives, such as foreign intelligence services.

In addition, the tools we would normally use to bring people together–political leadership, education, news media, civic organizations, faith groups, our very communities–are themselves suffering from high levels of distrust and disbelief in the eyes of so many. It will take the whole of society, and time, to climb our way out. Fortunately, many are already doing exceptional work to respond to these challenges.

The goal of the Aspen Institute's Commission on Information Disorder is to elevate and build upon those efforts and recommend the means by which the public and private sector can transparently, effectively, and appropriately combat information disorder.

We seek not only to counter disinformation; we aspire to a better state of information–more than just reliable facts, but a better way of understanding each other, and renewed ways to build trust. These are the foundations of an information ecosystem that can nurture

our fragile democracy. It will enable those who differ to not just hear facts, but also to hear each other in true dialogue and civic discourse. We hope to build communities together, online and in person, where we can disagree on policy and process without becoming enemies.

The Commission is made up of a diverse group from across the political spectrum, representing academia, government, philanthropy, and civil society. This group goes beyond some of the typical experts we've seen before on disinformation–we're taking a broader view, and our work is meant to complement their efforts. That means we need a greater diversity of experience and expertise. We think that's a strength that will lead to better debate and disagreement, and ultimately better recommendations.

As we set out to lead this group, there were a series of values and principles that we incorporated into our approach:

First, we wanted to adopt a non-partisan and non-ideological approach. That isn't to say we won't address bad actors, or address harms that are disproportionately felt by communities, even if those issues of human rights or civil rights have been labeled as political. Efforts to combat disinformation inevitably draw attacks from those who employ those same tactics for their own ends. We will not recognize criticism from those who present false information as differences of opinion or partisan in nature. Our focus will be on the integrity of the information ecosystem, not bad-faith attacks or particular partisan battles.

Second, we will prioritize structural fixes that can reduce the impacts of information disorder at scale across multiple communities, including government and the traditional and social media ecosystems. Relatedly, we will target some of our recommendations towards things that will be immediately actionable, because the crisis is urgent, and while some fixes may take years, we must act now.

Finally, we will identify areas for subsequent work. We know we won't solve everything in the time we have, but we can map out a plan for future engagement, research, and innovation to tackle these problems as a community.

We have a lot more to do together, but we're pleased to share our priorities with you in this document, and to invite others to join us and contribute to the discussions with ideas and opportunities. ○

Co-Chairs, on behalf of the Commission	**Katie Couric**
	Chris Krebs
	Rashad Robinson

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Background and Process

In early 2021, the Aspen Institute announced the creation of a non-partisan Commission on Information Disorder. Developed and hosted by the Aspen Digital program, the Commission is co-chaired by three leading public figures, each with a unique perspective on society's urgent mis- and disinformation challenges: renowned journalist Katie Couric; cybersecurity expert Chris Krebs, the founding director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA); and racial equity leader Rashad Robinson, the president of Color Of Change. They are joined by 15 commissioners representing a diversity of perspectives, expertise, and experience.

Beginning in April 2021, the Commission embarked on a six-month work plan, investigating the information ecosystem through four areas: Real-World Implications of Information Disorder; Government Actions and Responsibilities; Private Sector Actions and Responsibilities; and Civil Society Actions and Responsibilities. Meeting every other week for discussion and debate, commissioners heard from a range of experts in their fields to learn about and elevate the rich body of previous work in this space in order to examine:

- *Effective policy solutions and stakeholders to address the most critical near-term disinformation threats*

- *Lawful and ethical means by which the federal government can counter the most critical disinformation campaigns*

- *How government, private industry, and civil society can work together in the near term to help protect underrepresented groups, and engage disaffected populations who have lost faith in evidence-based reality*

- *Longer-term, more foundational challenges that will require deeper societal engagement to address*

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The work of this Commission is split into two phases. The first phase set out to identify and prioritize areas of responsibility and outcomes where the Commission can make recommendations to have a meaningful impact on reducing disinformation. The second phase will work within these priority areas of focus to determine near-term actionable solutions to the most pressing issues, as well as a set of recommendations for the longer term. The Commission engages with a group of technical advisors and leading thinkers, and invites guest speakers from academia, technology, and the news media to engage with some of the most challenging questions facing the field.

The full Commission met twice a month via video conference to hear from experts and discuss the most pressing issues. Between meetings, the Commission has already studied more than 500 pages of news articles, academic papers, reports, and opinion pieces pertaining to these topics, materials that are available to the public in the Commission's Knowledge Center. Aspen Digital staff also produced an audio/video series of Disinfo Discussions, featuring 25 experts from a diverse set of backgrounds, skills and experience to weigh in on the crisis, creating more than 10 hours of expert understanding surrounding information disorder.

The purpose of this process to date was three-fold:

- *To explore the broad range of topics, ideas, harms and solutions related to the information disorder space.*

- *To allow each commissioner to bring their individual areas of expertise to the table, regardless of their familiarity with other aspects of this broad and complex field.*

- *To create an opportunity for the group to discuss and debate in order to develop its own perspectives and a more cohesive view of the problems.*

Their deliberations covered the entire range of issues—from business models and systems, to laws and regulation, to the media landscape and polarization. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Commission is that the topic is so broad and far-reaching that it is impossible to explore every aspect within the capacity and time available. After substantial discussion and debate, they agreed upon a set of priorities to focus on for the next phase of work.

The Aspen Institute's Commission on Information Disorder is now issuing its Interim Report identifying the priorities to focus on for the remainder of their time. Below is a summary of the Commission's deliberations and approach to information disorder.

What is Information Disorder?

The definition of <u>information</u> **is complex. Broadly, it encompasses** knowledge as it is learned, distributed and discussed. In today's society, it has expanded to include whole systems and industries. Information is more than facts or data; it has evolved into an ecosystem of knowledge that relies on both individuals and institutions to reflect reality and lived experiences. It includes both what we consume as information, but also what we know, and how we incorporate what we learn into our understanding and our perceived reality. An informed citizenry requires trustworthy systems of data, access, and delivery to maintain a healthy democracy. When the free-information ecosystem is polluted, the levers holding a democratic society together begin to break.

The term "information disorder" was coined by First Draft co-founder <u>Dr. Claire Wardle</u> to describe the broad societal challenges associated with misinformation and disinformation on the digital landscape and in real-life circumstances. Mis-, dis- and mal-information contribute to the pollution of our evolving information ecosystem. Disinformation is the false or misleading information that is deliberately spread with an intent to cause harm or damage. Misinformation is the unintentional spread of false or misleading information shared by mistake or under a presumption of truth, whereas malinformation describes the malicious use of factual information to cause harm or damage.

Information disorder is neither new nor unique to the modern day. From Octavian's <u>propaganda</u> campaign against Marc Antony in Ancient Rome to '<u>The Great Moon Hoax</u>' of 1835, disinformation has been a favored tactic of those seeking to influence the outcome of world events; foment division; justify violence against racial, ethnic, or other groups; or push back against facts and evidence that are driving change. Today, augmented by technology, those same tactics have evolved: with even greater reach and velocity, a disinformation campaign can be launched by nearly anyone with an Internet connection, and can be more precisely targeted to specific populations, with real-world impacts. In today's environment, well-organized groups (including intelligence agencies of nation states, lobby groups, and commercial interests) can lead disinformation campaigns while hiding their influence and falsely making them appear like "grassroots" democratic phenomena.

From their very first meeting, commissioners expressed an appreciation for the complexity of the issues they were brought together to address. The Commission acknowledged mis- and disinformation as a global humanitarian issue, provoking a crisis across society, including for physical and mental health, civil society, business, and government. Commissioners also recognized the political lens through which their work would undoubtedly be viewed. While this was to be expected, they did not approach their priority-setting from partisan perspectives, nor did they shy away from the issues that are at the core of our current polarized and politicized climate. Information disorder is a whole-of-society problem with life-and-death consequences, and despite those who decry this work as partisan, it is the Commission's view that every individual has a right to access reliable, trusted information from institutions and leaders.

How the Commission approached the challenge

Over the course of their meetings, readings, and briefings, commissioners gained a robust, comprehensive understanding of the layered complexity of information disorder, and shared their perspectives and expertise with each other on various aspects of the problem. Commissioners brought forward their own questions for Aspen Digital staff, experts, and our advisors, ranging from Internet regulation to platform transparency and concerns around data privacy.

To reach the core of the challenge, the Commission explored the history and impact of false and misleading information. As demonstrated by research and expert briefings, mis- and disinformation has been used to drive large swaths of Americans towards more extreme and radical views that have roots which go back decades. While much of the disinformation we've seen targets individuals and communities of color, either driving radicalization or inciting aggression, the Commission avoided framing the challenge as one solely facing those communities; while race is often invoked as a method to amplify and intensify American disinformation, people of color are not the only ones at risk when racial rhetoric is weaponized. All of society is harmed by disinformation, and it has since become a national security issue that threatens the stability of American democracy.

Infiltrating communities with disinformation to manufacture and amplify grievances against targeted communities and populations are tactics that have been used by foreign actors to cause strife and conflict around the world. When partisan politics and business models are added to the equation, all of which are entangled in traditional systems of power, the damage disinformation can cause is revealed.

It would be impossible for the Commission to develop meaningful recommendations without understanding the real-world implications of targeted disinformation campaigns and their role in the critical divergence in democracy's fundamental pillar of political discourse.

Commissioners grappled with the scope and scale of "Big Tech"— from the social media platforms, which are at the center of these challenges, to search engines, cloud providers, and digital messaging services. Since platforms have developed their own content moderation policies, and an adequate understanding of those interventions has been difficult to acquire, questions around effectiveness, responsibility, and accountability were raised. Research materials, the Commission's technical advisors, and in-meeting briefers provided insight on the tension between America's traditions of free expression and the real-world implications of harmful content. They discussed the quandaries around Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which gives websites such as Facebook and Amazon liability shields when their users post defamatory or otherwise harmful content, and challenges around platform data access and transparency. There is consensus that these issues are deeply connected and complex, and that solutions must look beyond just platform liability to explore all the tools available within the law to protect the information environment and public discourse.

Several commissioners have backgrounds and expertise regarding tech industry access and transparency around data collection, ad targeting, and the application of algorithms to shape user experiences. Independent research has revealed how platform algorithms recommend and amplify conspiracy theories, undermining the efforts of platforms' self-imposed community guidelines. The Commission examined tech company actions and policies and their impact on polarized camps and fabricated belief networks. Experts have advocated for Congress to review international approaches to platform regulation around transparency, responsibility, and accountability, a consideration the Commission is taking seriously.

Commissioners developed a broader understanding of the impacts of information disorder beyond the tech industry, as disinformation tactics evolve faster than governments can address them; from stock price manipulation, and damage to brand reputations, to consumer and employee targeting, and compromised cybersecurity.

To fully understand how information disorder affects not only society but people, commissioners studied the fractures in America's information ecosystem that have given rise to the worst actors and super-spreaders of disinformation. Commissioners examined the role that cognitive biases, mental shortcuts, and brain mechanics play in the production, spread, and consumption of false and misleading con-

tent, revealing what makes people vulnerable to believing and sharing disinformation. The challenge commissioners faced was identifying effective prevention, intervention, and response strategies when powerful algorithms affect a user's exposure to credible, nonpartisan information, just as the presence of trusted local news outlets wanes. This effort brought attention to just how much the country's information ecosystem has been degraded and individualized, from the loss of local news to the massive consolidation and corporatization of major news media conglomerates, to the shift to alternative sources of information.

The transfer of advertising revenues from traditional media and towards the Big Tech platforms, compounded by the pandemic, has fueled the nationwide closing of newsrooms. When amplified with acquisitions and consolidations by hedge funds that drive record job cuts, millions of Americans are facing an alarming decline of access to critical, trustworthy local information, often replaced with divisive, counter-factual sources. In this deteriorating information environment, the Commission tangled with the challenge of how to restore the role of fact-based news as a trusted source that debunks–rather than amplifies–the reach of disinformation.

The Commission inquired about the effectiveness of increasing the public's media literacy and civic education as a solution to addressing the impact of information disorder. Studies by research institutions and programs by schools and libraries that focus on innovative civic engagement and digital media literacy are viewed as effective long-term measures that can push back against cognitive bias, political polarization, and online radicalization on a whole-of-society level.

Establishing the scope and scale of the information disorder challenge closed out the first phase of the Commission's work. Members deliberated with one another to prioritize the most critical areas of focus, the sectors where recommendations could be implemented, and the potential for short- and long-term success. The Commission's priority areas are outlined below. ○

Decline in Trust in Institutions, Ethan Zuckerman

Disinformation and Conservative Media, Steve Hayes

Crisis in Local News, Margaret Sullivan, Lauren Williams & Steve Waldman

Disinformation and the Role of News Media, Jay Rosen

Youth and Media Literacy, Jim Steyer

News literacy and Education, Alan Miller

Cognitive Science and the Spread of False Information, Brendan Nyhan

Cognitive Psychology and the Effects of Repeated Falsehoods, Dr. Danielle Polage & Dr. Babak Hemmatian

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Priorities

As the Commission developed its work plan, it first set out to define the scope of the massive problem it would seek to assess. "Information disorder" is an enormous topic, reaching across multiple sectors and disciplines. The Commission's hope is to identify some immediate and meaningful actions, and chart a path for a series of longer-term interventions that will have a positive impact.

What are the elements of a good priority for this Commission? The group's mandate is "to identify and prioritize the most critical sources and causes of information disorder and deliver a set of short-term actions and longer-term goals to help government, the private sector, and civil society respond to this modern-day crisis of faith in key institutions."

With that in mind, its priorities focus on areas where:

- *The Commission has expertise (or access to expertise) and interest*

- *There are clear opportunities to develop short-term recommendations that will have impact*

- *There are clear needs for longer-term study or planning that must be addressed before certain actions can be taken*

After considerable deliberation, the Commission focused on a set of three priority outcomes and, within those, three areas of intervention. It is not feasible to take on every aspect of information disorder, nor was that the intention from the start. Instead, these areas of focus are intended to highlight where commissioners believe they can make meaningful, actionable recommendations and offer suggestions for longer-term research and policy work.

The Commission has identified three priorities for its work:

1
Reducing harms: Addressing the greatest harms and the worst actors

2
Increasing transparency and understanding: Access, disclosure, and research

3
Building trust: Discourse, community, facts, and content

Priority 1:
Reducing Harms

Addressing the greatest harms and the worst actors

Information disorder is not a theoretical challenge—there are daily real-world harms that have immediate impact on communities, organizations, and individuals. Platforms have policies and automated systems in place for the worst offenses. Still, disinformation gets through and outcomes are inconsistent. Many of these harms impact vulnerable and marginalized communities disproportionately. New rules or terms of service intended to address these challenges will undoubtedly be abused or exploited to suppress dissent, as they always have been. Addressing these impacts immediately has the potential to mitigate the worst consequences of information disorder.

This priority will focus on interventions that reduce the worst harms of disinformation, such as threats to public health, election integrity, and the targeting of communities through hate speech. The Commission recognizes that everyone is harmed by disinformation, and some groups, particularly communities of color, are at greater risk and are often targeted by malicious actors. It will consider the worst actors, including high-profile influencers across all types of media, who have been shown to have a disproportionate impact as super-spreaders and instigators of harm.

Priority 2:
Increasing Transparency and Understanding

Access, disclosure, and research

Nearly two decades have passed since social media became a part of the mainstream. With a permissive regulatory environment and strong legal protections, technology platforms have flourished and grown, but the public has very little access to, or understanding of, how they work. In fact, the companies themselves don't fully grasp how their platforms are shaping and distorting public discourse, or how they affect human relationships and polarization. That limits the ability to develop solutions, or to test the impact of initiatives to mitigate the spread of disinformation. New regulations need to be based on empirical knowledge of the platforms, and that requires visibility into how they work, and who is making the decisions. This priority focuses on ways to create greater transparency in business practices, policies, regulations, and their application, algorithms, data, and more.

Taking an even broader view, we don't know nearly enough about how today's information ecosystem works—how the news media, social media, and online interactions affect communities, discourse, and relationships to issues and each other. Over the past three decades, patterns of consumption and sharing of information have changed dramatically, from the rise of the 24-hour news cycle, to the services that allow users to share news, comments, and original content and opinions at a rapid pace. This requires a greater understanding of how these sectors interact and influence individuals and society. The absence of such data diminishes our ability to develop informed, evidence-based policy. Researchers and policy-makers lack access, and statutory law and platforms' terms of service are sometimes impediments to important research and reporting. The Commission will explore previous efforts, both in the U.S. and internationally, including in Europe, where different legal frameworks have led to alternate outcomes and legal precedents. There is broad consensus that researchers and policymakers need greater access to and understanding of how these systems work to be able to develop impactful solutions, avoid unintended consequences, and evaluate previous interventions from platforms to understand if they have been effective and why.

This priority will focus on improving access to platforms' practices and a deeper examination of the information environment and its interdependencies.

Priority 3:
Building Trust
Discourse, community, facts, and content

Trust in institutions, experts, and the media is at an all-time low. In some cases, institutions need to do more than restore trust–they need to address long-standing issues and legitimate criticisms that have justifiably given the public good reason to withhold their trust. In other cases, efforts to divide and polarize targeted groups, grounded in false statements, fuel social distrust and contribute to a dehumanization of those we disagree with. People need to be able to rely on what they read and consume online, and distinguish between information that is reliable or misleading. There is an urgent need to build trust, and renew the faith that has been lost, and in some cases undermined, due to malicious actors. Today's polarized environment–driven by a technologically enabled rise in authoritarianism–means people are less able to find common ground, and they are more likely to remain in their bubble once they head down a particular ideological path. This division is harming constructive discourse and diminishing exposure to vital information necessary to make informed decisions on issues such as public health, and elections.

This priority considers the challenges the country faces in building and rebuilding trust in the institutions people count on to support informed public discourse and debate, and the role that access to reliable facts and content must play in those conversations. Many long-standing institutions will need to consider new ways of working to build or rebuild the confidence that has been lost. The Commission will explore the issue of instilling trust: including across social, cultural, and political divides, and within the institutions society relies upon, including government, the media, research and academic institutions, and the accountability and influence of experts.

Developing Interventions and Recommendations

For each of the three priorities, the Commission will consider opportunities for intervention and innovation, towards the development of actionable recommendations that will have both short- and long-term impact on information disorder in the following areas:

1

Structures and systems: Business models, incentives, and practices.

2

User resilience: Civic discourse and media literacy

3

Government leadership: Oversight, and action

Structures and systems
Business models, incentives, and practices

Today's information environment is shaped by the business models that underpin the media and technology sectors. Online services are optimized for audience engagement and the delivery of advertising, which can be detrimental to the development of human connection and social cohesion. Perpetuating these models can often prevent meaningful change, or amplify harms. Bad actors have learned to take advantage of these systems and policies to amplify and extend the reach of their malicious content. Any examination of information disorder needs to explore the systems, structures, and incentives that allow disinformation to spread.

The Commission will investigate the ways in which existing structures and business models either contribute to, or prevent interventions to constrain or combat, information disorder. From data collection and surveillance to influencer culture, the underlying models that drive today's information economy need to be explored. This will include an examination of incentives and disincentives for platforms, influencers, news media, and advertisers.

User resilience
Civic discourse and media literacy

When it comes to reducing information disorder, an informed society is a resilient society. In today's environment, more needs to be done to equip the public to evaluate what they read and share. Users need more agency and influence over their online experiences, and greater accountability from the services that deliver them. Few users of online services understand the ways platforms use data and technology to deliver content, create filter bubbles, and determine what groups they are connected with. Equipping users to defend themselves is one important element, but the Commission acknowledges that, taken on its own, these solutions can put the onus on those who are being harmed, so they must be considered in conjunction with recommendations that address bad actors and systemic challenges.

This priority will focus on ways to equip the public to be more resilient against disinformation–to spot attempts to manipulate them, to identify inaccurate content or malicious actors, and to avoid sharing misinformation more broadly. This topic also includes ways to promote better civic discourse and stronger human connections that would, over time, reduce polarization.

Government leadership
Oversight and action

Government has an essential role in protecting and supporting the knowledge and communication ecosystem. From defending against foreign actors, to protecting the principles of free speech, to guaranteeing public access to key data, there are opportunities for leadership; important roles for oversight in need of review, refinement, or innovation; and areas where government can be more assertive and take action to stem or otherwise disrupt malicious activity. In the U.S., it remains unclear where the responsibility for addressing disinformation rests, and what the strategy, goals, or focus will be in the coming years.

This priority will explore the roles and responsibilities of government entities, and also explore regulatory and legislative interventions. The Commission will consider Section 230 but is taking a broader legislative view–thinking about all the potential tools available to create the kinds of outcomes needed. This might include other agencies, laws, or protections, and will take care to consider both the intended outcomes and any unintended consequences that could result.

Conclusion

This information disorder is vast and will require a whole-of-society effort over the long term in order to address the harms we've already suffered. But action cannot wait as mis- and disinformation is spreading at an alarming rate and affecting every corner of our society. By design, this Commission set out to prioritize the most critical and urgent issues that require immediate solutions to respond to this modern-day crisis. This means not every area could be a priority for the Commission, despite their importance or potential for impact. Still, these three priority areas of focus can lead to a series of important recommendations that will build on and complement the good work that many others are doing, and have done, to understand and combat this urgent set of interconnected challenges.

What's next?

The next phase of work will include a deep-dive into the priorities. The Commission will engage more thoroughly in these areas to develop its draft recommendations. Members will invite individuals and organizations working in this space to engage on their own work that may be relevant, in order to build on existing studies and initiatives that share the goals of the Commission.

The final report will be published in early Fall.

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