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**Democrats' Digital Democracy Task Force Wrong Direction for Online
Democracy**

by

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*Following the 'roadmap' would give government more control to determine what
information passes muster*

Recently, nine Democrats, led by Reps. Jennifer Wexton, Don Beyer and David Cicilline, sent a letter to President-elect Joe Biden proposing a “roadmap” for confronting the threat of “disinformation and misinformation” that they claim poses a danger to our democracy.

But following the roadmap would take the country in the wrong direction because it would give the government more power and control over the information available to the American public.

The roadmap’s premise is that “many Americans are ill-equipped to recognize and sift through false, misleading or emotionally manipulative posts” on social media platforms.

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So, to confront what they see as the combination of “ill-equipped” Americans and rampant disinformation and misinformation, the House Democrats propose a number of measures.

Some are old standbys like dedicating more public funds to support media literacy programs and investing more in quality public broadcasting. But others are considerably more troublesome.

For example, the Democrats propose creation of a new multiagency Digital Democracy Task Force, comprised of officials from across the federal government, with dedicated funding. The task force would be charged with developing communications strategies for the government to counter “disinformation and misinformation.”

Because social media platforms seldom act as “responsible information gatekeepers,” the roadmap urges the government to prioritize grant funding to “experienced organizations” so that they can teach “vulnerable audiences” to spot propaganda and to “provide counter-narratives.”

By now it should be evident why adoption of the Democrats’ roadmap likely poses a greater danger to democracy than ignoring it. This is not to say “misinformation” or “disinformation” on the social media platforms which are the roadmap’s primary targets doesn’t exist. It does.

But there are serious disagreements every day — really, every hour — regarding what news and information on social media should be pinned with a Scarlet Letter. And it should be obvious too that the disagreements regarding claimed misinformation and disinformation extend to what the roadmap calls the “traditional news media,” which the House Democrats claim have higher editorial standards.

These disagreements are far too numerous to need recounting. But to take one very timely example, consider the way that what, for simplicity’s sake, I’ll call the “Hunter Biden’s Business Dealings in China” story was handled by the dominant social media platforms.

As we know, when The New York Post published news stories three weeks before the November election containing allegations of possible wrongdoing by Hunter Biden, Twitter, Facebook and Google all quickly took measures to prevent or throttle the posting and sharing of the articles. And the “traditional media,” with only a few exceptions, not only studiously avoided mentioning the story, but actually applauded the social media giants for countering what they claimed, mostly singing from the same song sheet, was “disinformation” planted by the Kremlin.

Now, my purpose here is not to debate the truth or falsity of any allegations relating to Hunter Biden’s conduct, or, for that matter, to any other controversial assertions, such as those relating to various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It’s not even, at least here, to pass judgment on the actions of Twitter, Facebook or Google, or the traditional media, in suppressing any particular controversial story.

Rather, my purpose is to make another more important, albeit obvious, point: What constitutes actual “disinformation and misinformation” — as opposed to truthful information — is frequently subject to good-faith dispute. While I may have concerns about the way that social media decide to treat certain information, as private entities they have a First Amendment right to make decisions regarding the content carried on their platforms without government interference.

The government, of course, is in an entirely different position. We don’t want to give a federal agency, even one soothingly named the Digital Democracy Task Force, the authority to assemble a government-wide apparatus with the mission of developing communications strategies to suppress whatever it decides is disinformation or misinformation.

To be sure, there is an important role for certain government agencies to play, within the confines of legal strictures and judicial process, in monitoring social media sites to assess whether they carry disinformation, say, that poses a threat to national security or the health and safety of the American public. But we don’t want to entrust a new federal bureaucracy with the power to develop programs to determine what information passes government muster and to prioritize grant funding to organizations tasked with countering information that the government disfavors.

Here’s a thought experiment: Based on what we know now, would we want a Biden administration’s Digital Democracy Task Force deciding which aspects of the Hunter Biden story should be classified as “disinformation” or “misinformation”? Or a Trump administration’s Task Force making determinations regarding allegations relating to Donald Trump Jr.?

However well-intentioned the House Democrats’ roadmap may be, creating a new multiagency federal task force with the mission of deploying communications strategies that enable it to be the arbiter of whether information is “truthful” or not is more likely to endanger our democracy than to preserve it.

H.L. Mencken’s pithy riposte is ringing in my ears: “The urge to save humanity is almost always a false front for the urge to rule it.”

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