COMMITTEE on HOMELAND SECURITY

The Protecting Against Public Safety Disinformation Act
Sponsored by Congresswoman Lauren Underwood (D-IL)

The increasing use of deepfakes, manipulated media, and online bots to spread disinformation is an emerging homeland security threat.[1] Overseas disinformation operations harness and exacerbate emergencies including public health crises, natural disasters, terrorist events, and other threats to public safety and infrastructure.[2] For instance, foreign state media and non-state actors alike are taking advantage of the global COVID-19 pandemic to undermine public health and safety by spreading malign disinformation about the outbreak in order to undermine trust in the U.S. government.[3]

This is not the first time that disinformation operations have been carried out to propagate false medical information to the detriment of public health. For example, Russia has been spreading health disinformation for years in order to erode trust in U.S. government institutions, including baseless anti-vaccination rhetoric and false claims that HIV was created as a bioweapon.[4] Similar tactics have been observed during the COVID-19 pandemic: troll farms in North Macdeonia and the Philippines have disseminated falsehoods about the coronavirus and vaccines, while the Russian government is suspected of starting false rumors about a national quarantine in the U.S.[5] Disinformation operations can worsen the impact of a national crisis like a pandemic by generating panic and distrust, dangerously undermining government response efforts.[6]

Nation states and terror groups engage in disinformation for a variety of reasons. They may seek to influence public opinion, promote a favorable agenda, weaken adversaries, sow discord, or stoke tensions amongst the public. Groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda frequently post digitally

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[1] Homeland Security Advisory Council, Interim Report of the Countering Foreign Influence Subcommittee (May 21, 2019).
[2] Emmor, R, Russia deploying coronavirus disinformation to sow panic in West, EU document says (*Reuters*, March 18, 2020); Nakashima, E, DHS to advise telecom firms on preventing 5G cell tower attacks linked to coronavirus conspiracy theories (*Washington Post*, May 13, 2020); The Soufan Center, INTELBRIEF: Disinformation and terrorism (October 15, 2019).
[3] Wong, E et al., Chinese agents helped spread messages that sowed virus panic in US, officials say (*New York Times*, April 22, 2020).
[4] Kirk, K, How Russia Sows Confusion in the U.S. Vaccine Debate (*Foreign Policy*, April 9, 2019); Boghardt, T, Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign (*Studies in Intelligence*, December 2009); Broad, W, Putin's long war against American science (*New York Times*, April 13, 2020).
[5] Toh, M, Facebook, Google, and Twitter crack down on fake coronavirus 'cures' and other misinformation (*CNN*, February 3, 2020); Polityuk, P and Ziners, N, With selfie, Ukrainian health minister joins coronavirus evacuees in quarantine (*Reuters*, February 21, 2020); Collins, B & Zadrozny, B, Troll farms from North Macedonia and the Philippines pushed coronavirus disinformation on Facebook (*NBC News*, May 29, 2020); Wise, J, DHS Chief: False Reports of National Shutdown May Be Part of Russian Disinformation Campaign (The Hill, March 22, 2020).
[6] Emmor, R, Russia deploying coronavirus disinformation to sow panic in West, EU document says (*Reuters*, March 18, 2020).

manipulated depictions of terror attacks in Western cities to enhance their messaging efforts.[7] Such posts are not only meant to inspire individuals to commit acts of violence but also to attract new recruits to their cause.[8] Some nation states use disinformation to radicalize individuals in order to cause violence in another country. For example, malicious Russian government-affiliated actors regularly post false content to promote far-right extremist sentiment to stoke violence globally.[9]

Whether propagated by a nation state like Russia or a terrorist group like ISIS, disinformation endangers Americans. Federal leadership is necessary to help local public health and safety professionals mitigate the impact of disinformation in their communities. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is well positioned to play a leading role in combatting disinformation that threatens national security.

The **Protecting Against Public Safety Disinformation Act of 2020** would increase America's resilience against disinformation by:

- Directing the DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis to assess the impact of malign disinformation operations carried out by foreign malicious actors on domestic preparedness for and response to terrorism and other homeland security threats;

- Charging the DHS Science and Technology Directorate with developing research-based methods for identifying and countering such malign disinformation operations;

- Ensuring that state and local public health officials, first responders, and emergency managers have access to those assessments and recommendations; and

- Requiring DHS to report to Congress on its findings.

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[7] NCTC, DHS, FBI, First Responders ToolBox (August 9, 2018).
[8] Allendorfer, W and Herring, S, ISIS vs. the U.S. government: A war of online propaganda (*First Monday*, December 2015).
[9] Becker, J, The Global Machine Behind the Rise of Far-Right Nationalism (*New York Times*, August 20, 2019); Arnsdorf, I, Pro-Russian Bots Take up the Right-Wing Cause After Charlottesville (*ProPublica*, August 23, 2017); Innes, M et al., Disinformation and digital influencing after terrorism: spoofing, truthing, and social proofing (*Contemporary Social Science*, January 25, 2019); Gleicher, N, Removing Bad Actors on Facebook: What We've Found So Far (July 31, 2018).