



The Global Disinformation Index (GDI): Government-Funded Group Targets “Riskiest Online News Outlets”

Description

Goodbye Disinformation Board, Hello Disinformation Index. *Less than a year after many celebrated the disbanding of the Biden’s Administration Disinformation Board, it appears that the Administration has been funding a British group to rank sites to warn people about high-risk disinformation sites.*

The Global Disinformation Index (GDI) has released its index and every one of the high-risk sites turn out to be . . . wait for it . . . conservative or libertarian sites. HuffPost or Mother Jones (which were also analyzed), but HuffPost made the top list of most trustworthy for potential advertisers. It turns out that the “riskiest online news outlets” just happen to be some of the most popular sites for conservatives, libertarians, and independents.

The GDI is designed to steer advertisers and subscribers away from certain sites, potentially draining sites of revenue needed to operate. The organization issues the index to “advertisers and the ad tech industry in assessing the reputational and brand risk when advertising with online media outlets and to help them avoid financially supporting disinformation online.” The State Department is partially funding the effort. The Biden Administration gave \$330 million to The National Endowment for Democracy, which partially supports the GDI’s budget.

GDI warned advertisers that these sites could damage their reputations and brands: *New York Post, Reason, Real Clear Politics, The Daily Wire, The Blaze, One America News Network, The Federalist, Newsmax, The American Spectator, and The American Conservative.*

The inclusion of the *New York Post* is particularly notable. It is ranked in the top ten newspapers in the country and the top ten digital news sites. (For full disclosure, I have written for the newspaper as well as many of those on the trusted side of the GDI ledger). The *New York Post* was suspended by social media companies over the Hunter Biden story before the 2020 election by companies relying on false stories appearing in many of the most trustworthy sites listed by GDI.

The allegedly dangerous sites also included *Reason*, a website associated with UCLA Law Professor

Eugene Volokh, who was clearly gobsmacked by the warning. *Reason* regularly posts insightful and substantive analysis from conservative and libertarian scholars. With the diminishing number of such academics on faculties, the site is a relative rarity in offering a different take on cases and legal issues. The inclusion of *Reason* in the listing is absurd and shows an utter lack of objective and reliable criteria. For example, GDI says that the site offers “no information regarding authorship attribution, pre-publication fact-checking or post-publication corrections processes, or policies to prevent disinformation in its comments section.” That is obviously untrue as any cursory review of the site would confirm. The *Reason* articles contain clear indications of authorship.

Moreover, there is a reason why *Reason* does not have policies posted on the removal of disinformation: it opposes content moderation policies of groups like GDI on free speech grounds. *Reason* like my own blog *Res Ipsa* (www.jonathanturley.org) opposes disinformation “processes” used to limit free speech. As Volokh noted, “*Reason* does not specifically police disinformation in the comments section; that is perhaps an area where *Reason*’s philosophy—*free minds* and *free markets*—clashes with GDI’s.”

The GDI reviewed sites on the far left like *Mother Jones* that routinely run unsupported attacks on the right and debunked theories on Russian collusion or other claims. For example, many of the sites ranked as most reliable only recently admitted that the Hunter Biden laptop was not Russian disinformation. For two years, these sites spread this false story with little or no opposing viewpoints despite early refutation by American intelligence.

Even in 2021, NPR still claimed that “The laptop story was discredited by U.S. intelligence and independent investigations by news organizations.” After a chorus of objections to the clearly false story, it corrected the story but still stated falsely that “numerous news organizations cast doubt on the credibility of the laptop story.” It never explained the continuing “doubt”? Media organizations that effectively imposed a blackout on the story had already confirmed that the laptop was authentic.

Likewise, sites like NPR continued to make the false claim that former Attorney General Bill Barr cleared Lafayette Park for a photo op long after the claim was proven to be categorically untrue. The government-supported news outlet also has been routinely challenged for making biased or false claims about conservatives, including Supreme Court justices.

Nevertheless, the *New York Post* and *Reason* are listed as dangerous sites while sites like *HuffPost* are actually listed at the top of the least risky disinformation sites. *HuffPost* is regularly challenged on false or misleading attacks on conservatives.

None of that means that I would put NPR or *Mother Jones* or *HuffPost* on a do-not-advertise disinformation list. These are sites with a well-known liberal bent just as other sites have a conservative bent. I am not here to denounce those sites any more than I am here to defend the other sites for their content. Rather the concern is that GDI is applying skewed measures to target disfavored sites. It is concerning that the sites at either extreme of GDI’s spectrum of disinformation largely reflect the political spectrum. (One exception is the Wall Street Journal, which is in the most trustworthy grouping).

GDI accuses sites like *Reason* of lacking transparency on issues like authorship but the group is fairly opaque on its own conclusions and standards. The explanations for tagging these sites are riddled with subjective and ambiguous terms. For example, GDI includes RealClearPolitics due to what GDI

considers “biased and sensational language.” Did the reviewers actually visit the sites of *Mother Jones* and *HuffPost* in evaluating comparative levels of bias? Were those sites paragons of neutrality and circumspection?

GDI further says that *RealClearPolitics* “lacked clear and diverse sources.” Many of the sites ranked as most reliable (and thus worthy of advertising revenue) are routinely criticized for excluding conservative or libertarian perspectives. *HuffPost* and *Mother Jones* have a range of diversity that runs from the left to the far left.

The *New York Times* has led efforts to exclude opposing voices from the right. In 2020, the the *Times* issued a cringing apology for running a column by Sen. Tom Cotton. The *Times* forced out editor James Bennet and apologized for publishing Cotton’s column calling for the use of the troops to restore order in Washington after days of rioting around the White House. (Bennet recently denounced his former newspaper for abandoning journalistic standards of balance).

The GDI disinformation index shows the very favoritism that it attributes to others. For example, in discouraging advertisers from supporting the *New York Post*, the group declares that “content sampled from the *Post* frequently displayed bias, sensationalism and clickbait, which carries the risk of misleading the site’s reader.” The line reflects the utter lack of self-awareness of self-appointed monitors of disinformation. There is no effort to explain what constitutes “clickbait” or “sensationalism” in comparison to more favored sites like *HuffPost*.

The fact that GDI reflects such bias is not particularly surprising. Disinformation efforts have long displayed pronounced political influences and agendas. Indeed, we have seen recent disclosures of how members of Congress like Rep. Adam Schiff (D., Cal.) secretly sought to use disinformation claims to ban critics, including a columnist, from social media.

What is more troubling is the funding of the United States government for a group seeking to target conservative sites and deter advertisers from supporting them. I recently testified on the disclosures of the Twitter Files and the confirmation of coordination by the FBI and other federal agencies with social media companies in censoring citizens. I noted that the Administration played the public for chumps. After yielding to an outcry over the creation of the Disinformation Governance Board, the Administration disbanded it. It never mentioned that a far larger censorship effort was being carried out with an estimated 80 federal employees in targeting citizens and others. While the GDI effort is smaller in comparison and effect, it is an additional facet of this effort. It is not known if the Administration has other programs of this kind and the Democrats continue to vehemently oppose any investigation into these free speech concerns.

In other words, the Board was just a shiny object that distracted from a far more comprehensive effort to censor and control speech on social media. I still would not call it disinformation but one might call it deceitful.

By Jonathan Turley

Featured image is from Jonathan Turley

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