

EDITORIAL

Do we trust the feds to define 'disinformation?'

That the Biden administration has created what it calls the "Disinformation Governance Board" — that's the official title, not some right-wing exaggeration — all but demands a reference to George Orwell.

We can't know at this point whether this board within the Department of Homeland Security will in any way resemble the Thought Police in Orwell's novel, "1984."

But even if this new apparatus has nothing in common with Orwell's dystopian setting, Americans ought to be a trifle concerned that the federal government, with its limitless resources, deems "disinformation" — a noun for which there is nothing like an absolute definition — a topic so serious as to warrant expanding the already gargantuan government.

The Department of Homeland Security's announcement of the new board, on April 27, seems innocuous.

This is hardly surprising — no one expects the bureaucrats to admit it if they intend to try to suppress information lest it get to Americans.

Yet if this new board is so wholesome, then why, as of April 29, had Homeland Security officials declined an interview request from The Associated Press?

The official announcement about the board stated that "the spread of disinformation can affect border security, Americans' safety during disasters, and public trust in our democratic institutions."

This is certainly true.

(Although the federal government struggles mightily with border security regardless of disinformation.)

Homeland Security said it would immediately focus on false information allegedly intended to encourage illegal immigrants to try to come to America, and monitor, as The Associated Press put it, "Russian disinformation threats as this year's midterm elections nears and the Kremlin continues an aggressive disinformation campaign around the war in Ukraine."

The obvious problem here is that we are, apparently, expected to trust that federal officials can discern between "disinformation" created and distributed by foreign agents, and what an American says on his podcast or posts on his social media accounts.

Or, for that matter, what a major American newspaper publishes.

The distinction is vital.

In October 2020 the New York Post reported about a laptop that belonged to Hunter Biden, the president's son, and that allegedly contained information showing business dealings between both Bidens and Ukrainian leaders.

Many people dismissed the Post's stories as either unproven or — and here comes that word again — "disinformation."

Among the skeptics is Nina Jankowicz. She is the executive director of the Disinformation Governance Board. In 2020 she told The Associated Press, in an interview regarding the Post's reporting, and referring to the laptop itself, "We should view it as a Trump campaign product."

Yet subsequent reporting by other newspapers, including The New York Times and The Washington Post — albeit a year and a half or so later — corroborated some of the Post's reporting.

Put simply, the person in charge of the Biden administration's "disinformation" agency branded as disinformation stories published by the New York Post. Stories that are accurate. It is reasonable, then, for Americans to wonder just how Jankowicz, and the board she will be running, would deal with future reporting that they brand as "disinformation."

The simple answer, of course, is that they can't do anything at all — unless they have as little respect for the First Amendment as Jankowicz seems to have for the New York Post.

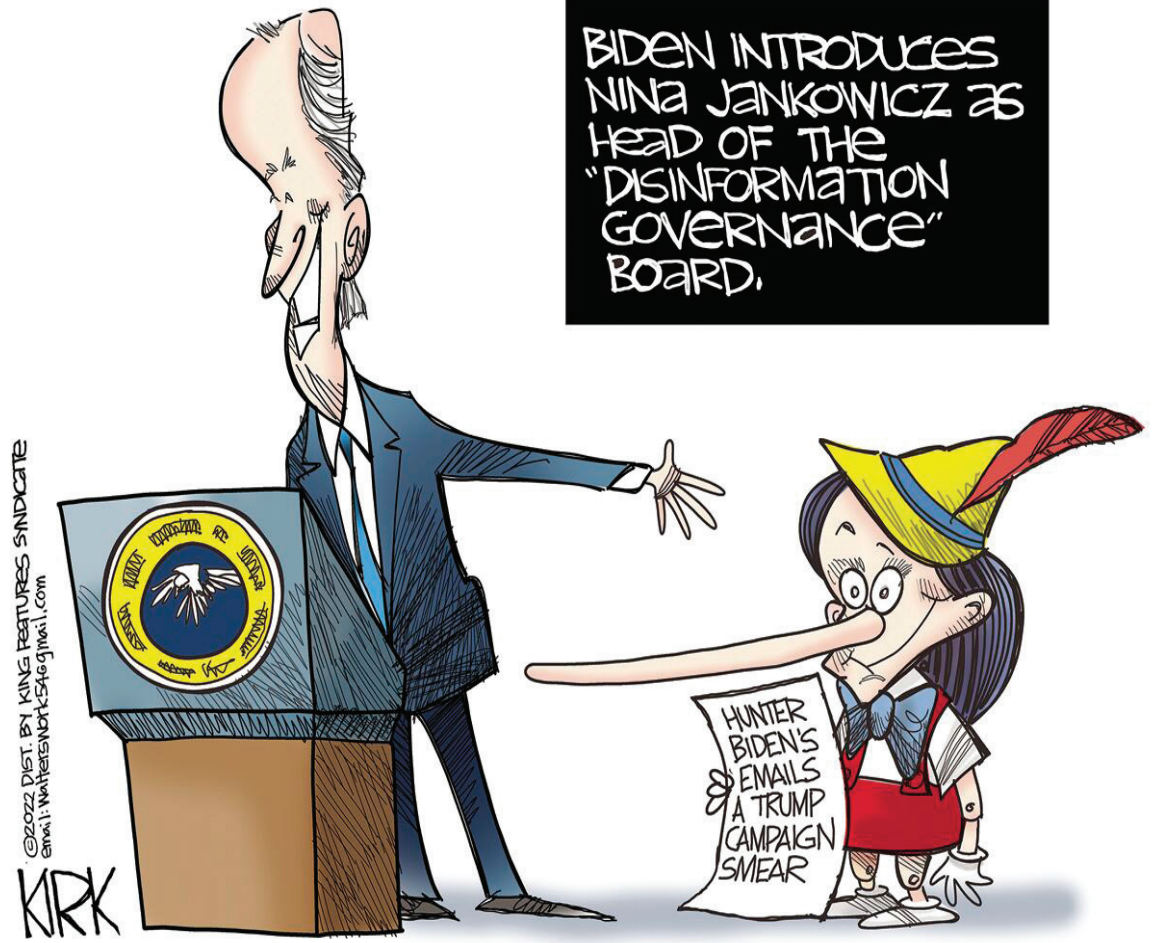
Her dismissal of the Post's stories isn't the only reason to question not only the creation of this board, but specifically giving her the authority to operate it.

Jankowicz has also written books examining how people use social media to harass others. This is an unfortunate truth about online forums, to be sure. But while the federal government has a legitimate reason to ensure that Americans have accurate information in an emergency — the need to evacuate during a wildfire, for instance — there is no justification for trampling on the Bill of Rights to deal with some cretins on social media.

The federal government obviously is capable of distributing information whenever it chooses — there's no need to create a new board to accomplish that.

But responding to disinformation, with the goal of refuting it, is a vastly different thing than suppressing Americans' opinions — the difference between public relations and unconstitutional censorship. It ought not be lost on anyone that this new agency's name includes the word "Governance."

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

Good news with kids, viruses

BY CORY FRANKLIN AND MARY HALL

Whether it is attending school, being vaccinated or transmitting the virus at family gatherings, the role of children in the COVID-19 pandemic has been contentious and widely debated, not just in the United States but across the world.

Two years in, what have we learned and what can we apply to the future concerning children and COVID-19?

When the threat of COVID-19 emerged in early 2020, pediatricians braced to provide care for a flood of sick children across the country. A pediatric clinic is normally a busy place, especially during the protracted viral respiratory season, October to May, when it is typical for small children to annually experience as many as 10 colds caused by endemic respiratory viruses.

Fortunately, in most situations, healthy children recover from respiratory viruses within a week with supportive care and endemic human respiratory viruses becoming permanent members of our viral ecosystem. But COVID-19 was an unknown wild card.

It turned out to be a pleasant surprise when it became clear the coronavirus caused milder illness in children than adults. For healthy young patients, with rare exceptions, this has essentially remained true throughout the pandemic.

But there was another intriguing and unexpected surprise as well.

In the first year of the pandemic, COVID-19 turned out to be milder in children, but colds, ear infections, wheezing episodes and stomach bugs also seemed to disappear. The frequency of common viral illnesses expected in the youngest patients plummeted.

Initially, it was believed that parents were simply reluctant to bring children in, but greater numbers of parents reported, with considerable

relief, that their children were just not getting sick.

This temporary disappearance of most endemic pediatric viruses was partly the result of behavior changes, particularly the cancellation of in-person meetings, group activities and travel plans. However, pandemic mitigations could not be the entire explanation because the same disappearance was observed in areas where children attended school or uninterrupted day care.

Eventually, with the onset of the highly contagious omicron wave last winter, more and more children were infected with COVID-19, most with mild symptoms. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that as of February 2022, approximately 75% of children and adolescents have been infected, with approximately one-third of those infections coming since December 2021. Including those who have been vaccinated, there is now considerable population immunity to the virus in children.

In the past year, a rebound in routine childhood viruses has occurred during the intervals when COVID-19 waves ebbed. The typical viral respiratory illnesses are spreading again, with the expected natural cycle of waning in May and returning in autumn.

Parents and teachers once again confront maintaining public health measures meant to avoid the spread of viral illnesses with the priority of the educational, developmental and emotional needs of children. The key is to offer kids routine protection against common diseases (staying home when sick, washing hands) — not frantic overprotection against one illness in particular.

The pediatric immune system is programmed to encounter a new virus and generate an initial immune response. Anyone who has spent time with toddlers is familiar

with their desire to touch and lick everything. This type of exploration plays many roles in child development, and one may include immunologic development.

Small children sample the viral environment, which in turn enables them to mount an immune response. Children eventually augment the response with subsequent exposures, eventually resulting in a mature, adult immune system. It is beneficial for children to be exposed to routine viral illnesses that inevitably spread and ultimately recede. Acceptance of this reality will be important in preventing unnecessary disruptions to children's lives.

Viruses interact with each other and with our immune systems. Some of these interactions may be advantageous for unknown reasons. On occasion, wide spread of one virus can crowd out other viruses, a phenomenon known as viral interference. This happened in 2009 when an incipient influenza pandemic was short-circuited by an endemic rhinovirus outbreak.

Was this what happened in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic? If so, the return of endemic viruses and unpleasant, but benign, colds may be an encouraging sign that the COVID-19 pandemic is finally subsiding.

In the New Testament, Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." As parents, pediatricians and other professionals who love children, we should guard against becoming overprotective. For children to develop the robust immune systems required for healthy adulthood, we must recognize that viral illnesses are a necessary part of life.

■ Dr. Cory Franklin is a retired intensive care physician. Mary Hall is a pediatric specialist in private practice from Skokie, Illinois.

YOUR VIEWS

U.S. needs to work toward resolution to Ukraine war

As I see it, U.S. foreign policy has lost its way in the world, especially our capacity for statesmanlike diplomacy.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, we have for years promoted eastward expansion of NATO to Russia's doorstep, while ignoring Russian vigorous security protests.

Now, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and NATO's supplying arms to Ukraine, our Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin declared this week that our goal in Ukraine is "to see Russia weakened."

To what end?

Is Russia really our enemy? Do we not understand how unpredictable and unstable war is, especially given the grave danger of nuclear weapons? Are we insane?

After visiting Ukraine, United Nations Secretary António Guterres stated, "The war is an absurdity in the 21st century. The war is evil."

"There is no way a war can be acceptable in the 21st century."

I say that if we had any sense we would all work with the United Nations to find an immediate, workable resolution to the Ukraine war.

Marshall McComb
Baker City

CONTACT YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

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Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

State Sen. Lynn Findley (R-Ontario): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., S-403, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1730. Email: Sen.LynnFindley@oregonlegislature.gov

State Rep. Mark Owens (R-Crane): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., H-475, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1460. Email: Rep.MarkOwens@oregonlegislature.gov

Baker City Hall: 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second

and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers. Councilors Jason Spriet, Kerry McQuisten, Shane Alderson, Joanna Dixon, Kenyon Damschen, Johnny Waggoner Sr. and Dean Guyer.

Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Jonathan Cannon, city manager; Ty Duby, police chief; Sean Lee, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Noodle Perkins, roadmaster; Greg Baxter, district attorney; Alice Durlinger, county treasurer; Stefanie Kirby, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.

Baker School District: 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Witty. Board meets the third Tuesday of the month at 6 p.m. Council Chambers, Baker City Hall, 1655 First St.; Chris Hawkins, Andrew Bryan, Travis Cook, Jessica Dougherty, Julie Huntington.