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New 'disinformation' board paused amid free speech questions

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and AMANDA SEITZ May 19, 2022



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WASHINGTON (AP) — The Department of Homeland Security on Wednesday paused a new and controversial board’s work on disinformation and accepted the resignation of its leader, capping weeks of concerns about impinging on free speech rights and frenzied conspiracy theories about the board itself.

Former Disinformation Governance Board director Nina Jankowicz told The Associated Press hours after resigning Wednesday that the wave of attacks and violent threats she’s

pulsing through the social media

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conversation about how to deal with threats to our national security and that's not what happened here," Jankowicz said. "I'm not going to be silenced."

What remains to be seen is how the board's disastrous rollout and ensuing criticism around it will damage ongoing U.S. efforts to counter disinformation used as a weapon by Russia and other adversaries. Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas acknowledged the board's controversy had become a distraction to the department's

other work, which includes safeguarding U.S. elections, two officials familiar with his decision said.

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While the board has not formally been shuttered, it will be reviewed by members of a DHS advisory council that's expected to make recommendations in 75 days. [The Washington Post](#) first reported the board's pause.



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its launch, [DHS said the new initiative would coordinate efforts](#)

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the U.S. and false claims that encourage migrants to travel to the U.S.-Mexico border.

The new board was hampered from the start by questions about its purpose, funding and work that Mayorkas struggled to answer even as he appeared in front of lawmakers on Capitol Hill earlier this month.

Mayorkas made the decision to pause the board after the negative reaction and growing concerns that it was hindering DHS' other work on disinformation, according to two department officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

“The Board has been grossly and

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department said in a statement. “It was designed to ensure we fulfill our

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rights.”

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre noted the board had never met and neither the department nor Jankowicz had any power to censor or remove content labeled as disinformation.

DHS officials had tried to quell concerns about how the board would impact issues of free speech and online privacy by describing it as an internal working group intended to study definitions of disinformation across the department.

But opponents remained unconvinced about the board’s work and purpose.

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political tool to be wielded by the party in control.”

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reinforcing that the Department of Homeland Security’s priorities are severely misplaced,” wrote Reps. Mike Turner of Ohio and John Katko of New York, who previously said DHS had not disclosed information to them about the program.

Sen. Mitt Romney, a Utah Republican, told Mayorkas the board was a “terrible idea” that “communicates to the world that we’re going to be spreading propaganda in our own country.”

Twenty Republican attorneys general, led by Jason Miyares of Virginia, threatened Mayorkas with legal action over the board “unless you turn back now and disband this



Deception online and across

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The phrase “Ministry of Truth” — a reference to George Orwell’s “1984” — trended on Twitter in discussions about the board. Conservative pundits and social media users pushed conspiracy theories and falsehoods around its purpose, with some falsely claiming the board was quickly developed by DHS in response to billionaire [Elon Musk’s quest to buy Twitter](#). Others put out [false claims](#) that Jankowicz planned to edit the tweets of everyday Twitter users.

“It’s been really mischaracterized from the beginning,” said Cindy Otis, a disinformation researcher and former CIA analyst.

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identify and stop the spread of false narratives about elections and hot-

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Russia has tried to influence the last two presidential elections by boosting false stories and using social media to inflame divisions in American society on issues like race and the coronavirus pandemic. It has continued to spread false and misleading narratives about [its invasion of Ukraine](#). U.S. intelligence officials have also accused China and Iran of peddling disinformation to Americans. DHS has several ongoing programs to counter disinformation, including the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency's efforts to debunk claims of election fraud.

But, Otis warned, "It would be really unfortunate if they just decided that

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of sexist and antisemitic attacks,

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questioned whether Jankowicz should have agreed to lead the board while pregnant.

Jankowicz said Wednesday that she was reporting violent threats that came in daily through phone calls, emails or Twitter messages. Some included rape or death threats. Others encouraged her to kill herself.

“It was horrible. It was constant,” she said. “That’s obviously really scary and really unpleasant. I was trying to do important work to

protect Americans from a real threat.”

The department, she said, failed to address concerns about privacy and



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was too partisan for the job,

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laptop said to belong to Hunter Biden, the president's eldest son, and replaying a TikTok video she taped about disinformation to the tune of a song from "Mary Poppins."

Supporters of Jankowicz have accused the department of not doing enough to protect her from trolls and online attacks.

"It is deeply disappointing that mischaracterizations of the board became a distraction from the Department's vital work, and indeed, along with recent events globally and nationally, embodies

why it is necessary," Jankowicz wrote in her resignation letter.



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