May 1, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We write today to ask for full consideration of a proposal to initiate a multilateral negotiation to establish an international research center to facilitate cross platform research on the information environment.[1]

The last few years have highlighted the importance of independent research to understand the evolving impact of the information environment. Prominent online platforms are constantly making design and policy choices that determine the flow of information, the use of personal data and pace of marketing. These decisions are often opaque. Studies have highlighted social media's role in promoting self-harm, eating disorders, and sales of drugs to children.[2] While the field of Information Science continues to expand and evolve, significant gaps in the research remain.[3] Challenges with social media data sharing have meant that researchers are often limited to data they can scrape or obtain through open-source tools. These processes can be cumbersome, privacy invasive and often do not include key information.[4]

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[1] *See* National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, H.R.7900, 117th Cong. § 5860 (2022), https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/7900.

[2] *Xanax, Ecstasy, and Opioids: Instagram Offers Drug Pipeline to Kids*, TECH TRANSPARENCY PROJECT (Dec. 7, 2021), https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/xanax-ecstasy-and-opioids-instagram-offers-drug-pipeline-kids. *See also*, *Pills, Cocktails, and Anorexia: Facebook Allows Harmful Ads to Target Teens*, TECH TRANSPARENCY PROJECT (May 4, 2021), https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/pills-cocktails-and-anorexia-facebook-allows-harmful-ads-target-teens.

[3] Sharath Chandra Guntuku, et al., *Detecting Depression and Mental Illness on Social Media: An Integrative Review*, 18 CURRENT OPINION IN BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES 43-49 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2017.07.005. S*ee also*, Jon Bateman, et al., *Measuring the Efficacy of Influence Operations Countermeasures: Key Findings and Gaps From Empirical Research*, CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE (Sept. 21, 2021), https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/09/21/measuring-efficacy-of-influence-operations-countermeasures-key-findings-and-gaps-from-empirical-research-pub-85389.

[4] Irene V. Pasquetto, et al., *Tackling Misinformation: What Researchers Could Do With Social Media Data*, HKS MISINFORMATION REVIEW (Dec. 9, 2020), https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/tackling-misinformation-what-researchers-could-do-with-social-media-data/. *See also*, Bogdan Batrinca, & Philip C. Treleaven, *Social Media Analytics: A Survey of Techniques, Tools and Platforms*, 30 AI & SOCIETY 89–116 (2015), https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-014-0549-4.

Your administration has a unique opportunity to leverage the internationally recognized desire for more transparency into online platforms.[5] These efforts would build on several bipartisan, bicameral proposals from the 117th Congress to clarify and even mandate that online platforms share data with researchers. Indeed, these proposals received markups in both the House and Senate Commerce Committees and were discussed in legislative hearings.[6]

Similar efforts to increase and improve online safety research are already underway. Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Partnership for Countering Influence Operations have undertaken a joint initiative to create a shared infrastructure to study the information environment across borders and platforms.[7] The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) developed a draft Code of Conduct under the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which specifies how platform-to-researcher data access might be achieved in compliance with Europe's privacy law. The Report of the EDMO Working Group on Platform-to-Researcher Data Access proposes an independent, third-party intermediary body that could vet researchers and research proposals, and evaluate the codebooks and datasets made available by platforms.[8] Considerations are underway for such an intermediary body to facilitate data sharing under the Digital Services Act Article 40.[9] While several leading social media companies have agreed to participate in these efforts, challenges regarding harmonizing differences in country and state data protection laws and research ethics regulations threaten the effectiveness of such collaboration.

Initiating negotiations to create an independent international research center to facilitate cross platform research on the information environment shows recognition of the internet's nearly borderless nature in which U.S. innovation has thrived. Such a research center could increase the ease of data sharing that is complete, respects the data rights of online consumers around the globe regardless of nationality, and enables thoughtful understanding of the design and algorithms that have changed the nature of communication.

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[5] *The Government's Commitment To Address Online Safety*, THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA (last updated Oct. 4, 2022), https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/harmful-online-content.html. *See also*, *The Digital Services Act Package*, THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION (last updated Nov. 4, 2022), https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package. *See also*, *Online Safety Bill: Factsheet*, UNITED KINGDOM DEPARTMENT FOR DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA & SPORT (last updated Apr. 19, 2022), https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-bill-supporting-documents/online-safety-bill-factsheet.
[6] Kids Online Safety Act, S.3663, 117th Cong. (2022), https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/3663. *See also*, American Data Privacy and Protection Act, H.R.8152, 117th Cong. (2022), https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/8152. *See also*, Platform Transparency: Understanding the Impact of Social Media: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Privacy, Technology, and the Law of the S. Comm. on the Judiciary, 117th Cong. (2022), https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/meetings/platform-transparency-understanding-the-impact-of-social-media.
[7] Alicia Wanless, & Jacob N. Shapiro, *A CERN Model for Studying the Information Environment*, CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE (Nov. 2022), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Wanless_Shapiro_CERN_final.pdf.
[8] *Report of the European Digital Media Observatory's Working Group on Platform-to-Researcher Data Access*, EUROPEAN DIGITAL MEDIA OBSERVATORY (May 31, 2022), https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Report-of-the-European-Digital-Media-Observatorys-Working-Group-on-Platform-to-Researcher-Data-Access-2022.pdf.
[9] Vermeulen, Mathias. *Researcher Access to Platform Data: European Developments*. JOURNAL OF ONLINE TRUST AND SAFETY 1.4 (2022). https://tsjournal.org/index.php/jots/article/view/84

This would not be the first time a U.S. President has participated in such a negotiation. In November 1985, President Ronald Reagan joined the Geneva Superpower Summit which set in motion ITER, an international fusion research facility.[10] ITER has played a critical role in the fusion research and development community, highlighting the importance of international collaboration and study to address monumental, emerging challenges. Similar efforts could lead to a safer online space for our children and youth today and for generations to come as the media environment continues to evolve.

U.S. leadership in this effort is essential. While we recognize the administration for taking part in conversations on tech transparency in the *White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse*,[11] the Data Governance and Technology Platforms working group established under the *U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council,*[12] the *G7 Rapid Response Mechanism*,[13] and other similar efforts, more deliberate and everlasting action is needed. We ask that the administration use these existing venues to initiate the creation of an independent research center on the information environment, or to create a new venue dedicated to the task.

Given the nuance and forethought required to set up such an initiative we suggest that the administration consult with:

- Representatives from providers of prominent online platforms;
- Researchers from the fields of information science, media studies, international data governance, psychology, child development and other similar fields;
- Civil society organizations;
- Technologists, including individuals with training and expertise in the state of the art in the fields of information technology, information security, network security, software development, computer science, computer engineering, and other related fields; and
- Representatives from international standards-setting organizations.

Further, we recommend that the initial coalition of countries include partners and allies with prominent data protection and online safety laws.

The agreements shall consider and outline the purposes, functions, and related administrative provisions of the research center – most notably:

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[10] *The ITER Story*, ITER (accessed Jan. 31, 2023), https://www.iter.org/proj/iterhistory.

[11] *FACT SHEET: Presidential Memorandum Establishing the White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse*, THE WHITE HOUSE (June 16, 2022), https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/16/fact-sheet-presidential-memorandum-establishing-the-white-house-task-force-to-address-online-harassment-and-abuse/.

[12] *U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council Inaugural Joint Statement*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Sept. 29, 2021), https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/29/u-s-eu-trade-and-technology-council-inaugural-joint-statement/.

[13] *Rapid Response Mechanism Canada: Global Affairs Canada*, THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA (last updated Sept. 20, 2022), https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/rapid-response-mechanism-mecanisme-reponse-rapide/index.aspx?lang=eng.

- To enable international collaboration to better understand and measure the impacts of content moderation decisions, product design choices, and algorithms of online platforms on society including considerations for child and youth development;
- To conduct research projects with a focus on the global information environment that require information from or about multiple online platforms and multi-year time horizons;
- To facilitate secure information sharing between online platforms and researchers, including overseeing best practices regarding what types of information from an online platform should be made available, and under what circumstances; and
- Ensure access to the information by the research center does not infringe upon reasonable expectations of personal privacy of users of online platforms or of other individuals; and ensure that information is made available to the research center consistent with any applicable privacy and data security laws of member countries.

Please consider this proposal with urgency.

Sincerely,

Lori Trahan   Jay Obernolte
Member of Congress   Member of Congress

CC: United States Department of State