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Conversations of Note

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A stylized, dark blue profile of George Washington's face is positioned on the left side of the cover. It is surrounded by a circular arrangement of light blue stars, reminiscent of the Great Seal of the United States. The background is a solid dark blue.

# **MISINFORMATION AND THE THREAT TO OUR DEMOCRACY**

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<https://www.mediainstitute.org/the-madison-project/>

I have always been an avid consumer of news. My sources of content, however, have changed dramatically over the years. When I was young, I got my news by listening to the radio and watching TV. As a teenager, believe it or not, I got much of my news from MTV. Seriously. Kurt Loder was Walter Cronkite to a lot of my generation.

Unfathomable in today's world, MTV once covered events such as a town hall with President Bill Clinton, the death of Kurt Cobain, and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Later on, I started to read print newspapers regularly. And now I consume news on the radio, on television, through newspapers (though in digital form now), in addition to listening to journalism on podcasts.

Many of us lament that younger generations are consuming news and media in new and suspicious ways: Instagram reels, TikToks, YouTube shorts, and more. I see this, and I am not at all surprised that young people want to be both entertained and informed. They always have, and they always will. And they are simply not entertained by the

same things that we were. That is why our media landscape continues to evolve over time.

One thing does stand out clearly about the era of news media we are in now. We cannot blindly trust the information that we consume.

When Walter Cronkite said, "That's the way it is," that's the way it was. The news was the news. And very few felt the need to question it. But times have changed.

**We cannot blindly trust the information that we consume.**

I know I'm not breaking news when I say there is a lack of trust in journalism today.

And really, this is not new. A lesson from history clues us into the power of biased or unreliable reporting. In 1898, when the U.S. battleship Maine sunk in Havana harbor, newspaper publishers took the reins. They employed hyperbole and played on the emotions of their audience in their reporting. Though the Maine was likely sunk by a mine explosion in the harbor, journalists Hearst and Pulitzer published rumors that the incident was a Spanish plot to sink the ship. We certainly can't blame

this reporting alone for the anti-Spanish sentiment in the United States or the start of the Spanish-American War, but biased reporting in this case set the tone for the events that would follow and the public's impression of the war.

This is why localism, competition, and diversity are the Commission's bedrock principles of media ownership. Having a variety of diverse voices in each community is key to the public interest. And while placing our collective trust in the hands of the homogenous few may have started the mistrust in news and information, changes in technology have exacerbated the problem.

Serious concerns about dis- or misinformation today go further with the help of technological advancements. Artificial intelligence (AI) and its products such as deepfakes and voice cloning have widened the reach of misinformation. While consuming media has always required an understanding of context and tone, discerning misinformation, especially when it is presented in a hyper-realistic way, proves to be far more difficult today than discerning satire or comedy on the Daily Show, which delivers news

in an entertaining and informative way to millennials.

Recently, AI voice cloning was used to impersonate President Joe Biden in an attempt to influence a federal election primary. This is serious. Misinformation in this form poses a threat to our democracy. And I am proud of the work the FCC is doing to address the harms of artificial intelligence as they relate to robocalls and robotexts. For example, we issued a declaratory ruling clarifying that calls made with AI-generated voices without prior consent are illegal. This is an important step toward holding bad actors accountable and limiting the spread of false information by seemingly trustworthy voices.

Misinformation also poses dangers to public safety. In February of this year, the New York Times published a story titled, "When the Storm Online Is Worse Than the One Outside." It detailed an incident in which an emergency-preparedness enthusiast without expertise in meteorology posted on social media about a potential #ARKStorm headed for California.

Despite the lack of scientific evidence to support a severe or catastrophic flood across the state, those on social media

continued to express their worry about the storm. Stories like this one are amplified on social media, motivated by the fear and panic they instill. And what if the story had been to downplay a significant storm? When it comes to public safety, we cannot afford to have untrustworthy sources clouding our view of reality.

Concern about dis- or misinformation is one of the top media issues raised to me in my role as commissioner. And it is one where, frankly, regulatory options are limited, as they should be. The Commission is not in the

business of regulating content. The First Amendment's criticality to democracy cannot be overstated. Let me say this again to make sure I am crystal clear: I have zero interest in regulating what goes on in a newsroom. Our democracy needs a press free from interference from regulators like myself.

I approach this issue as both an FCC commissioner and a concerned citizen.

I have had the benefit of 30 years of experience working in technology, media,

and telecom law and policy. And I have had a lifetime of appreciating the evolution of news media as a consumer. I now have the opportunity to combine my policy expertise with my personal experience to contribute to the thought leadership in this space. What a gift.

My thinking continues to evolve, but I see my role at this time as focusing on consumer education. What that means is

using my platform as an FCC commissioner to amplify the many and varied efforts of others because we, the collective we, need to meet people where they are. Not everyone

consumes media in the same way and not everyone views the media that they consume in the same way.

Giving consumers tools for understanding and consuming media is both powerful and necessary. I have been heartened by the initiatives I've come across that are aimed at helping people discern whether content is reliable, and I want to highlight a few.

The first is water marking. Water marking can be a helpful tool to label content that

“Our democracy needs a press free from interference from regulators like myself.”

has been generated or altered by artificial intelligence. With content on social media being shared and reshared quickly, and often without a second thought, it is critical that we have indicators informing us when the content we are viewing is not entirely organic. Adobe has been a leader in this space, setting their goal for watermarks to be the “ultimate signal of transparency in digital content.”

The second is preserving content authenticity. The Content Authenticity Initiative is a group of content creators, journalists, activists, and leaders working to address misinformation by adding a layer of tamper-evident provenance to their digital content. Their work aims to provide consumers with a traceable history of the alterations made to an original piece of content.

The third is dis- and misinformation education. In the same way that taking an art appreciation class can help people better engage with the art they consume, I believe that media literacy education efforts will help people better engage with the online media that they

consume. Productive engagement requires knowledge.

MediaWise and Noticias Telemundo, for example, have developed a course to educate on radio misinformation, biases in the media, confirmation bias, identifying trustworthy sources, and how graphics can be misleading. They have partnered with Poynter, a nonprofit media institute

and newsroom that provides fact-checking, media literacy, and journalism ethics training to citizens and journalists. These educational resources

“Real discernment skills should transcend the type of media being consumed.”

are also offered to Spanish speakers and available through a WhatsApp course.

These are just some of the tools I’ve come across that I hope will be helpful to consumers who are navigating an increasingly confusing online environment. At the end of the day, real discernment skills should transcend the type of media being consumed. People should be able to carry these skills and tools that they acquire as they continue to navigate the changing media landscape.

So, how do I amplify the message? I do it by taking opportunities to speak, to highlight what I know, and to encourage members of industry to educate me about their efforts. I also work to spread the knowledge when it seems relevant.

For example, I had the great honor of being on a panel with Edward James Olmos, legendary actor and founder of the Latino Film Institute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating infrastructure for

equity, diversity, and excellence for the Latino community in the entertainment industry that is investing in youth media education. I took the opportunity to connect him with leaders in the media literacy space. While it was a small step, I hope the impacts will be far reaching. And I am always looking for ways to do more. I hope others will join me in spreading the word about these technologies and education efforts and help identify new ways to educate and empower consumers.



**Commissioner Anna M. Gomez** has served in her current position at the Federal Communications Commission since September 2023. She has been a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of State, Deputy Administrator of NTIA, and served in a number of senior positions at the FCC.

*This paper is adapted from remarks Commissioner Gomez delivered at a Media Institute Communications Forum luncheon in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 20, 2024.*

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**THE MADISON PROJECT**

**The Madison Project: Free Speech and Press in American Democracy** is a timely and much-needed assessment of the impact of free speech and press on the future of democracy, at a time when democracy itself has come perilously close to the brink in America. The Madison Project will offer distinctive insights, assess challenges and threats to free speech and free press, and chart a course forward to maintain these essential freedoms as the bulwark of our democracy.

The Madison Project is underwritten by organizations with an interest in media and communications, the First Amendment, and the preservation of American democracy. Support for The Madison Project is provided in part by **Verizon**, **LG Electronics**, and **Wiley Rein LLP**.

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