PRESS RELEASE

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PCLOB RELEASES FIRST COMPREHENSIVE UNCLASSIFIED REVIEW OF GOVERNMENT SOCIAL MEDIA DISINFORMATION EFFORTS

WASHINGTON, DC – The staff of the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board (PCLOB) on Wednesday released the first ever comprehensive unclassified review of the government's recent counter domestic terrorism policies and actions designed to combat alleged disinformation on social media.

PCLOB's report, *Government Efforts to Counter Domestic Terrorism by Targeting Disinformation on Social Media*, concludes a four-year investigation during which PCLOB requested and evaluated related Executive Branch policies and protections as federal authorities sought to suppress perceived disinformation on social media. The probe evaluated the government's basis for establishing a connection between disinformation and domestic terrorism and compared the historical and current role of countering foreign malign influence (FMI) to more recent counter domestic terrorism efforts.

The report concludes that the effort had few safeguards and operated with minimal transparency. The government's informal outreach was often intended to, and did, prompt social media companies to take action, and was largely conducted *ad hoc*.

PCLOB's report finds that no government entity engaged in counter-disinformation efforts had formal policies or procedures governing engagement with social media companies that required agencies to distinguish Americans' speech from that of non-Americans. It further finds there were limited requirements that officials seek attorney or high-level approval before encouraging the suppression of speech.

The report concludes that the government did not substantiate, either publicly or to PCLOB, whether disinformation was in fact fueling domestic terrorism, as initially claimed by the White House in 2021.

In a separate statement, Board Member Beth Williams stressed that the avoidance of explicit government coercion is insufficient to protect Americans' civil liberties.

"Whether such actions are lawful or not, the government should not be in the business of policing Americans' speech," Member Williams said. "Americans should not have to suspect — or fear — that the government is encouraging private companies to censor their speech."

PCLOB's report warns that civil liberties may be infringed when the government encourages the suppression of lawful, protected speech under the justification of combating domestic terrorism. This includes false speech and speech the government deems to be disinformation. While the government has historically played a role in combating FMI, the government steps beyond its proper bounds in seeking censorship for disfavored views expressed by Americans.

This is the second report produced as part of PCLOB's Countering Domestic Terrorism project. The first report, *The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Domestic Terrorism Threat Review and Prioritization Process*, describes the process used by the FBI starting in 2013 to prioritize domestic terrorist threats. An unclassified summary of that report, as well as the full version of today's unclassified report, is available at www.pclob.gov.

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