I want to thank the committee for inviting me to testify today. My name is Katelynn Richardson. I am a reporter at the Daily Caller News Foundation, a nonprofit news outlet based in Washington, D.C. dedicated to holding public officials accountable and exposing government waste, fraud and abuse through in-depth investigative reporting.

I cover the Supreme Court and do investigative reporting. In September 2021, I started looking into the government's funding of censorship tools after finding that the National Science Foundation (NSF) had launched a program awarding grants to researchers to develop projects aimed at combating misinformation. What I discovered was a multi-million dollar effort to build what I call a Censorship Industrial Complex, using taxpayer dollars as seed funding for various projects.

The effort fits within the broader trend of the federal government's increasing involvement in online censorship, from the Center for Disease Control flagging posts during COVID-19 to the FBI working with social media companies to suppress the Hunter Biden laptop story.

In September 2021, the NSF awarded $750,000 grants to twelve teams of researchers as part of a new research track within its Convergence Accelerator program titled, “Trust & Authenticity in Communication Systems.” Proposals ranged from fact checking-tools to tools that warn journalists when publishing content may result in outcomes like “polarizing discourse” or perpetuating “false narratives.”

Six projects — which are currently ongoing — advanced in 2022 to the second stage and received an additional $5 million in funding.

One is a digital dashboard called Course Correct, which aims to help journalists locate and correct misinformation. Run by researchers in the University of Wisconsin system, the project uses machine learning to identify networks where misinformation is spreading and pinpoint who is sharing it on social media. It highlights issues like “vaccine hesitancy” and “electoral skepticism” as areas of special interest. When the initial grant was awarded in 2021, a researcher told me intervention techniques the team developed to counter misinformation would likely be tested on public platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Potential interventions included using “ad-purchasing, automated bots, and online influencers.”

A University of Michigan project called WiseDex that was chosen for additional funding uses AI to automatically identify social media posts that contain misleading claims based on keywords, so human reviewers at social media companies can flag or remove them.

Another AI-based grant project by the company Meedan aims to curb “racially-targeted misinformation” by developing algorithms that scan “millions of posts” and map them to “misinformation narratives.” Meedan’s platform would host resources to combat these narratives.

The Convergence Accelerator program is not the only way the NSF has steered taxpayer dollars towards the development of censorship tools.

In August 2021, the NSF awarded $3 million through the Secure and Trustworthy Cyberspace (SaTC) program to academics at the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public (CIP) and the Stanford Internet Observatory.

These same two groups helped found the Election Integrity Partnership (EIP), an information exchange created at the request of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). EIP collaborated with CISA to flag content for social media companies to suppress during the 2020 election.

The NSF awarded the University of Washington $550,000 to develop language technologies that "detect and intervene" in hate speech and discriminatory language, like "sexist, racist, homophobic microaggressions."

The NSF awarded the University of Houston $50,000 to develop an online dashboard with "misinformation forecast trends."

The NSF also approved $324,000 in 2022 for a summer camp at Old Dominion University to teach students about "the rapidly growing research area of disinformation detection and analytics," which is scheduled to happen again this summer. The goal is to prepare students for future "disinformation-related jobs" — an indicator this is a growing industry, and, as this sampling of grants demonstrates, one the federal government has a multi-million dollar stake in.

Even as a lawsuit challenging the federal government's communications with social media companies progresses to the Supreme Court, these grants and the tools they are developing have received comparatively little attention.

The NSF swears it does not engage in censorship and that it does not partner directly with social media platforms. But taxpayer dollars spent on projects that do are still troubling, as were the agency's responses to straightforward questions about its programs.

After I reported on Convergence Accelerator grants shortly after their announcement, the NSF devised an official media strategy instructing research teams to highlight the "pro-democracy" nature of their projects. I only know this thanks to emails unveiled in a report this committee put out today.

When I wrote for the Daily Caller News Foundation in early 2023 about projects that advanced to stage two, another NSF brainstorming session occurred. Emails in the committee's report show the NSF privately considering the removal of YouTube videos on the projects they were funding.

If the agency's reaction to fair questions from journalists is to strategize ways to rebrand to avoid attention, why does it have any business funding tools that tell reporters what is true and what is false? If their impulse is to hide information, how can projects it backs be trusted to sort out what information is authoritative?

The government is not the arbiter of truth. Our Founders understood this, which is why we have a First Amendment. They understood the danger of the government telling people what they should believe and targeting opinions that cut against the official narrative. Pursuing information control by funding outside organizations is no less a threat to free speech and freedom of the press than a tyrannical government.