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Combating disinformation is not the same as censorship

di Clare Melford

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Last year, as much of the world was winding down for the holidays, an under-secretary in the US state department announced on X that I was to be placed under sanctions.

A short time later, secretary of state Marco Rubio issued a press release clarifying this rather surprising turn of events. My visa, along with those of four other Europeans, was being revoked because our presence “would have potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States”. The statement described us as radical activists who coerce tech companies into censoring speech.

This characterisation of my work is inaccurate. The reality is much more pedestrian. I run a non-profit organisation called the Global Disinformation Index, which tracks and reports instances of risky online content. We identify sources of foreign propaganda, along with polarising or divisive material from all over the world. We then make that data available to the advertisers who fund today’s internet and to the public for educational purposes.

Advertisers are often keenly interested in such data, attuned as they are to the reputational harm of their products appearing alongside divisive content. Some draw on our research when making choices about which websites will host their ads.

This work is critical to the online advertising industry. A fully informed transaction between buyers and sellers is a key tenet of the free market. Far from coercion or censorship, GDI is simply one member of a community that seeks to make the internet a safer place for businesses and citizens alike.

The business model of the modern internet is one in which platforms capture the attention of the reader, then monetise that attention, often via advertising. But as we’ve seen over the past decade, the types of content that are most effective at this — especially via engagement-optimising social media algorithms — are those that amplify conflict.

Such adversarial narratives pose greater risks for brands. Research by digital advertising group Integral Ad Science has confirmed that those perceived as supporting divisive content can suffer reputational damage and lost sales. The result is a tension between the kind of content that benefits platforms and the kind that is safe for advertisers to subsidise.

At GDI, we believe advertisers should be able to choose where their adverts go and with what sort of content they associate, just as they did in the analogue age.

My organisation exercises free speech in a free market with the goal of improving transparency for everyone. We don't buy or sell ads. We do not dictate editorial decisions. We have no power to take down content. This part of our work fills one specific niche within a much larger market for digital advertising: reporting on brand risks to help advertisers decide how they spend their money. If advertisers hold back their dollars, it's because they don't want their ads to be displayed alongside certain types of content. They have the right to do so.

That the US government has so misunderstood our mission is disappointing. The stakes are only growing higher. Independent assessment of online content will become even more important with the rise of generative AI. Tech companies must earn and maintain public trust to build sustainable business models. This will require independent quality measurements of the content being used to train their models.

The visa ban levelled against me misunderstands these fundamental facts. It's my hope that this administration — or perhaps a future one — will recognise this error and correct it. Giving buyers and sellers greater choice in the free market is not censorship. It's just good business.