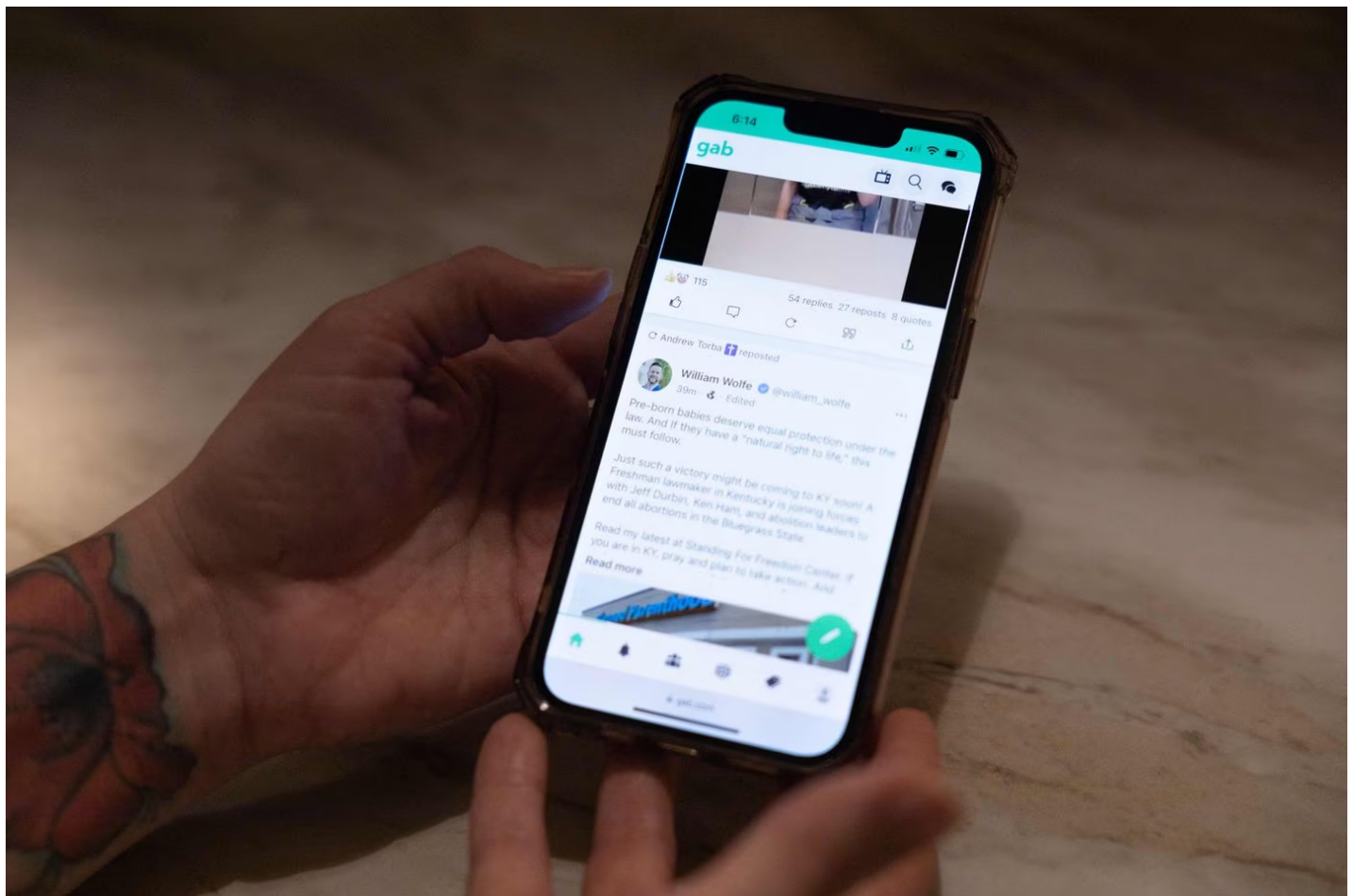


MEDIA LITERACY

In push to counter misinformation, R.I. to launch public conversations to foster media literacy

Designed by URI's Media Education Lab, the virtual series will start with topics like disinformation and hoaxes, free speech and public safety. Rhode Island is the only New England state to receive federal funding for such an initiative.

By [Alexa Gagosz](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 24, 2023, 4:07 p.m.



A woman scrolls through the app Gab, which spread misinformation on COVID-19 vaccines. MEGAN JELINGER/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

PROVIDENCE — A federally-funded two-year initiative is expected to launch next week to help combat misinformation in Rhode Island and help minimize online violence and extremism.

The new program, dubbed [Courageous RI](#), was designed by the University of Rhode Island's [Media Education Lab](#), and was funded through a \$700,000 grant from the US Department of Homeland Security. The initiative, which will be rolled out in three phases, has been tasked with fostering community conversations, providing training and education, and engaging youth. The trainings look to help participants across sectors become “more resilient to propaganda and disinformation.”

The initiative will formally launch at an in-person event at 3 p.m. on Tuesday at the Rhode Island State House, kicking off [a series of free virtual sessions](#) that are open to the public. Officials including Rhode Island Secretary of State Gregg Amore, Republican State Representative Brian Newberry, and Democrat State Senator Hanna Gallo are expected to offer remarks.

The first of the virtual sessions will take place the following week, starting with one on March 7 that will focus on hard-to-spot disinformation and hoaxes. The second session, on March 21, will tackle the balance between free speech and public safety, and focus on white nationalist ideology.

There are 11 sessions in total, which will take place through July, according to organizers.

URI communications professor Renee Hobbs, who founded the Media Education Lab, said this project will help respond to the rise in polarization that is “tearing at the very fabric of our democracy.”

ADVERTISING



“People have distorted stereotypes about people in other political parties,” said Hobbs in an interview Friday. “Liberals think things about conservatives that are incorrect. Conservatives think things about liberals that are wrong.”

Hobbs explained propaganda boils down to effective communication tactics that can activate strong emotions and tap into someone’s hopes and fears. But the propaganda she is looking to tackle with Courageous RI will focus on “demonizing those who might not share a particular belief.”

Pam Steager, director of public engagement at the Media Education Lab, said Rhode Islanders have fallen victim to several hoaxes in the last few years, including the [since-debunked](#) allegations made by parents who reported the North Kingstown School Department had deployed litter boxes in school bathrooms for students who identify as cats.

In one example of a lack of media literacy, Steager said she has heard from teachers who are afraid to bring copies of The New York Times into their classrooms for fear of how parents might react. Rochambeau Library in Providence, she said, has received death threats from across the country in response to drag queen story hours there. And the Nationalist Social Club — and its Rhode Island chapter that goes by the name “Ocean State-131” — have spread racist leaflets across the state and [increased attempts to recruit members.](#)



The scene outside the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 6, 2021. BONNIE JO MOUNT/THE WASHINGTON POST

Nationally, misinformation has fueled domestic terrorism and right-wing, often extremist groups like the Oath Keepers, white nationalists, Proud Boys, and QAnon, and led to incidents such as the [attack on the US Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021](#).

In October 2022, [an Axios investigation](#) reported how Democratic operatives were behind a sprawling network of at least 51 local media outlets who were publishing Democrat-aligned news content ahead of the midterms. Articles were heavily slanted and attacked Republicans.

“This is disinformation people are experiencing in their daily life,” said Steager. Hobbs said the less prone to “us-versus-them thinking” Rhode Island is, the more resilient it can be in the face propaganda and misinformation.

“Courageous Questions,” which will begin in August, is the second phase of the initiative, and will provide professional development to educators and law enforcement officials so

that media literacy can be used as a tool for civic education and violence prevention. In January 2024, “Courageous Creativity,” the final phase, will invite high school and college students to participate in a youth multimedia contest where they can win prizes for creating media messages that invite Rhode Islanders to “stay curious, not furious” while engaging with media in their daily lives.

The funding used to pay for the Courageous RI initiative was first administered to URI in October, and was part of the Department of Homeland Security’s [Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program](#). Rhode Island is the only New England state that has received funding through the program.

The push to combat disinformation within President Biden’s administration became public in April 2022 when the Department of Homeland Security announced the creation of the first Disinformation Governance Board. Nina Jankowicz, who has worked to combat disinformation, was [named the board’s executive director](#). Jankowicz and the board faced mounting criticism from Republican lawmakers and right-wing groups, claiming the board would police online speech and that Jankowicz was a “Democratic hack.” Fox News’ Tucker Carlson spouted personal attacks, calling Jankowicz [“the most ridiculous of all”](#) in Biden’s “Ministry of Truth.”

Within three weeks of the announcement, [the board was suspended](#). Some observers noted that the program designed to counter disinformation fell victim to misinformation.

“We know that people’s beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, and sense of social connectedness are key factors in their behavior,” Hobbs said. “If we’re able to help create communities that are more resilient to harmful propaganda and disinformation, that can help keep people out of extremist niches and foster a greater sense of connectedness.”

She added, “That makes for a better functioning democracy.”

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