

## Are Russia and China behind Helene misinformation in WNC? 3 in Congress want answers

BY VIRGINIA BRIDGES

vbridges@newsobserver.com

Three United States representatives from North Carolina requested a national intelligence briefing on the spread of online misinformation hindering efforts to support and rebuild parts of Western North Carolina washed away by Hurricane Helene.

"This information is dangerous to saving life and property right now, and we need to get to the bottom of whoever might be disseminating it, manipulating it and manipulating our citizens," U.S. Rep. Deborah Ross, a Wake Democrat, told The News & Observer Saturday.

In the Friday, Oct. 18, letter, Democratic U.S. Reps. Ross, Wiley Nickel and Kathy Manning, wrote to Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines they are concerned about foreign governments' involvement in spreading and promoting misinformation to undermine the public trust in government and hamper response efforts.

"Given the significant impact that such disinformation can have on public safety, morale, and the overall effectiveness of recovery initiatives, it is critical to address these threats in a timely and transparent manner," the letter states.

The letter is the latest sign of frustration among federal officials, elected leaders and some members of the public about what is turning into a troubling trend of misinformation spreading online after natural and other disasters.

They are particularly concerned about the amount of false and misleading information following recent hurricanes Helene and Milton.

President Joe Biden, Gov. Roy Cooper, American Red Cross officials and leaders from federal, state, county and local governments have criticized and debunked the circulating misinformation, emphasizing people should only rely on trusted sources.

"It's absolutely the worst that I have seen," FEMA administrator Deanne Criswell told reporters Oct. 8, The New York Times reported.

But the rumors continue to spread and recently forced federal officials to temporarily suspend canvassing door-to-door in North Carolina after reports of a militia targeting workers, The Washington Post and Associated Press reported.

The militia never materialized, but a Polk County man was linked to the threat and charged with going armed to the terror of the public after he was found armed with a handgun and a rifle, News & Observer and Charlotte Observer journalists have been reporting on misinformation related to Helene's devastation in Western North Carolina.

Helene made landfall in Florida Sept. 26 as a Category 4 hurricane before drenching Western North Carolina in the days that followed. The storm claimed the lives of at least 95 people, ages 4 to 89, in North Carolina.

Many died from drowning and landslides, and it took rescuers more than a week to recover some of their bodies.

**ARE FOREIGN ADVERSARIES SOWING DISTURB?**

Ross said there could be a mix of motivations for the steady deluge of misinformation, from politicians and influencers seeking support to foreign adversaries using this opportunity to be disruptive.

Ross pointed to a recent article in the Tampa Bay Times quoting research

from social research media analytics company Graphika and misinformation tracking company NewsGuard. They said there is evidence that China and Russia amplified misinformation, just as foreign countries did after wildfires consumed Maui, Hawaii, in 2023 and a container ship destroyed a Baltimore bridge in March.

Foreign adversaries succeed when they sow discontent, but they also collect personal information when individuals click on their links, Ross said.

"Since it's happened in the past, we need to find out if it's happening now. We need to protect the public," said Ross, who is running for re-election to represent Congressional District 2. Lawmakers hope the intelligence office will respond next week and plan to follow up if there isn't one.

### NICKEL WANTS ANSWERS BEFORE THE ELECTION

Nickel, of Cary, said he's concerned foreign influence from countries like China, Russia and Iran are trying to sow chaos with an ultimate goal to interfere with the upcoming elections in favor of Republican candidate Donald Trump.

"That's a big part of the goals," said Nickel, who isn't seeking re-election in his recently redrawn congressional district, but plans to run for a U.S. Senate seat in 2026.

Nickel said he hopes the national intelligence director will share a "candid assessment" about any work Russia, Iran and China are doing to undermine the election.

"This is information that the American people should know before election day," Nickel said, adding that such reports have been historically shared after the election.

### MISINFORMATION: A NEW CONSEQUENCE OF DISASTERS

Misinformation seems to be finding its way into key American events, Ross said, but the ongoing effort targeting recovery after hurricanes is the most pressing and dangerous at the moment.

The spread of misinformation during contentious or vulnerable events are becoming constants in U.S. culture. But evolving technology, shifting algorithms and the sharpening of artificial intelligence tools have fueled the spread, Ross said.

Western North Carolina residents, many of whom turned to local and hurricane-entered social media groups for information and advice before, during and after the hurricanes, pay the price, elected officials said.

"We are seeing the dark side of social media, and I wish that people were more disconcerting in how they consume not just social media, but all media," Ross said.

Republican U.S. Rep. Chuck Edwards also spoke out about the misinformation, while debunking rumors such as Helene was geo-engineered to seize lithium deposits in Chimney Rock and that FEMA might run out of money or diverted disaster responses to the border or foreign aid.

"I encourage you to remember that everything you see on Facebook, X, or any other social media platform is not always fact," wrote Edwards, who represents far Western North Carolina.

### LETTER TO FACEBOOK, X, TIKTOK, YOUTUBE AND MORE

A week ago, Ross, Nickel, U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor of Florida and Rep. Nikema Williams of Georgia sent a

letter to executives at Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, X, Discord and Snap.

"In the aftermath of Helene, we have witnessed a troubling surge in misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and scams that are hindering recovery efforts and exploiting vulnerable individuals and families," states the letter.

Misinformation also followed Hurricane Milton, which made landfall on Oct. 9 on Florida's central west coast, elected leaders said. The misinformation trend is becoming "a troubling fixture," of social media after natural disasters, states the Oct. 11 letter to social media sites.

"Misinformation about Hurricane Helene recovery efforts is making it harder for those impacted by the storm to get the help they need," U.S. House Rep. Kathy Manning of Florida posted on X Friday.

The information, which sometimes includes AI-generated images or recycled images, covers a range of topics, putting experts and assistance organizations at risk and scamming storm victims of their time, money and effort to find shelter and resources, North Carolina and other leaders have warned.

### METEOROLOGISTS THREATENED

The lies, scams and conspiracy theories circulating on social media compromise climate scientists and rescue organizations work, and put Americans at risk, the U.S. representatives said.

Some of the posts encouraged hurricane victims to seek fake Federal Emergency Management Administration relief programs and shared misleading information about where to find shelter and resources, the letter states.

A series of posts on Facebook and X took advantage of families in distress by falsely claiming FEMA offered a new grant for immediate cash assistance, sowing more mistrust and delaying efforts to seek help from legitimate programs, the letter said.

Posts on Instagram, TikTok and Discord spread conspiracy theories that government actions created Helene and Milton.

"It was particularly disturbing to see that, prior to Hurricane Milton's landfall, meteorologists experienced harassment and even received death threats from users on X," the letter states.

Nickel said he was particularly worried about X as the company is now owned by Elon Musk, who has given \$75 million to support Trump, NPR reported.

Trump and his allies have also made and amplified misinformation.

Trump said Cooper and Washington Democrats blocked help and aid for those impacted by Helene.

Copper called the claim "a flat-out lie." The News & Observer reported.

### SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES RESPOND

The News & Observer reached out to the social media companies on Friday evening and Saturday morning.

"I encourage you to remember that everything you see on Facebook, X, or any other social media platform is not always fact," wrote Edwards, who represents far Western North Carolina.

On Oct. 9, X's profile for Community Notes, which allows users to write and rate notes on posts, shared that Community Notes "related to recent weather events are showing on

hundreds of posts and have already been seen well over 44 million times."

Posts with notes are reshared less and more likely to be deleted, another X update states. Poynter, a nonprofit media institute, recently reported on a rise of misinformation since Musk purchased the platform nearly two years ago.

YouTube's approach to Hurricane Milton included "focusing on helping people access timely and credible news and information," according to the company owned by Google.

"As with many breaking news events, we are prominently surfacing content about Hurricane Milton from authoritative sources, like local and national news outlets, at the top of search results with our Top News panels," according to the letter.

"Misinformation about Hurricane Helene recovery efforts is making it harder for those impacted by the storm to get the help they need," U.S. House Rep. Kathy Manning of Florida posted on X Friday.

The information, which sometimes includes AI-generated images or recycled images, covers a range of topics, putting experts and assistance organizations at risk and scamming storm victims of their time, money and effort to find shelter and resources, North Carolina and other leaders have warned.

"That's a big part of the goals," said Nickel, who isn't seeking re-election in his recently redrawn congressional district, but plans to run for a U.S. Senate seat in 2026.

Nickel said he hopes the national intelligence director will share a "candid assessment" about any work Russia, Iran and China are doing to undermine the election.

"This is information that the American people should know before election day," Nickel said, adding that such reports have been historically shared after the election.

### MISINFORMATION: A NEW CONSEQUENCE OF DISASTERS

Misinformation seems to be finding its way into key American events, Ross said, but the ongoing effort targeting recovery after hurricanes is the most pressing and dangerous at the moment.

The spread of misinformation during contentious or vulnerable events are becoming constants in U.S. culture. But evolving technology, shifting algorithms and the sharpening of artificial intelligence tools have fueled the spread, Ross said.

Western North Carolina residents, many of whom turned to local and hurricane-entered social media groups for information and advice before, during and after the hurricanes, pay the price, elected officials said.

"We are seeing the dark side of social media, and I wish that people were more disconcerting in how they consume not just social media, but all media," Ross said.

Republican U.S. Rep. Chuck Edwards also spoke out about the misinformation, while debunking rumors such as Helene was geo-engineered to seize lithium deposits in Chimney Rock and that FEMA might run out of money or diverted disaster responses to the border or foreign aid.

"I encourage you to remember that everything you see on Facebook, X, or any other social media platform is not always fact," wrote Edwards, who represents far Western North Carolina.

### LETTER TO FACEBOOK, X, TIKTOK, YOUTUBE AND MORE

A week ago, Ross, Nickel, U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor of Florida and Rep. Nikema Williams of Georgia sent a

letter to executives at Face-

book, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, X, Discord and Snap.

"In the aftermath of

Helene, we have witnessed a troubling surge in misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and scams that are hindering recovery efforts and exploiting vulnerable individuals and families," states the letter.

YouTube prohibits scams

and deceptive practices and

"rigorously enforce" policies

through human review and

technology.

### RECOMMENDED CHANGES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

The representatives' letter urged the companies to:

- Enhance fact-checking partnerships with local and disaster relief organizations.

- Strengthen algorithms to prevent the spread of conspiracy theories.

- Increase safeguards against scams that prey on natural disaster victims.

Ross said Saturday they haven't heard from the social media companies yet.

The letter urged quick and decisive action. "You have the power and the responsibility to improve the digital spaces where millions of Americans both seek and promote information during crises, including natural disasters," the letter states.

*Virginia Bridges:  
919-829-8924,  
@virginiabridges*

## Legals

### STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA COUNTY OF YORK

#### IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS

#### ACTION TO CONFIRM FORFEITURE, CA-#2024-CF-46-00122

Kevin S. Brackett, Solicitor of the Sixteenth Judicial Circuit, Plaintiff, vs.  
Jason Levi Couar & \$5,728.00 in U.S. Currency, Defendants.

#### SUMMONS AND NOTICE

Notice of Summons given at day 12,2024, complaint was filed in the Court of Common Pleas in York County, South Carolina, regarding \$5,728.00 seized by officers with the York County Multi-jurisdictional Drug Enforcement Unit on December 9, 2021.

TO: JASON LEVI COUAR TAKE NOTICE:

YOU ARE HEREBY SUMMONED and required to appear and defend by answering the Complaint in this action, of which a copy is herewith served upon you and to serve a copy of your Answer on the Plaintiff's Subcriber at his office, the Office of the Clerk of the Court, 1674 Main Street, Suite 100, Rock Hill, SC 29730, Moss Justice Center, 1674 1/4 A Highway, York, South Carolina 29745, within thirty (30) days after service hereof, exclusive of the day of such service, and in case of your failure to do so, judgment will be rendered against you according to the demand of the complaint.

IPL0200435  
Oct 23,30 Nov 6 2024

#### NOTICE OF SERVICE OF PROCESS BY PUBLIC

#### STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA ROWAN COUNTY

#### IN THE GENERAL COURT OF JUSTICE DISTRICT COURT DIVISION

#### FILE NO. 24 CVD 1656

LEE ROY LOCKHART and LARITA LOCKHART, Plaintiffs v. HENNESEY MOODY and JOHN DOE

TO: Defendant, Hennesey Moody, the biological mother of Bronx Jae'll Maseen

Maseen, male child born on the 21st of September, 2023, to Hennesey Moody and John Doe, in the City of Lincolnton, County of Mecklenburg, State of North Carolina.

You are required to make defense to such pleading no later than the 2nd day of December, 2024, and upon your failure to do so the Plaintiffs, Lee Roy Lockhart and Larita Lockhart, will apply to the Court for the relief herein sought.

TAKE NOTICE that a pleading seeking relief against you has been filed in the above-entitled action. The nature of the relief being sought is as follows: custody of the minor child, Bronx Jae'll Maseen Moody.

You are required to make defense to such pleading no later than the 2nd day of December, 2024, and upon your failure to do so the Plaintiffs, Lee Roy Lockhart and Larita Lockhart, will apply to the Court for the relief herein sought.

TO: Defendant, Hennesey Moody, the biological mother of Bronx Jae'll Maseen

Maseen, male child born on the 21st of September, 2023, to Hennesey Moody and John Doe, in the City of Lincolnton, County of Mecklenburg, State of North Carolina.

You are required to make defense to such pleading no later than the 2nd day of December, 2024, and upon your failure to do so the Plaintiffs, Lee Roy Lockhart and Larita Lockhart, will apply to the Court for the relief herein sought.

TO: Defendant, Larita Lockhart, the biological mother of Bronx Jae'll Maseen

Maseen, male child born on the 21st of September, 2023, to Hennesey Moody and John Doe, in the City of Lincolnton, County of Mecklenburg, State of North Carolina.

You are required to make defense to such pleading no later than the 2nd day of December, 2024, and upon your failure to do so the Plaintiffs, Lee Roy Lockhart and Larita Lockhart, will apply to the Court for the relief herein sought.

IPL02000053  
Oct 23,2024

#### PLEASE PUBLISH ON THE FOLLOWING DATES:

October 23, 2024

October 30, 2024