



The University of Texas at Austin  
**Center for Media Engagement**  
*Moody College of Communication*

---

**TESTIMONY OF SAMUEL WOOLLEY, PHD**

**Program Director, Propaganda Research Lab, Center for Media Engagement**

**Assistant Professor, School of Journalism & Media**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**-Hearing on-**

**A Growing Threat:**

**The Impact of Disinformation Targeted at Communities of Color**

**The House Committee on Administration: Subcommittee on Elections**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**April 28, 2022**

**Center for Media Engagement**

Moody College of Communication | The University of Texas at Austin

2504 B Whitis Avenue, Austin, TX 78712

[mediaengagement.org](http://mediaengagement.org) | [mediaengagement@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:mediaengagement@austin.utexas.edu)



## **Introduction**

Good morning Chairman Butterfield, Ranking Member Steil, and members of the subcommittee. Thank you very much for giving me the chance to testify on the impact of disinformation targeted at communities of color. I would also like to extend thanks to the other witnesses providing testimony during this hearing and to my colleagues and collaborators at the University of Texas at Austin.

I lead the Propaganda Research Lab at UT Austin's Center for Media Engagement (CME). Our team at CME works across multiple fields in order to help foster and maintain "a vibrant American media ecosystem that more effectively empowers the public to understand, appreciate, and participate in the democratic exchange of ideas."<sup>1</sup> The Propaganda Research Lab specializes in the study of how emerging media technologies—from social media to virtual reality—are leveraged in efforts to manipulate public opinion. Crucially, we work to develop research, technological, as well as policy-based solutions to this growing informational problem. During my career I have focused on conducting empirical research into how internet-based platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp are used to spread mis- and disinformation, coordinated political trolling campaigns, and other forms of malign influence. In particular, I concentrate upon computational propaganda<sup>2</sup>: how online automation (often in the form of software-driven "bots"), algorithms, and other digital tools are used to amplify and suppress various streams of propaganda.

In the last five years, I have begun focusing upon the human consequences of computational propaganda<sup>3</sup>. Rather than seeing growing issues like disinformation as technological problems with technological solutions, I view them as deeply-rooted social problems magnified by new communication tools. My team has begun to focus on how communities of color and diaspora communities—groups crucial to the success of a vibrant U.S. democracy—are specifically targeted with malicious online influence campaigns during elections. Our work centers the perspectives and experiences of these communities and their own sense-making and evaluations of contemporary informational problems.

Just last month, the Propaganda Research Lab published the paper "Escaping the Mainstream? Pitfalls and Opportunities of Encrypted Messaging Apps and Diaspora Communities in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Center for Media Engagement (2022). About us. <https://mediaengagement.org/about-us/>

<sup>2</sup> Woolley, S. C., & Howard, P. N. (Eds.). (2018). *Computational propaganda: Political parties, politicians, and political manipulation on social media*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Joseff, K., & Woolley, S. (2019). The human consequences of computational propaganda: Eight case studies from the 2018 U.S. midterm elections. *Institute for the Future*. [https://www.iff.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/downloads/ourwork/IFTF\\_Executive\\_Summary\\_comp.prop.W\\_05.07.19\\_01.pdf](https://www.iff.org/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/ourwork/IFTF_Executive_Summary_comp.prop.W_05.07.19_01.pdf)



U.S.”<sup>4</sup>, which I have attached here in my written testimony. In this paper we explore the ways diaspora communities use apps like WhatsApp and Telegram to communicate and organize democratically, but also how they are targeted with disinformation and other forms of political manipulation. For the purposes of this work, we use the term “diaspora communities” to include people who told us that they regularly use EMAs to communicate with people in their country of origin or where their family is from, with individuals who share their cultural context, and with people living in the U.S. identifying with the same community. While this approach risks over-including individuals who are not part of identical communities, the connecting thread for our research is the usage of these apps. Our definition also aims to avoid the dominant rationale for the homogenization of people from non-white communities in the U.S. Instead of basing our study on sociologically deterministic inclusion/exclusion criteria, we follow well-established conceptualizations that subvert the determinist scheme in which any nation is portrayed as a product of specific sociological conditions; instead, the nation is an “imagined political community.”<sup>5</sup>

This work informs recently initiated analysis focused on electoral disinformation and electoral propaganda spread during the 2022 midterms supported via a new grant received from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation: “Addressing Disinformation Campaigns Against Diaspora Communities on Encrypted Messaging Applications”.<sup>6</sup> Finally, I am working on the second paper for a two-part report commissioned by the group Protect Democracy—the first paper<sup>7</sup> for this series is attached in this testimony. This project specifically focuses on building research-based understandings of how communities of color in Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin are contending with electoral disinformation and propaganda. I offer preliminary results of the forthcoming original study (part two of the report) in the following pages.

Today, I will focus on four key points drawn from these—and several other—Propaganda Research Lab studies:

1. Encrypted messaging apps are critical vectors for false and misleading information: Chat apps are important platforms for democratic communication, and particularly so among diaspora communities. Their particularities and design, however, make them attractive

---

<sup>4</sup> Trauthig, I. K., & Woolley, S. (2022, March). Escaping the mainstream? Pitfalls and opportunities of encrypted messaging apps and diaspora communities in the U.S. *Center for Media Engagement*.

<https://mediaengagement.org/research/encrypted-messaging-apps-and-diasporas>

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso Books.

<sup>6</sup> Knight Foundation (2022, April 7). *Nine universities and nonprofits awarded more than \$1.2 million from Knight Foundation to combat disinformation in communities of color*. <https://knightfoundation.org/press/releases/nine-universities-and-nonprofits-awarded-more-than-1-2-million-from-knight-foundation-to-combat-disinformation-on-communities-of-color/>

<sup>7</sup> Woolley, S., & Kumleben, M. (2021, November). At the epicenter: Electoral propaganda in targeted communities of color. *Protect Democracy*. <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/21099928/at-the-epicenter-electoral-propaganda-in-targeted-communities-of-color.pdf>



targets for false and misleading information, and difficult venues for interventions by platforms and governments.

2. Minority groups are targeted by unique strains of propaganda: Specific content is drafted as well as tactical behavior employed to influence minority groups. These targeted messages undermine our democracy as they work to alienate and disengage minority groups. The specific, often transnational, tactics challenge content moderation and fact checking efforts and regularly rely on cross-platform communication.
3. COVID-19 dis- and misinformation affecting communities of color: For a range of reasons, including historical injustices around medical research, racism inherent in the medical system, distrust around vaccinations, and the confluence of social media promotions of alternative treatments, false information around COVID-19 severely affects communities of color. As COVID-19 has become a highly politicized issue, it also intersects with and permeates election-related dis- and misinformation.
4. Structural factors of our information environment inhibit the democratic inclusion of communities of color: These structural issues are related to long-term efforts of controlling minority groups' access to, and understandings of, the country's electoral and media systems. Online attempts at undermining our democracy by thwarting minority groups' democratic participation are concerning developments. They become exacerbated by existing structures of disadvantage and offline propaganda.

I want to be clear on what I mean when I say “electoral disinformation”: false content *purposely* spread during elections with the intent to disinform, demobilize, and/or disenfranchise voters and those involved in other forms of civic engagement. “Electoral propaganda” is a broader term that encapsulates other intentional efforts to manipulate public opinion through illicit means ranging from the purposeful spread of false content—disinformation—to politically motivated harassment and trolling.

## KEY POINT ONE

### Encrypted messaging apps are critical vectors for false and misleading information

Over the last several years, our research at the Center for Media Engagement's Propaganda Research Lab has focused upon platforms that do not squarely fall into the purview of what is conventionally understood as social media. We specifically investigate (often-encrypted) chat and messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or Signal. Some of these apps rose to fame when far-right groups were deplatformed from the social media platform Parler after January 6,



2021, only to congregate on the chat app Telegram soon thereafter.<sup>8</sup> Others, such as WhatsApp, are not as widely used across the U.S. general population as they are in other countries, but they are used disproportionately more among demographic groups defined by intersecting identities of race/ethnicity, and membership in diaspora communities.

For example, according to data from the Pew Research Center, 42% of Hispanic Americans use WhatsApp, 24% of Black Americans do so, compared to 13% of white Americans.<sup>9</sup> Our own survey research, representative of the U.S. population, also confirms this, and underscores how WhatsApp as a platform for political discussion is more used among Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Black Americans, as well as among those identifying with two or more racial/ethnic categories than it is used among non-Hispanic whites.<sup>10</sup>

In our research, we investigate and describe central mechanisms and defining features of encrypted messaging apps. These apps are, in many cases, immersed in everyday life and constitute critical communicative infrastructures<sup>11</sup> among networks of trusted connections, coworkers, friends, and family. They are important and valuable civic spaces, while at the same time nefarious actors can engage their specificities to fly under the radar and promote false and misleading information. It is precisely when propagandists who want to spread false or misleading information are able to penetrate these spaces—defined by trust, close relationships, and authenticity—that their influence operations are ever-more damaging.

One mechanism that is particularly important when discussing the role of encrypted chat apps—and that my team finds across many such apps—is what we call *cascade logic*. By this, we mean the ways in which encrypted chat and messaging apps serve as points through which information is either “trafficked upstream (making its way from private conversations into the mainstream),” or “downstream (allowing information to withdraw from the public eye).”<sup>12</sup> What is important here is that as information moves through chat apps, it can easily get “distorted,

---

<sup>8</sup> DFRLab. (2021, February 11). Extremists on Telegram exploit Parler’s de-platforming to ramp up recruiting. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/extremists-on-telegram-exploit-parlers-de-platforming-to-ramp-up-recruiting-eb1256227a5d>

<sup>9</sup> Perrin, A., & Anderson, M. (2019, April 10). Share of U.S. adults using social media, including Facebook, is mostly unchanged since 2018. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/10/share-of-u-s-adults-using-social-media-including-facebook-is-mostly-unchanged-since-2018/>

<sup>10</sup> Gursky, J., Riedl, M.J., & Woolley, S. (2021, March 19). The disinformation threat to diaspora communities in encrypted chat apps. *Brookings Institution, Techstream*. <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/the-disinformation-threat-to-diaspora-communities-in-encrypted-chat-apps/>

<sup>11</sup> Cruz, E. G., & Harindranath, R. (2020). WhatsApp as “technology of life”: Reframing research agendas. *First Monday*, 25(1). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i12.10405>; Matassi, M., Boczkowski, P. J., & Mitchelstein, E. (2019). Domesticating WhatsApp: Family, friends, work, and study in everyday communication. *New Media & Society*, 21(10), 2183–2200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819841890>

<sup>12</sup> Gursky, J., Riedl, M.J., Joseff, K., & Woolley, S. (forthcoming). Chat apps and cascade logic: A multi-platform perspective on India, Mexico, and the United States. *Social Media + Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221094773>



decontextualized, and thereby, transport false information"<sup>13</sup>. Chat apps oftentimes provide both spaces that are very public, as well as spaces that are very private: many of them allow the convening of large groups of people in chats or broadcast lists, while at the same time allowing for a great deal of conversation via very small, private, groups of individuals.

As our interviews with producers and trackers of propaganda in the United States, India, and Mexico show, encrypted chat apps are a particularly relevant vector for false information globally and transnationally. In these spaces key informational context can get easily lost when messages get forwarded. Our research also shows how chat apps can be venues in which cross-platform coordination happens, meaning that the manipulation and seeding of content on other platforms is coordinated in the privacy of encrypted chat apps. For instance, white nationalist interviewees in the U.S. that we spoke with during the course of our research described to us how they had used certain apps for backstage coordination of campaigns with the intent to ultimately seed false information in more public social media platforms, information that might ultimately make its way into legacy media.<sup>14</sup>

## KEY POINT TWO

### Minority groups are targeted by unique strains of propaganda

In our research we found that minority groups are targeted by unique strains of propaganda. In other words, specific tactics as well as themes are tailored towards deceiving sub-populations of the American electorate.<sup>15</sup> Misinformation targeting minority communities—and particularly communities of color—as a form of voter suppression is not new; as the most recent State of Black America report notes, misinformation is one strategy besides gerrymandering, voter suppression, and intimidation, to exclude minority communities and communities of color from electoral participation.<sup>16</sup> Specific types of false information targeting minority populations in the United States carries two concerning implications: one short-term and one long-term. The short-term one is the disenfranchisement of these populations which jeopardizes their voice in

---

<sup>13</sup> Gursky, J., Riedl, M.J., Joseff, K., & Woolley, S. (forthcoming). Chat apps and cascade logic: A multi-platform perspective on India, Mexico, and the United States. *Social Media + Society*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221094773>

<sup>14</sup> Gursky, J., Riedl, M.J., Joseff, K., & Woolley, S. (forthcoming). Chat apps and cascade logic: A multi-platform perspective on India, Mexico, and the United States. *Social Media + Society*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221094773>

<sup>15</sup> Nguyễn, S., Kuo, R., Reddi, M., Li, L., & Moran, R. E. (2022). Studying mis- and disinformation in Asian diasporic communities: The need for critical transnational research beyond Anglocentrism. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-9>

<sup>16</sup> National Urban League (2022). *Under siege: The plot to destroy democracy*.  
[https://soba.iamempowered.com/?\\_ga=2.237304519.691387762.1650656812-1380527237.1650656812](https://soba.iamempowered.com/?_ga=2.237304519.691387762.1650656812-1380527237.1650656812)



imminent political decisions;<sup>17</sup> the long-term one is the undermined trust in our democratic system<sup>18</sup> which outlines its struggles as being defined by histories of exclusion or marginalization.<sup>19</sup>

With our research, we identified four main themes within contemporary propagandistic messages aimed at diaspora communities in the U.S.: First, the sowing of confusion via translational ambiguities; second, the leveraging of falsehoods to redraw ideological fault lines; third, the use of religion to sow doubt about candidates' views, and finally, the oversimplification of complex perspectives, policies, and procedures to alter voting decisions.<sup>20</sup> Recent research in this space points out how the impact and legacy of imperialism affects some diaspora communities and their respective information infrastructures and media systems, as well as how language and (mis)translation can play key roles in the spread of false and misleading information.<sup>21</sup>

To make these themes more tangible, I would like to provide a few examples. For instance, during the previous presidential election campaign period, various open and more private social media sites hosted content decrying Joe Biden, at the time presidential candidate, as socialist or at least as being favored by Latin American socialists.<sup>22</sup> Allegedly Nicolás Maduro's socialist party in Venezuela was in favor of Biden; allegedly Joe Biden was a force of creeping socialism in the U.S. While large parts of the American population are likely to disapprove of this messaging, the outlined invocations raise graver concerns with people who have either directly fled regimes such as Venezuela and Cuba, or who have been brought up with harrowing stories of living under (partial) socialism, such as some Colombian diaspora communities.

Another example would be propaganda that criticized Joe Biden for being "Anti-Catholic".<sup>23</sup> Many of these messages seemed to be less targeted towards Joe Biden per se, which is

---

<sup>17</sup> Romero, L. (2020, October 20). Florida's Latino voters being bombarded with right-wing misinformation, experts and advocates say. *ABC News*. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/floridas-latino-voters-bombarded-wing-misinformation-advocates/story?id=73707056>

<sup>18</sup> Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (Eds.). (2020). *The disinformation age: Politics, technology, and disruptive communication in the United States*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Aguirre Jr, A., Rodriguez, E., & Simmers, J. K. (2011). The cultural production of Mexican identity in the United States: An examination of the Mexican threat narrative. *Social Identities*, 17(5), 695-707.

<sup>20</sup> Trauthig, I. K., & Woolley, S. (2022, March). Escaping the mainstream? Pitfalls and opportunities of encrypted messaging apps and diaspora communities in the U.S. *Center for Media Engagement*.

<https://mediaengagement.org/research/encrypted-messaging-apps-and-diasporas>

<sup>21</sup> Nguyễn, S., Kuo, R., Reddi, M., Li, L., & Moran, R. E. (2022). Studying mis- and disinformation in Asian diasporic communities: The need for critical transnational research beyond Anglocentrism. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-95>

<sup>22</sup> Tankersley, J. (2020, October 14). Why Trump's efforts to paint Biden as a socialist are not working. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/business/socialist-biden-trump.html>

<sup>23</sup> Gangitano, A. (2021, June 21). Move by Catholic bishops against Biden brings howls of hypocrisy. *The Hill*. Retrieved from <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/559491-move-by-catholic-bishops-against-biden-brings-howls-of-hypocrisy>



reasonable given the fact that he is Catholic himself, and instead pointed towards the Democratic Party and its stance on abortion policies. For instance, videos were shared with the caption: “You cannot be a Catholic and be a Democrat,” which elaborated on the conviction that “no Catholic can be aligned with the Democratic Party.” Again, this messaging plays on identity-defining characteristics for some Hispanic voters who are Catholics. Important to note here is also that Hispanic/Latino/Latinx voters are not a monolithic group of the electorate<sup>24</sup>, and generalizations across subpopulations should generally be avoided.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of specific tactics used by propagandists which are tailored towards diaspora communities in the U.S., two dynamics are prevalent: its transnational character and its reliance on intimacy<sup>26</sup> and trust amongst the communities.<sup>27</sup>

Disinformation has proven borderless, as content is often created in one country with the intent to influence communities in another.<sup>28</sup> In other instances, it is clear that while the messages might have originated or been produced inside the U.S., their distribution tactics were borrowed from popular forms of sharing information in a given target community—for instance, distribution might rely on audio and video messages in addition to text; sometimes because audio and video messages are more easily accessible for people.<sup>29</sup> These tactics challenge content moderation and fact checking efforts and often rely on cross-platform communication – for example, videos were first found on YouTube, then shared on WhatsApp and forwarded to different WhatsApp groups.

### KEY POINT THREE

#### COVID-19 dis- and misinformation affecting communities of color

The informational problems associated with COVID-19 have been referred to as an ‘infodemic’ by the World Health Organization, a term meant to describe “an over-abundance of information –

---

<sup>24</sup> EquisLabs (2021, April 1). *2020 Post-mortem (part one): Portrait of a persuadable Latino*.

<https://equisresearch.medium.com/2020-post-mortem-part-one-16221adbd2f3>

<sup>25</sup> Longoria, J., Acosta, D., Urbani, S., & Smith, R., (2021, December 8). A limiting lens: How vaccine misinformation has influenced Hispanic conversations online. *First Draft News*. <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/covid19-vaccine-misinformation-hispanic-latinx-social-media/>

<sup>26</sup> Turcotte, J., York, C., Irving, J., Scholl, R. M., & Pingree, R. J. (2015). News recommendations from social media opinion leaders: Effects on media trust and information seeking. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20(5), 520-535. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12127>

<sup>27</sup> Cunningham, S. (2001). Popular media as public ‘sphericules’ for diasporic communities. *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/136787790100400201>

<sup>28</sup> Trauthig, I. K., & Woolley, S. (March, 2022). Escaping the mainstream? Pitfalls and opportunities of encrypted messaging apps and diaspora communities in the U.S. *Center for Media Engagement*. <https://mediaengagement.org/research/encrypted-messaging-apps-and-diasporas>

<sup>29</sup> Hobbs, R., & Frost, R. (2011). Measuring the acquisition of media-literacy skills. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38(3), 330-355. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.38.3.2>





some accurate and some not.”<sup>30</sup> In July 2021, President Joe Biden said that social media platforms are ‘killing people,’ referring to how false information related to the pandemic spread through social media.<sup>31</sup> Research published in *Nature Human Behavior* points to how exposure to false information about COVID-19 can negatively impact people’s intent to get vaccinated.<sup>32</sup>

False information about COVID-19 affects communities of color severely and disproportionately, for a range of reasons. Many of these reasons are systemic, and rooted in historical injustices around medical research, racism inherent in the medical system, corresponding distrust around vaccinations, issues of access to health care, or the prevalence and promotion of alternative treatments, to mention but a few. For example, a study released by researchers at UCLA points to how members of racial and ethnic minority communities in Los Angeles County, in their calculus of decision-making around vaccinations, were influenced by knowledge about historical injustices.<sup>33</sup> In a recent report, First Draft News emphasized how skepticism toward vaccines among Hispanic/Latino/Latinx Americans is connected to medical exploitation and discrimination, such as sterilization of Puerto Rican women, or of Mexican American women in California during eugenics programs,<sup>34</sup> and among Black Americans it is connected to structural inequities, exploitation, and medical racism.<sup>35</sup>

This matters in a political and in an election-related context. The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated how hate speech and misinformation are connected, and how they create disparate effects for communities of color. President Donald Trump is notorious for having sown anti-Asian sentiment during his tenure, such as by calling COVID-19 the “Chinese virus”<sup>36</sup> or by referring to

---

<sup>30</sup> World Health Organization (2020, February 2). Novel Coronavirus(2019-nCoV) Situation Report – 13. *World Health Organization*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Lee, E. (2021, July 16). ‘They’re killing people’: Biden points the finger at social media platforms for pandemic misinformation. *USA Today*. Retrieved from: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/07/16/biden-social-media-killing-people-allowing-misinformation/7996725002/>

<sup>32</sup> Loomba, S., de Figueiredo, A., Piatek, S.J., de Graaf, K., & Larson, H.J. (2021). Measuring the impact of COVID-19 vaccine misinformation on vaccination intent in the U.K. and U.S.A. *Nature Human Behavior*, 5, 337-348. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01056-1>

<sup>33</sup> Carson, S. L., Casillas, A., Castellon-Lopez, Y., Mansfield, L. N., Barron, J., Ntekume, E., ... & Brown, A. F. (2021). COVID-19 vaccine decision-making factors in racial and ethnic minority communities in Los Angeles, California. *JAMA network open*, 4(9), e2127582-e2127582.

<sup>34</sup> Longoria, J., Acosta, D., Urbani, S., & Smith, R., (2021, December 8). A limiting lens: How vaccine misinformation has influenced Hispanic conversations online. *First Draft News*. <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/covid19-vaccine-misinformation-hispanic-latinx-social-media/>

<sup>35</sup> Dodson, K., Mason, J., & Smith, R. (2021, October 13). COVID-19 vaccine misinformation and narratives surrounding Black communities on social media. *First Draft News*. <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/covid-19-vaccine-misinformation-black-communities/>

<sup>36</sup> Salcedo, A. (2021, March 19). Racist anti-Asian hashtags spiked after Trump first tweeted ‘Chinese virus,’ study finds. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/03/19/trump-tweets-chinese-virus-racist/>



it as “Kung Flu.”<sup>37</sup> Empirical research has found an increase in the spread of false hateful information about COVID-19<sup>38</sup> after President Trump’s hateful tweets. COVID-19, as well as corresponding mask and vaccination policies, have become incredibly polarized partisan issues. Therefore, COVID-19 constitutes a noteworthy vector of election-related mis- and disinformation.

While our research with diaspora and immigrant community leaders in the U.S. was not primarily focused on COVID-19, the pandemic still left its mark during these interviews. I will provide an example from an interview with one of our participants, who is a member of an organization focused on Indian Americans. They described an increase in false information about COVID-19 in 2021 and said: “A lot surrounding incorrect information about masks and false coronavirus cures. More recently, Covid vaccine, or how to prevent Covid with different kinds of tea.” A former Democratic strategist, who is a member of several WhatsApp groups of Latinx communities, had also witnessed COVID-19 dis- and misinformation. Covid group chats originally created to inform about the pandemic, according to this interviewee, were sprinkled with political disinformation and conspiracy theories: “then, in between all of that [referring to community services and things such as food banks] someone places a conspiracy theory. It goes from religion to things on George Soros, to things about Biden, Obama, and Harris.”

#### KEY POINT FOUR

##### Structural factors of our information environment inhibit the democratic inclusion of communities of color

Linked to a previously mentioned theme, namely the oversimplification of complex perspectives, policies, and procedures to alter voting decisions, I would like to elaborate on my fourth and final main takeaway: that communities of color across the United States are more impacted by structural issues related to the broader information environment than by purely online disinformation. These structural issues are connected to long-term efforts aimed at controlling access of communities of color to, and understandings of, the country’s electoral and media systems.

Research for the organization Protect Democracy by Mark Kumleben, Katie Joseff and myself on three U.S. battleground states—Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin, finds that communities of color are more challenged by structural disinformation surrounding our elections than they are by disinformation that originates online with the primary intention of radicalization or sowing

---

<sup>37</sup> Ong, J. C. (2021, October 19). Online disinformation against AAPI communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/19/online-disinformation-against-aapi-communities-during-covid-19-pandemic-pub-85515>

<sup>38</sup> Kim, J. Y., & Kesari, A. (2021). Misinformation and hate speech: The case of anti-Asian hate speech during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Online Trust and Safety*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.54501/jots.v1i1.13>



conspiracy.<sup>39</sup> In our research, we paid particular attention to interviewees' concerns about the forthcoming 2022 U.S. midterm elections. While many organizations and individuals have flocked to the study of digital disinformation because they see it as a technological problem with technological solutions, our research underscores the fact that both disinformation and propaganda are social and cultural problems first. Interviewees—primarily community organizers representing various communities of color in these states—again and again told us that a great deal of content circulating among their groups about how, when, or where to vote—but also about recent, planned, or possible changes to legislation—is disinformative. Some of this even originates from official state sources.

These efforts to manipulate public opinion are amplified and strengthened via various affordances of new media, but they are rooted in the context of a history in which powerful groups have exerted continuous control over both political franchise and the communication ecosystem.<sup>40</sup>

During the 2020 election, people across the United States faced a barrage of deceptive and divisive information related to that year's highly contentious election cycle. Next to false content about candidates, people were also targeted by patently untrue information about electoral processes.<sup>41</sup> For example, in Arizona, Hispanic American and Native American communities faced a cascade of untrue digital messaging over Twitter about the voting process.<sup>42</sup> In Wisconsin, multiple communities of color from Madison to Milwaukee were targeted with lies about mail-in ballot fraud and ballot dumping.<sup>43</sup>

In online chat groups, false information was sometimes shared by people within a WhatsApp group that were from other states or was forwarded from other WhatsApp groups that claimed the information was relevant for all voters even though it only concerned some states and not others. One community organizer we spoke to provided an example wherein members of a national organization dedicated to mobilizing South Asian American voters for Democratic candidates, likely unintentionally, spread dangerous false information by sharing voting laws from California

---

<sup>39</sup> Kumleben, M., Joseff, K., & Woolley, S. (forthcoming). Contending with structural disinformation in communities of color. *Protect Democracy*.

<sup>40</sup> Kuo, R., & Marwick, A. (2021, August). Critical disinformation studies: History, power, and politics. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, 2(4). <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-76>

<sup>41</sup> Austin, E. W., Borah, P., & Domgaard, S. (2021). COVID-19 disinformation and political engagement among communities of color: The role of media literacy. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, 1(Special Issue on US Elections and Disinformation). <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-58>

<sup>42</sup> Quaranta, K., (2020, November 6). Social media disinformation tactics that attempted to deceive Arizonans in the 2020 elections. *Cronkite News/Arizona PBS*. <https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2020/11/06/social-media-disinformation-tactics-tried-to-deceive-arizonans-elections-2020/>; Kumleben, M., Joseff, K., & Woolley, S. (forthcoming). Contending with structural disinformation in communities of color. *Protect Democracy*.

<sup>43</sup> Heim, M., & Litke, E. (2020, November 4). PolitiFact—Fact-checking the avalanche of Wisconsin election misinformation. *PolitiFact*. <https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/nov/04/fact-checking-avalanche-wisconsin-election-misinfo/>



that did not apply in North Carolina. Another interviewee, the co-executive director of an independent political organization that has members in over 12 counties in Florida, cited various examples of relatively unsophisticated attempts at spreading false information such as providing wrong information about where and when to vote; nevertheless, these also fed into the previously described dynamics of voter discouragement.

Research into disinformation targeting communities of color is often defined by arguments that disinformation originates online as part of a propaganda strategy designed to mislead or even radicalize its recipients.<sup>44</sup> Contrary to this theme, our research indicates that the “online first” model of polarizing techno-propaganda is less relevant for communities of color. When disinformation seemed to be purposefully designed to deceive voters of color, interviewees told us it circulated mostly through offline channels—via deceptive mailers and misleading campaign advertising in print news, on TV, radio, and even billboards. On the whole, they said that communities of color are most harmed by lack of consistent access to accurate, trusted, local information and by the second-order effects of political disinformation, which create barriers to their participation in civic life.

Given the voting intricacies, especially for first-time voters, but also for returning voters, any suitable summary or allegedly helpful information is likely to be picked up as guidance within pre-established communities of trust, such as by a group chat on an encrypted messaging app composed mostly of community members.<sup>45</sup> In addition, some members of minority groups face offline risks related to elections, such as poll workers or individual voters of color encountering vicious and dangerous disinformation-inspired harassment. Voters across all communities are demoralized by general concerns about U.S. politics, structural barriers to participation as well as potential repercussions they face.

These online attempts at undermining our democracy by thwarting minority groups’ democratic participation are concerning developments. They become exacerbated by structural disadvantages related to the broader information environment. Overall, we are at a crucial time for our democracy—as Richard Hasen points out in a recent essay for Harvard Law Review wherein he details the risk of future election subversion in the US.<sup>46</sup> Disruptive private action can

---

<sup>44</sup> Mazzei, P., & Medina, J. (2020, October 21). False political news in Spanish pits Latino voters against Black Lives Matter. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/21/us/politics/spanish-election-2020-disinformation.html>

<sup>45</sup> Briggs, P., Burford, B., De Angeli, A., & Lynch, P. (2002). Trust in online advice. *Social Science Computer Review*, 20(3), 321-332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089443930202000309>

<sup>46</sup> Hasen, R. (2022, April 20). Identifying and minimizing the risk of election subversion and stolen elections in the contemporary United States. *Harvard Law Review*, 135, 265-301.. <https://harvardlawreview.org/2022/04/identifying-and-minimizing-the-risk-of-election-subversion-and-stolen-elections-in-the-contemporary-united-states/>



prevent people from voting. We need to make sure these disruptive actions do not turn into democracy-threatening election sabotage and subversion.

## SOLUTIONS

Today's electoral propaganda is driven by a complex hybrid of political but also commercial motivations. This means it needs a variety of efforts to prevent it or at least alleviate its impacts.

In order to be better prepared, we need short-, mid- and long-term responses.<sup>47</sup> For the short term, the support of real-time fact-checking is vital.<sup>48</sup> Importantly, researchers like Kiran Garimella have built a successful "WhatsApp Monitor" tool for electoral contests in Brazil and India. Tools like this are designed to work alongside communities who use them to detect viral false information content early on, and hence to facilitate fact-checking.<sup>49</sup> Such efforts should be accompanied by bottom-up, community-centric, regionally and linguistically specific programs, because the utilization of familiar relationships is particularly relevant for communities of color and because the problem is much more than just a technological one.<sup>50</sup> This also means that accurate information about electoral processes must be available in a variety of languages,<sup>51</sup> and there ought to be more civic support for communities where English is not the dominant language.

In the mid-term, we need to work harder to understand the significance of electoral propaganda for minority communities and communities of color in order to create more inclusive democracies. Policy makers should carry these insights into discussions about public trust and move away from top-down models that derive from the points of view of people in power but rather include insights from the broader electorate. Legislative discussions about regulating the tech sector and content moderation must include equitable representation from minority groups so that their experiences and opinions inform these discussions and any subsequent policy decisions.

---

<sup>47</sup> Trauthig, I. K., & Woolley, S. (2022, March 23). Digital disinformation increasingly targets the most vulnerable. *Centre for International Governance Innovation*. <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/digital-disinformation-increasingly-targets-the-most-vulnerable/>

<sup>48</sup> Rossini, P., Stromer-Galley, J., Baptista, E. A., & de Oliveira, Vanessa Veiga (2020). Dysfunctional information sharing on WhatsApp and Facebook: The role of political talk, cross-cutting exposure and social corrections. *New Media & Society*, 23(8), 2430-2451. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820928059>

<sup>49</sup> Reis, J. C. S., Melo, P., Garimella, K., & Benevenuto, F. (2020). Can WhatsApp benefit from debunked fact-checked stories to reduce misinformation? *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, 1(5). <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-035>

<sup>50</sup> Chang, E., & Zhang, S. (2020, December 11). It's crucial to understand how misinformation flows through diaspora communities. *First Draft News*. <https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/misinfo-chinese-diaspora/>

<sup>51</sup> Nguyễn, S., Kuo, R., Reddi, M., Li, L., & Moran, R. E. (2022). Studying mis- and disinformation in Asian diasporic communities: The need for critical transnational research beyond Anglocentrism. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-9>



The current crisis of public trust is evident among numerous demographics in the United States. Populist rhetoric has found fertile soil in many communities.<sup>52</sup> Singling out communities of color should not be viewed as an effort to ‘educate;’ rather, congress and other entities must work to support, listen to, and learn from these communities so that it can better protect them from the today’s deluge of disinformation and better enable them to engage civically. Without these communities’ crucial equitable inclusion within the democratic process—through access to quality political information and via elections and all means of civic engagement—U.S. democracy will deteriorate.

---

<sup>52</sup> Stier, M., & Freedman, T. (2022, March 1). Why democracy’s in such trouble: A crisis in public trust of government. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/03/01/democracy-public-crisis-trust-government-faith-00012565>





# ESCAPING THE MAINSTREAM?

## PITFALLS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ENCRYPTED MESSAGING APPS AND DIASPORA COMMUNITIES IN THE U.S.

Inga K. Trauthig and Samuel Woolley

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2022 will prove a pivotal year for the U.S. with mid-term elections scheduled in November and the country still battling the COVID-19 pandemic. Minority groups are affected by both these developments as they are exposed to and sometimes targeted by disinformation aiming to deter them from voting or receiving vaccinations. The Center for Media Engagement's Propaganda Lab aims to address this topic in three ways:

- Provide conceptual clarification of our research on “diaspora communities” in the U.S. by arguing that with encrypted messaging apps (EMAs), the potential to operate as “subaltern counterpublics” is created, which can inspire more confidence or trust among communities that have been historically marginalized.
- Draw on eleven in-depth qualitative interviews to argue that four main themes defined false content on EMAs: (1) the sowing of confusion via translational ambiguities, (2) the leveraging falsehoods to redraw ideological fault lines, (3) the use of religion to sow doubt about candidates' views, and (4) the oversimplification of complex perspectives, policies, and procedures to alter voting decisions.
- Outline tactical advantages of propagandists targeting diaspora communities.

This paper builds the foundation of our future research on diaspora communities, false information, and EMAs with regard to the 2022 mid-term elections and provides an assessment useful for the design of community-centric counter programs.

### SUGGESTED CITATION:

Trauthig, I. K. and Woolley, S. (March, 2022). Escaping the mainstream? Pitfalls and opportunities of encrypted messaging apps and diaspora communities in the U.S. Center for Media Engagement. <https://mediaengagement.org/research/encrypted-messaging-apps-and-diasporas>

## **BRINGING TOGETHER THE STUDY OF ENCRYPTED MESSAGING APPS AND DIASPORA COMMUNITIES**

Encrypted messaging apps (EMAs) offer users communication spaces secure from intrusion. WhatsApp and Signal are end-to-end (E2E) encrypted by default and Telegram offers a “secret chat” function which employs E2E.<sup>1</sup> But privacy is not the only draw for EMA users. The apps are also popular because they offer free modes of text messaging and user-friendly features such as easy, transnational audio and video sharing and intuitive group communication spaces. On Telegram, group chats can grow up to 200,000 members. Telegram and others also offer channels that have no limits on followers and are popular for broadcasting live messages.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, EMAs have several features offered by social media platforms (e.g., the sharing of messages through forwarding or, in some cases, the creation of news feeds) combined with the features of closed-communication channels (e.g., private chats). The combination of these characteristics make EMAs preferred platforms for a variety of people.<sup>3</sup> False information on encrypted messaging apps has proven dangerous during the COVID-19 pandemic, next to the spread of false information on other social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter or TikTok.<sup>4</sup>

For this study, which focuses on diaspora communities in the U.S., broader sociological parameters can also explain the success of encrypted platforms since these environments offer an alternative to what is considered the majority-dominated public discourse. In the words of Fraser, they have the potential to operate as “subaltern counterpublics,” which can inspire more confidence or trust among communities that have been historically marginalized from the public sphere.<sup>5</sup> Our research also engages with one of Fraser’s main deliberations, namely the move from understanding the public sphere not as unitary but instead as a plurality of contesting publics.<sup>6</sup> In our case, diaspora communities on EMAs create a partially protected counterpublic which can have implications for the consumption and spread of false information or the development of narratives for political candidates independently from dominating campaign rationales.

This paper focuses on one aspect of EMA use that is only likely to grow in importance over the course of the 2022 mid-term election year in the U.S.: the engagement patterns and narratives that spread among diaspora communities. In other words, it looks at how members of these groups interpret false information they encounter. The paper also assesses which messages or themes are successful in spreading on EMAs because recipients are compelled by the messages. This is relevant as false information continues to divide Americans on topics such as the right measures to fight the pandemic or the allegedly socialist agendas of politicians, which divert focus from coming together to rally against a common enemy like a virus or foreign powers interested in weakening internal cohesion of the U.S.<sup>7</sup>

## Research Rationale And Methods

The Propaganda Research Lab at the Center for Media Engagement has been conducting research into the people and groups behind propaganda campaigns on EMAs since 2019. In the course of this research, we came across evidence that diaspora communities in the United States were the frequent targets of digital disinformation and manipulation. Existing research and reporting has examined disinformation on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube aimed at Hispanic communities, for instance arguing for an increased focus on Spanish-language disinformation in the U.S. for content moderators of Meta,<sup>8</sup> or outlining the “vaccination gap” between white Americans and Hispanic communities,<sup>9</sup> which is also related to misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines targeting Hispanic communities on social media.<sup>10</sup>

With these, and other, examples in mind, we decided to conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with members of the groups exposed to this false information in order to understand how it spreads on EMAs. We conducted a series of 11 interviews with community leaders and digital activists who self-identified as members of the Hispanic, Black, and South Asian communities in the swing states of Florida and North Carolina — communities and states that have experienced significant issues with digital disinformation.<sup>11</sup> We also spoke to civil society leaders who had established digital literacy programs and to leaders of local and international fact-checking organizations. Our research was led by a comparative approach and the limitations of the research are tied to the general parameters of interview-based research; we are not claiming to have captured all patterns of false information spread nor all diaspora communities that are affected by this. Instead, we are hoping to provide a deeper understanding about these ongoing phenomena by giving examples and analyzing our data in a qualitative manner.

From a media perspective, different experiences and interactions with the national media environment define communities’ experiences of inclusion and representation. Fraser elaborates on two dynamics in this regard: one related to the stigmatization of stereotypical media frames in the context of multiculturalism and the second the vulnerability to populist rhetoric in different time periods.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to Mexican-Americans, for example, Aguirre et al. analyzed how the cultural production of Mexican identity in U.S. media produces a Mexican threat narrative in the American public’s mind, emphasizing the alleged criminality or foreignness of those ‘others’ in U.S. civic culture.<sup>13</sup> With regard to Hispanic communities more generally, Retis explains how the formation of Hispanic diasporas in recent decades spurred racial frameworks and discriminatory discourses in North America which tend to equate the “Latino otherness as a homogeneous peripheral group.”<sup>14</sup> This continues to marginalize a growing part of the population. Even in marketing campaigns aimed at different Hispanic communities, the homogenization of diaspora communities misrecognizes the various intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, language, religion, citizenship, and nation.

Similar dynamics have defined interactions between the national media environment and Black communities. Relying on research analyses of Black Lives Matter media portrayals, Kilgo and Mourão examine the effects news coverage has on the evaluation of the core ideas from the Black Lives Matter social movement agenda. They argue that conservative media increase negative evaluations with mainstream and liberal media consumption not leading to more positive views about Black Lives Matter’s core ideas because of an already-triggered multidirectional feedback loop.<sup>15</sup> In spite of these negative experiences, Mehra et al. argue that the internet has tremendous potential to empower those on the margins of society, such as African-American women, by incorporating it into their lives in ways that are meaningful to them.<sup>16</sup> By 2022, EMAs are well-positioned to support in this regard.

## **Studying “Diaspora Communities”**

For the purposes of this work, we use the term “diaspora communities” to include users who told us that they regularly use EMAs to communicate with people in their country of origin or where their family is from, with individuals who share their cultural context, and with people living in the U.S. identifying with the same community. While this approach risks over-including individuals who are not part of identical communities, the connecting thread for our research is the usage of these apps.<sup>17</sup> Our definition also aims to avoid the dominant rationale for the homogenization of people from non-white communities in the U.S. outlined in the previous section. Instead of basing the study on sociologically deterministic inclusion/exclusion criteria, such as a certain age or nationality, this study follows well-established conceptualizations by Anderson that subvert the determinist scheme in which any nation is portrayed as a product of specific sociological conditions; instead the nation is an “imagined political community.”<sup>18</sup>

For immigrants in the U.S., this means they engage in processes of how to fit in to this imagined community (or not). At the same time, they can influence existing conceptualizations by participating in the nation’s discourse. By the time this paper was written in 2022, the need to assess globalization, and with it technological advances in a nuanced manner, has become common sense.<sup>19</sup> Developments in transportation and communication have changed both the origins and the processes of migration. As Lie explains: “In the history of global diaspora (...), television, telephone (...) [and] e-mail perforce occupy significant roles. These transformations make possible diasporic communities, flung across the globe, that sustain strong social and business ties.”<sup>20</sup>

Content might originate in one country but be most important for a diasporic community in another, such as Naficy’s exploration of Iranian content production in Los Angeles, which is consumed by Iranians from France to Japan.<sup>21</sup> With regard to our paper, we argue that the infrastructural possibility of diaspora communities with regard to EMAs is part of what Appadurai calls “diasporic public spheres” since our interview data points toward an

emerging transnational reality among some of these groups.<sup>22</sup> Generally speaking, EMAs have attracted attention not only as intermediary spaces of collective action but also as incubators and crossroads for trafficking mis- and disinformation.<sup>23</sup> Disinformation is commonly understood as intentionally spreading false information, whereas misinformation is unwittingly shared false content.<sup>24</sup> For the purpose of this paper, we rely on using “false information” to avoid misrepresenting in cases where the definitional boundaries cannot be clearly determined.

Researchers of computational propaganda — who focus on the use of automation, algorithms, and other digital technology in attempts to manipulate public opinion — often encounter particular obstacles when attempting to study encrypted messaging apps. This difficulty arises precisely because these apps are designed for more private communication. This same feature directly leads to a corresponding affordance of the technology valued by individual users and exploited by malicious actors: EMA communication often occurs between existing, trusted networks of people with close ties to one another.<sup>25</sup> This more intimate information space can allow for manipulation via relational organizing — for potent content that begins as disinformation and is eventually spread as misinformation by loved ones, neighbors, local influencers, and other community members. From the perspective of credibility and public trust, these dynamics can work to increase trust of the sender by recipients of messages. The study of EMAs from a communication perspective therefore has relevance for continued debate about Lazarsfeld’s eminent remarks on the “two-step flow of communication,” since he asserted that the effects of media articles or any other output are not solely related to characteristics of that media output but instead mitigated by the processes of selectivity in attention and perception, which are in turn a function of predispositional and situational variables such as age, family history, political affiliation, etc.<sup>26</sup>

Our previous research into the propagandistic and disinformative use of EMAs in India, Mexico, and the United States spurred our use of the term *encrypted propaganda* — an emergent and novel form of political communication that occurs over EMAs and displays unique characteristics in both content and tactics — including relational organizing as a core mechanism for manipulation.<sup>27</sup> While EMAs are less widely used per capita in the U.S. than in other parts of the world, the Pew Research Center reports outsized importance of WhatsApp among U.S. Hispanic users (46% use it), compared to Black users (23%) and white users (16%).<sup>28</sup> Our own research suggests significant U.S. EMA usage numbers as well as corresponding evidence of EMA importance among particular U.S. demographics. In August 2020, we conducted a representative survey of 1,010 people aged 18 or older in the U.S. The survey was carried out through NORC at the University of Chicago. According to our data, 10.4% of participants said they had used WhatsApp within the past 7 days, with 9.5% saying they’d used WhatsApp in the last six months to discuss politics.<sup>29</sup> The demographic data was even more compelling. Of the communities we surveyed asking if they used WhatsApp in

the last six months, the following breakdown of people answering “yes” emerged: 27% of Hispanic communities; 21% of Asian communities; 9.5% of people who identified with two or more racial/ethnic categories, 8% of Black respondents, and a mere 4% of white people.

Overall, we wanted to understand how particular communities use EMAs, how they deal with false information on such apps, and whether EMAs have contributed to the development of counterpublics. This builds the foundation of our future research on diaspora communities, false information, and EMAs with regard to the 2022 mid-term elections and provides a first assessment on how to design community-centric counter programs.

## **IMPACTFUL MESSAGING: STRATEGIES OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AFFECTING DIASPORA COMMUNITIES ON EMAS**

We identified four main themes among diaspora communities’ political messaging on EMAs in the U.S. in 2020: (1) the sowing of confusion via translational ambiguities, (2) the leveraging falsehoods to redraw ideological fault lines, (3) the use of religion to sow doubt about candidates’ views, and (4) the oversimplification of complex perspectives, policies, and procedures to alter voting decisions.

All of these themes exhibit cultural denominators and hence potential for long-lasting effects. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that while we identified these themes based on our interviews with the mentioned communities, we do not argue that these themes are exclusive to those communities. Overall, it is likely that the 2022 mid-term election year in the U.S. will see political messaging emerge that relates to the identified themes and targets both diaspora communities and other parts of the U.S. population.

### **Translation Ambiguities**

The communication in the studied diaspora groups often floats between languages anchored in the communities’ mother tongue and English as well. In our interviews with community leaders in Florida, we encountered examples in which false information arose in primarily Colombian, Cuban, and Venezuelan WhatsApp groups relying on slight mistranslations that can at times misconstrue facts – both intentionally and not.<sup>30</sup> These translation ambiguities are also pertinent in the case of Asian-American Pacific Islander communities that are defined by a variety of different, but often similar, languages – meaning the exact phrasing is not always clear to some.<sup>31</sup> False information in this paper refers to information that the authors could identify as being disproven from our own fact-checking resources, such as by comparing and contrasting these claims to the official news. Our research does not rely on information that was too granular for us to understand and fact-check.

As any language learner knows, some words or phrases lack a direct and unambiguous



translation to another language. Sometimes languages also have “false positives” when a word exists in both languages but means different things, such as “sensible” existing in both German and English but with different connotations (in German, the word “sensible” actually means “sensitive”). For instance, Republican campaigners repeatedly framed current president Joe Biden as socialist;<sup>32</sup> in an effort to speak to Hispanic voters, a video of Biden referring to himself as “the most progressive president ever” was translated with the word *progresista* as progressive and shared in several groups. However, one interviewee explained “if you’re a first-generation Latin American it [*progresista*] is similar to *socialista* or *comunista*.”<sup>33</sup> Deliberately or not, this video left an imprint on parts of the WhatsApp group then displaying their conviction that Joe Biden was a socialist.

## **Ideological Fault Lines**

Related to the previous, potentially inadvertent invocation of Biden as socialist, other messages left less room for potential inconclusiveness.<sup>34</sup> The messaging we found during our research is in line with what reporters from *The New York Times* traced back to the Trump campaign. Social media accounts for “Equipo Trump” and “Latinos for Trump,” which are official campaign operations, have claimed that Latin American socialists, such as Nicolás Maduro’s socialist party in Venezuela, are in favor of Biden. These accounts implied a socialist axis reaching up to the U.S. and invoked a fear of creeping socialism.<sup>35</sup>

Naturally, these invocations do not sit well with people who have either directly fled socialist regimes, such as Venezuelan and Cuban immigrants, or who have been brought up with harrowing stories of living under (partial) socialism, such as some Colombian diaspora communities.<sup>36</sup> While our research only found examples targeting Biden’s presidential bid, the qualitative design of our research was a limiting factor, so it cannot be argued that similar messages might not also have targeted the Trump campaign, for instance.

## **Using Religion to Sow Doubt**

During our conversations, interviewees pointed out that Joe Biden was repeatedly denounced for being “Anti-Catholic”.<sup>37</sup> Many of these messages seemed to be less targeted towards Joe Biden per se, which is reasonable given the fact that he is Catholic himself, and instead pointed towards the Democratic Party and its stance on abortion policies. For instance, videos were shared with the caption: “You cannot be a Catholic and be a Democrat,” which elaborated on the conviction that “no Catholic can be aligned with the Democratic Party.” Again, this messaging, which plays on identity-defining characteristics for many Hispanic communities such as their adherence to Catholicism, could be found on group chats purportedly concerned with sharing the latest information on COVID-19 developments, for instance.<sup>38</sup> A former Democratic strategist and member of several WhatsApp groups in the South Florida area asserted:



*“The racism that exists within our communities, is why we (...) Latinos being aligned with Trump because they consider themselves white and they’re connecting with a man who shows (...) what they’re thinking too.”<sup>39</sup>*

## **The Power of Simplification in a Complex World**

Our interviews with WhatsApp group moderators, political strategists, and polling experts revealed that EMAs played an important role in the spread of false electoral information among diaspora communities in the United States.<sup>40</sup> The complexities surrounding different state legislation around voter registration, as well as on the actual ballot, were frequently exploited.<sup>41</sup> For instance, one interviewee told us how minority groups such as South Asian Americans in North Carolina were inundated with false information regarding the state’s voting rules via the studied WhatsApp groups.<sup>42</sup>

This false information seemingly achieved two things: it confused potential voters in the run-up to the election, which discouraged people to vote, and it preemptively sowed distrust, which nurtured wariness with regard to the election results before they were even announced. One example captured these dynamics well: “disinformation spread on WhatsApp told us [South Asian Americans in North Carolina] that we need to be careful because when you go to cast your ballot, if they mark your ballot with a pen, then your ballot will be considered not acceptable.” In North Carolina, however, your ballot needs to get marked because that’s how they get your precinct-specific ballot to the individual voter.

The quoted false information was sometimes shared by people within the WhatsApp group that were from other states, or was forwarded from other WhatsApp groups that claimed the information was relevant for all voters even though it only concerned some states and not others. The community organizer providing the cited example described a national organization dedicated to mobilizing South Asian American voters for Democratic candidates whose members, presumably unintentionally, spread dangerous false information by sharing voting laws from California that did not apply in North Carolina.<sup>43</sup> Another interviewee, the co-executive director of an independent political organization that has members in over 12 counties in Florida, cited various examples of relatively unsophisticated attempts at spreading false information such as providing wrong information about where and when to vote – nevertheless, these also fed into the previously described dynamics of voter

discouragement.<sup>44</sup> The co-executive director told us:



*“In 2020, there was a massive growth in misinformation [including] wrong information about where to vote, what time to vote.”<sup>45</sup>*

Given the voting intricacies, especially for first-time voters, but also for returning voters, any apposite summaries or alleged helpful information are likely to be picked up as guidance within pre-established communities of trust, such as a group chat on an encrypted messaging app comprised mostly of diaspora community members.<sup>46</sup>

## **TACTICAL ADVANTAGES OF PROPAGANDISTS TARGETING DIASPORA COMMUNITIES: THE (EASIER) EXPORT OF STRATEGIES AND NARRATIVES**

In addition to their respective languages being misappropriately translated on occasion, some interview subjects also noticed another trend when identifying false information messaging in their communities. In many of these circumstances, they outlined how false information messaging did not seem to target U.S. diaspora communities specifically, but rather seemed to originate from other countries or from the diaspora communities’ country of origin.<sup>47</sup>

In other instances, it became clear that while the messages might have originated or been produced in the U.S., the distribution tactics were borrowed from popular forms of sharing information in the countries of origin, namely relying on audio and video messages in addition to text (as audio and video messages are more easily accessible for people with lower literacy rates).<sup>48</sup> We encountered community organizers who pointed out difficulties in moderating local Telegram and WhatsApp groups as the groups were inundated with people sharing disinformation content in Spanish including “one-hour videos (...) and people are watching these.”<sup>49</sup> With regard to the videos, some links which could be traced pointed to crossplatform communication: the videos were first found on YouTube, then shared on WhatsApp and forwarded to different WhatsApp groups.<sup>50</sup> Longer videos also produce practical problems for fact-checkers, as two leaders at a major fact-checking organization specifically serving Hispanic communities told us:



*“[since] the videos are 15 or 20 minutes, it is almost impossible for small groups to check all incorporated statements. There are so many facts, and things to check [but] we are not necessarily going to give up.”<sup>51</sup>*

One group moderator was convinced that “many Latino strategists in Miami that have done Latin American campaigns in Latin America” now use their proven tactics in the U.S.<sup>52</sup> While the transplantation of campaign tactics across country borders has been witnessed in the past,<sup>53</sup> the widespread use of EMAs combined with the described, particular EMA characteristics carries a new and explosive potential of reaching people all the time and right at home. One WhatsApp group admin sounded defeated:



*“It hurts me that they would abuse my community this way. In campaigns, it’s a fight. And that’s okay to fight. But when you start losing the facts to win? All you can do is expose them.”<sup>54</sup>*

In general, attribution of false information on EMAs is complicated, in part because information flows easily across both international and state borders. One interviewee referenced that content from India reached American diaspora communities not only via group chats established by local diaspora communities, but also via individual chats with people “back home in India” which can easily be forwarded to the local group chats.<sup>55</sup>

Given these dynamic developments and corresponding challenges for transitional democracies around the world and for established democracies like the U.S., policymakers are facing a demanding situation, and journalists are constantly confronted with finding the right way to reach the right audience.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper analyzed interview data collected from September 2020 through September 2021, including during the American presidential election on November 3, 2020. The upcoming mid-term elections will take place in a possible post-COVID-19 environment which is defined by continuing reverberations of the pandemic and related challenges – economically, socially, and politically. The results show how diaspora communities get some of their news from EMAs and contribute to the ongoing debate about declining trust of official news channels – and with it, the rise of alternative sources of news and information, such as social media.<sup>56</sup>

At the same time, it draws attention to the challenges of inclusion and representation in U.S. environments and the fact that this critique is still perceived as legitimate among minority groups.<sup>57</sup>

In critical media theory and cultural studies, community-owned media have empowered marginalized groups by offering them an alternative environment for inclusion and representation.<sup>58</sup> This study suggests that we are now observing a critical shift in the way diaspora communities in the U.S. engage with news. This raises important questions about the conditions for public trust through inclusion and representation. For instance, the described rhetoric of domestic privacy seeks to exclude some issues and interests from public debate by personalizing and/or familiarizing them; it casts these as private-domestic or personal-familial matters in contradistinction to public, political matters.<sup>59</sup> However, the public sphere is not the government or state; it is rather the informally mobilized body of nongovernmental discursive opinion that can serve as a counterweight to the state. And to this, conversations on EMAs among diaspora communities are contributing already.<sup>60</sup>

In other words, diaspora communities engage politically, and so these political conversations also happen on EMAs. They are very much informed by cultural context, political ideology, cultural history, and migration. All of this leads to different conceptualizations of U.S. politics that are not always in line with mainstream media narratives. Political persuasion happens there as it does in other spaces, but the topics and themes are particular, such as emphasizing Joe Biden as an Anti-Catholic presidential candidate. While these developments offer opportunities for diaspora communities to claim their own spaces, it also means that false information enters the fray. With regard to the latter, our research outlined four main themes that defined false content on EMAs: (1) the sowing of confusion via translational ambiguities, (2) the leveraging falsehoods to redraw ideological fault lines, (3) the use of religion to sow doubt about candidates' views, and (4) the oversimplification of complex perspectives, policies, and procedures to alter voting decisions. In addition to the tactical advantages of propagandists targeting diaspora communities, these research insights reveal areas of prioritization for any counter programs with regard to the 2022 mid-term elections that aim to focus on and work with diaspora communities.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The authors thank Dr. Dounia Mahlouly and Dr. Martin Riedl for providing extensive feedback on previous versions of this paper. Thank you to Joao Vicente Seno Ozawa, Emily Flores, and Jacob Gursky for their diligent research. This study is a project of the Center for Media Engagement (CME) at The University of Texas at Austin and is supported by the Open Society Foundations, Omidyar Network, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding bodies.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For an overview of technical details regarding encryption on various messaging mediums see <https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TAT-Terrorist-use-of-E2EE-and-mitigation-strategies-report-pdf>, p.14 ff; For information on enabling Telegram’s secret chats see <https://telegram.org/faq#secret-chats>.
- <sup>2</sup> For information on the difference between groups and channels see <https://telegram.org/faq#q-what-39s-the-difference-between-groups-and-channels>
- <sup>3</sup> Feldstein, Steven and Sarah Gordon. (2021, March 13). Are Telegram and Signal Havens for Right-Wing Extremists? *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/13/telegram-signal-apps-right-wing-extremism-islamic-state-terrorism-violence-europol-encrypted/>; or for well-established use by Jihadis see e.g., Clifford, Bennett. (May 2018). Trucks, Knives, Bombs, Whatever:” Exploring Pro-Islamic State Instructional Material on Telegram. *CTC Sentinel* 11(5), 23-30. <https://ctc.usma.edu/trucks-knives-bombs-whatever-exploring-pro-islamic-state-instructional-material-telegram/>; Urman, A., and S. Katz. (2020). What they do in the shadows: examining the far-right networks on Telegram. *Information, Communication and Society*, 1-20; for previous reports on how terrorist have been using encryption over decades see R. Graham. (2016). How terrorists use encryption. *CTC Sentinel*, 9(6), 20.
- <sup>4</sup> Romm, Tony. (March 2, 2020). Fake cures and other coronavirus conspiracy theories are flooding WhatsApp, leaving governments and users with a ‘sense of panic. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/03/02/whatsapp-coronavirus-misinformation/>; Brandy Zadrozny (2021, July 13). On TikTok, audio gives new virality to misinformation. *NBC news*. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/tiktok-audio-gives-new-virality-misinformation-rcna1393>
- <sup>5</sup> Fraser, Nancy. (1990). Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. *Social Text* 8(56), 56-80.
- <sup>6</sup> Mansbridge, Jane. (2017). The Long Life of Nancy Fraser’s “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” in Bargu B., Bottici C. (eds) *Feminism, Capitalism, and Critique*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 101-118.
- <sup>7</sup> Jessica Brandt. (2021). How Autocrats Manipulate Online Information: Putin’s and Xi’s Playbooks, *The Washington Quarterly*, 44(3), 127-154.
- <sup>8</sup> Crontreras, Brian and Maloy Moore. (November 16, 2021). What Facebook knew about its Latino-aimed disinformation problem. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2021-11-16/facebook-struggled-with-disinformation-targeted-at-latinos-leaked-documents-show>
- <sup>9</sup> Ndugga, N. et al. (2021). Latest Data on COVID-19 Vaccinations by Race/Ethnicity. Kaiser Family Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/latest-data-on-covid-19-vaccinations-by-race-ethnicity>
- <sup>10</sup> Longoria, Jaime, Acosta, Daniel, Urbani, Shaydanay and Rory Smith. (2021). A Limiting Lens: How Vaccine Misinformation Has Influenced Hispanic Conversations Online. *First Draft News*. Retrieved from [https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/COVID-19\\_VACCINE\\_MISINFORMATION\\_HISPANIC\\_COMMUNITIES.pdf](https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/COVID-19_VACCINE_MISINFORMATION_HISPANIC_COMMUNITIES.pdf); Sesin, Carmen. (June 20, 2021). CDC launches Covid-19 WhatsApp chat in Spanish to spur more Latino vaccinations. *NBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/cdc-launches-covid-19-whatsapp-chat-spanish-spur-latino-vaccinations-rcna1235>
- <sup>11</sup> Romero, Laura. (October 20, 2020). Florida’s Latino voters being bombarded with right-wing misinformation, experts and advocates say. *ABC News*. Retrieved from <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/floridas-latino-voters-bombarded-wing-misinformation-advocates/story?id=73707056>; Bennett, W. L., and Livingston, S. (Eds.). (2020). *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States*. Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>12</sup> Fraser, Nancy. (2019). *The old is dying and the new cannot be born: From progressive neoliberalism to Trump and beyond*. London: Verso Books.
- <sup>13</sup> Aguirre Jr, A., Rodriguez, E., & Simmers, J. K. (2011). The cultural production of Mexican identity in the United States: An examination of the Mexican threat narrative. *Social Identities*, 17(5), 695-707.



- <sup>14</sup> Retis, J. (2019). Homogenizing Heterogeneity in Transnational Contexts: Latin American Diasporas and the Media in the Global North. *The Handbook of Diasporas, Media, and Culture*, 113-136.
- <sup>15</sup> Kilgo, D., & Mourão, R. R. (2019). Media effects and marginalized ideas: Relationships among media consumption and support for Black Lives Matter. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 19.
- <sup>16</sup> Mehra, B., Merkel, C., & Bishop, A. P. (2004). The internet for empowerment of minority and marginalized users. *New Media & Society*, 6(6), 781-802.
- <sup>17</sup> Gursky, Jacob, Riedl, Martin J and Samuel Woolley. (March 19, 2021). The disinformation threat to diaspora communities in encrypted chat apps. *Brookings Tech Stream*. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/the-disinformation-threat-to-diaspora-communities-in-encrypted-chat-apps/>; For additional studies on the Vietnamese Diaspora see e.g., Center for an Informed Public. (June 28, 2021). Early findings from explorations into the Vietnamese misinformation crisis. Retrieved from <https://www.cip.uw.edu/2021/06/28/early-findings-vietnamese-misinformation-crisis/>
- <sup>18</sup> Anderson, Benedict. (2006, revised edition). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso Books.
- <sup>19</sup> “The high moments of globalisation theory (...) [saw] the emergence of a kind of revisionism, in which people have begun to recognise not only that globalisation has a reverse gear, but also that even the Internet has got a geography.” David Morley. (2011). Decoding, diaspora and disjuncture-Arjun Appadurai in dialogue with David Morley. *New Formations* 73, 44-55.
- <sup>20</sup> Lie, John. (1995). “From International Migration to Transnational Diaspora. *Contemporary Sociology* 24(4), 303-306.
- <sup>21</sup> Naficy, Hamid. (1991). The poetics and practice of Iranian nostalgia in exile. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1(3), 285-302.
- <sup>22</sup> For further discussion see Morley 2011.
- <sup>23</sup> Tréré, E. (2020). The banality of WhatsApp: On the everyday politics of backstage activism in Mexico and Spain. *First Monday*, 25.
- <sup>24</sup> Jack, Caroline. (August 9, 2017). LEXICON OF LIES: Terms for Problematic Information. Data and Society Research Institute. <https://datasociety.net/library/lexicon-of-lies/>
- <sup>25</sup> Nouwens, M., Griggio, C. F., & Mackay, W. E. (2017, May). WhatsApp is for family; Messenger is for friends: Communication Places in App Ecosystems. *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems*. Retrieved from [https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3025453.3025484?casa\\_token=HJJJaHWCTghcAAAAA%3AHMgkQHRiGMUQuuHkZ\\_nMCdJdfxjUIxxfy7vSw\\_FT68FIdzaU7tgBVWMSc2UysGnC3Z8o97ccYhtA](https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3025453.3025484?casa_token=HJJJaHWCTghcAAAAA%3AHMgkQHRiGMUQuuHkZ_nMCdJdfxjUIxxfy7vSw_FT68FIdzaU7tgBVWMSc2UysGnC3Z8o97ccYhtA)
- <sup>26</sup> Katz, Elihu. (1987). Communications Research Since Lazarsfeld. *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 51(2), 25-45.
- <sup>27</sup> Gursky, J., Glover, K., Joseff, K., Riedl, M.J., Pinzon, J., Geller, R., & Woolley, S. C. (2020, October 26). Encrypted propaganda: Political manipulation via encrypted messages apps in the United States, India, and Mexico. Center for Media Engagement. <https://mediaengagement.org/research/encrypted-propaganda>
- <sup>28</sup> Auxier, Brooke and Monica Anderson. (April 7, 2021). Social Media Use in 2021. *Pew Research Centre*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>
- <sup>29</sup> Gursky, Riedl and Woolley.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Interview with the executive director of a civic engagement organization, specifically aiming to serve all Asian communities within the US.
- <sup>32</sup> Creitz, Charles. (October 1, 2020). Hannity: Biden’s pleas for ‘socialist’ takeover is proof he ‘doesn’t care about your kids, grocery bill, job’. *Fox News*. Retrieved from <https://www.foxnews.com/media/hannity-biden-socialist-takeover>

- <sup>33</sup> Interview with a political communication consultant in Florida.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Tankersley, Jim. (October 14, 2020). Why Trump's Efforts to Paint Biden as a Socialist Are Not Working. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/business/socialist-biden-trump.html>
- <sup>36</sup> Interviews with community leaders in North Carolina and Florida.
- <sup>37</sup> But likely related to Biden's stance on abortion. Alex Gangitano. (June 21, 2021). Move by Catholic bishops against Biden brings howls of hypocrisy. *The Hill*. Retrieved from <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/559491-move-by-catholic-bishops-against-biden-brings-howls-of-hypocrisy>
- <sup>38</sup> Interviews with community leaders in North Carolina and Florida.
- <sup>39</sup> Interview with a political communication consultant in Florida.
- <sup>40</sup> Gursky et al.
- <sup>41</sup> Interviews with community leaders in North Carolina and Florida.
- <sup>42</sup> Interview with the executive director of a civic engagement organization, specifically aiming to serve all Asian communities within the US.
- <sup>43</sup> Gursky et al.
- <sup>44</sup> Interview with the co-executive director of an independent political organization that has members in over 12 counties in Florida.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Briggs, P., Burford, B., De Angeli, A., & Lynch, P. (2002). Trust in online advice. *Social Science Computer Review*, 20(3), 321-332.
- <sup>47</sup> Interview with the co-executive director of an independent political organization that has members in over 12 counties in Florida.
- <sup>48</sup> Interview with two leaders of a fact-checking organization specifically serving the Hispanic communities.
- <sup>49</sup> Interview with researcher in disinformation who focuses on how misinformation and disinformation specifically impacts the US Hispanic communities.
- <sup>50</sup> Interview with two leaders of a fact-checking organization specifically serving the Hispanic communities.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> Interview with a political communication consultant in Florida.
- <sup>53</sup> Lahusen, C. (1999). International campaigns in context: collective action between the local and the global. In *Social Movements in a Globalizing World* (pp. 189-205). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- <sup>54</sup> Interview with a political communication consultant in Florida.
- <sup>55</sup> Interview with the Director of Community Engagement of a national South Asian civic organization.
- <sup>56</sup> Turcotte, Jason et al. (2015). News recommendations from social media opinion leaders: Effects on media trust and information seeking. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20(5), 520-535.
- <sup>57</sup> Harsin, Jayson. (2020). Toxic White masculinity, post-truth politics and the COVID-19 infodemic. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23(6), 1060-1068.
- <sup>58</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. (1990). *Technology and the reproduction of values in rural western India*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- <sup>59</sup> Fraser, Nancy. (2016). Progressive neoliberalism versus reactionary populism: A choice that feminists should refuse. *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 24(4), 281-284.
- <sup>60</sup> Fraser, Nancy. (2021). *Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy*. London: Routledge.



# AT THE EPICENTER

Electoral Propaganda in Targeted Communities  
of Color



**SAMUEL WOOLLEY & MARK KUMLEBEN**

NOVEMBER 2021

## SUMMARY

This paper lays the groundwork for a larger qualitative study forthcoming in 2022. Here, we lay out the threats posed to communities of color by online propaganda, with a focus on disinformation campaigns. After presenting a breakdown of relevant types of harmful content and the manner in which it spreads, we provide an overview of the ways that communities of color have been targeted with disinformation and propaganda by racist and antidemocratic actors during recent U.S. elections. We find that a wide-ranging and multi-platform propaganda ecosystem has developed since 2016, which poses real threats to these targeted communities and the electoral process. As the study will focus on three representative battleground states—Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin—we then assess the political influence of communities of color in each state and the distinct information threats they face. Finally, we review the current state of counter-propaganda efforts, which until now have largely been undertaken by social media platforms but are beginning to be addressed by lawmakers and regulators as well. Our study will center on interviews with community leaders, activists, and other prominent members of communities of color in the three states, focusing on the effect of propaganda on these communities and which counter-disinformation strategies community leaders have found to be successful. We then will be able to collaborate with these groups to create resources for responding to disinformation that are tailored for their specific needs.

---

**Samuel Woolley** is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). He is also the project director for propaganda research at the Center for Media Engagement (CME) at UT. Woolley's research is focused on computational propaganda and the use of emergent technologies in global political communication.

**Mark Kumleben** is a disinformation researcher at CME who studies technology in its social and cultural context. His recent work focuses on social media, computational propaganda, and combating disinformation.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary	2
Table of Contents	3
Introduction	4
The Propaganda Ecosystem and Elections	6
Disinformation in Recent U.S. Elections	13
Digging Deeper: Three Case Studies of Targeted Disinformation	17
Current Efforts To Combat Disinformation	23
Conclusion: Future Research Agenda	25
Bibliography	27

# INTRODUCTION

In 2020, people across the United States faced a barrage of deceptive and divisive information related to that year’s highly contentious election cycle. Social media platforms were plagued by false content about various candidates for office, patently untrue information about electoral processes, systematic efforts to amplify bogus claims about voter fraud, and coercive political messaging tied to COVID-19 conspiracy theories. A great deal of this content targeted marginalized communities and, in particular, communities of color (Facebook: From Election to Insurrection, 2021), (Austin et al., 2021), (Thakur & Hankerson, 2021). In Georgia, African Americans and Hispanic Americans were on the receiving end of sophisticated microtargeting efforts erroneously claiming that then-Senate candidate Raphael Warnock “celebrated” Fidel Castro (Kertscher, 2020). In Arizona, Hispanic American and Native American communities faced a cascade of untrue digital messaging over Twitter about the voting process (Ramachandran, 2021), (Quaranta, 2020). In Wisconsin, multiple communities of color from Madison to Milwaukee were targeted with lies about mail-in ballot fraud and ballot dumping (Heim & Litke, 2020), (Witynski & Christoffer, 2020). Several of these coordinated efforts to undermine voting and the democratic process have continued into 2021 with partisan-motivated, overwhelmingly fruitless audits of election results. There is no indication that these problems will abate during the 2022 election cycle.

While voter suppression and election disinformation efforts targeted at communities of color are not new, technological advances have supercharged the power and reach of those efforts. Such informational offensives are part of a new and innovative wave of highly potent, often anonymous and automated propaganda. Propaganda—systematic efforts to mold society and public opinion via coercive media tools and communication strategies—is now often computational in form and networked in spread (Woolley & Howard, 2018), (Benkler et al., 2018). Today’s influence campaigns are driven by a complex hybrid of political and commercial motivations. They are defined by sophisticated attempts to manipulate media frameworks and reporting practices, launder partisan information, and stoke political apathy and anger. Astroturf or “inorganic” operations are often purposefully seeded amongst the public in social media groups or via peer-to-peer text messages in efforts to get highly biased information to spread in a fashion that has the illusion of being grassroots or organic. Unsurprisingly, the origins of such endeavors are very difficult to trace. Many are defined by disinformation: the purposeful spread



of false content. This, in turn, can quickly become misinformation: false content that is accidentally or unknowingly spread at a viral level.

In partnership with Protect Democracy, we are initiating an original research study that will explore the effects of online propaganda and disinformation upon marginalized groups during recent election cycles and in the lead-up to what looks to be a highly contentious 2022 election. Targeted propaganda has been and remains a key mechanism through which racist and antidemocratic actors seek to selectively disenfranchise voters. During the 2020 U.S. election, these actors actively targeted communities of color with digital disinformation for the purposes of political propaganda, voter intimidation, and voter suppression. These malicious efforts, layered on top of longstanding structural barriers these communities face in exercising their right to vote, can have outsized effects.

Our upcoming study—to be published in Spring 2022—will be grounded in data from interviews with community leaders who have faced and responded to social media manipulation campaigns and policy makers looking for solutions. It will seek to uncover the local and specific harms caused by this focused form of digital propaganda. The study will also provide recommendations and resources to help marginalized communities cope, centering their voices, experiences, and expertise across these solutions. We will then partner with these groups to create more tailored resources for responding to disinformation that address the unique needs of individual communities in different regions of the country. In order to get the on-the-ground perspective necessary, we will be focusing on three battleground states—Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin—which will allow us to provide a nuanced picture of the situation across the United States without losing focus on the particular realities in individual communities.

This white paper is a primer for the forthcoming empirical study. It lays out the background and the conceptual foundation that our forthcoming research project will build on. Here, we explain the context of the wider disinformation ecosystem that surrounds elections, discuss how that ecosystem of disinformation has manifested in the three exemplar states in recent elections, and present our research agenda for each of the states covered.

# THE PROPAGANDA ECOSYSTEM AND ELECTIONS

No piece of propaganda, conspiracy theory, or hate campaign exists in isolation. Social media platforms from Instagram to YouTube play host to a networked collection of harmful, misleading, and Machiavellian content that appears in various forms on a continuum from massaged truths to outright lies. Coordinated attempts to illicitly manipulate public opinion originate and seamlessly spread across multiple spaces online and across traditional texts and innovative apps on mobile devices. This section describes the main types of online propaganda as they relate to election issues and the targeting of marginalized communities. We pay particular attention to disinformation, because it is purposefully spread and fictitious. With today's electoral process increasingly defined by bad-faith actors taking advantage of socio-political division and confusion about the technical aspects of voting, disinformation has become a particularly important tool for influencing perception and behavior. Election-related disinformation cannot be fully disentangled from related efforts to systematically seed manipulative information during both major events and everyday life. That said, disinformation seems to spike during security crises, natural disasters, and major international events.

Because all forms of harmful digital content reinforce one another, actions that affect one platform or community may have untold effects downstream on other groups as well as on other information spaces, including traditional media. The harms caused by those who leverage and spread these types of content differ, but so do the ways in which research may be able to discern worrisome behavioral outcomes and propose solutions. For example, because COVID-19 and election conspiracy theories develop in similar spaces, attempts to improve the information ecosystem by targeting health misinformation may also be helpful in the fight against election disinformation. Understanding the interrelated nature of propaganda and its forms, particularly disinformation, is necessary to capture and respond to the problem fully and to avoid unintended harm.

The damage caused by propaganda and disinformation can manifest differently depending on the target and the space in which it is spreading at a given moment. Propaganda can be purely commercial or political, but it is most often a combination of efforts to both make money through clicks, views, and ads and simultaneously advantage ideological allies. For instance, attempts to mislead minors on youth-oriented platforms like TikTok might result in an uptick in underage e-cigarette use or stoke anti-Black Lives Matter sentiment while also driving users

to follow particular influencers or access junk news websites. Meanwhile, “seeded” lies in Facebook groups popular with retirees might increase polarization while promoting phishing campaigns. As such, it is important to take a full-spectrum, multi-platform approach to understanding digital propaganda, while remembering the variety of methods these campaigns employ.

## **FORMS OF ELECTION-RELATED DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA**

- **Fabricated News:** Some disinformation is spread by websites or groups that claim to be legitimate news outlets but in fact fabricate stories due to ideological or profit-driven motives. While social media companies have taken some steps to remove or fact-check these websites, engagement with “unreliable” news sites on social media quadrupled in 2020 compared to 2019 (Fischer, 2020). Once created, fabricated news may be spread by politicians and their allies in their advertising material and speeches or inadvertently shared by unsuspecting viewers. For instance, three months after the 2020 election, businessman and far-right influencer Mike Lindell created a widely shared film claiming that the Biden campaign used a supercomputer to hack electronic voting systems—a claim that originated on a fabricated news website, The American Report (Spencer & Fichera, 2021).
- **Conspiracy Theories:** A lot of disinformation occurs in the form of conspiracy theories, which may be focused on a given issue (such as anti-vaccine conspiracy theories) or have a more general scope (for example, alleging pedophile networks in government and entertainment). A conspiracy theory is a claim that political events are manipulated by powerful groups without public knowledge, usually in a way the conspiracy theorist considers hostile. These generally differ from fabricated news because, rather than masquerading as coming from a trusted source, conspiracy theories spread organically through user-generated content in networks such as “QAnon” groups. Ordinary citizens serve as generators of false information, and their false narratives take on lives of their own on social media. In an election context, conspiracy theories may allege that the election will be rigged by powerful groups. Donald Trump and his allies, for instance, claimed after the 2020 election that Dominion Voting Systems had deleted or “flipped” millions of Trump votes in collusion with a list of possible conspirators from Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez (Swenson & Seitz, 2021).

- **Voting Disinformation:** One of the most dangerous types of disinformation (and one of the very few that can be tried as a criminal offense), voting disinformation is false information designed for the purpose of voter suppression. It includes false information about voting times, polling places, methods of voting, or eligibility to vote. For example, a variety of groups—foreign and domestic—maliciously spread claims that votes can be cast by text message among prospective Clinton voters during the 2016 election (Hawkins, 2016). Hate groups are the largest perpetrators of voting disinformation, and they directly target minority voters as part of their centuries-long efforts to suppress the votes of Americans of color. While this is a relatively uncommon form of disinformation, election integrity and U.S. law demand that it be identified and removed with diligence. Unsuspecting viewers of voting disinformation who share it with their networks with the best of intentions help its viral spread. Similarly, researchers have noticed that when well-meaning voters share state-specific voting information on social media, it can sow confusion and become misinformation when it is viewed out of context by members of their social networks in other states (Gursky et al., 2021).
- **False Political Advertising:** Political advertisements, commonly purchased by campaigns and political action committees (“PACs” and “Super PACs”) are pervasive in battleground states during significant election cycles. However, these advertisements may contain deceptive information designed to manipulate voters’ opinions of candidates. In 2020, pro-Trump advertisements microtargeted Wisconsin voters with false claims about then-presidential candidate Joe Biden’s economic policy (Hardee, 2020). While political advertising on social media is subject to disclosure rules enforced by the Federal Election Commission (FEC), which Facebook implemented with its policy on political advertising disclaimers (Facebook, 2019), and in some cases to fact-checking policies, these may be insufficiently enforced. Moreover, user-generated content, including repeating these false claims, is not subject to these policies. Deceptive advertising may also be camouflaged as organic content or “astroturfed” via paid influencers and computational propaganda.

## METHODS OF SPREAD

- **Computational Propaganda:** Computational propaganda is the use of automation, algorithms, and big data on social media in attempts to manipulate public opinion. Most notoriously, networks of bots—automated accounts posing as human users—can

disseminate false or harmful content. Computational propaganda has become a major information threat to U.S. elections, as automation allows bad actors to amplify the effects of disinformation by spreading it through social networks. The role of computational propaganda changed between the 2016 and 2020 elections; platforms removed some bot networks, but adversaries also developed more sophisticated techniques. It remains a persistent problem, with one large-dataset study finding over 100,000 likely bots on Twitter sharing election-related content in 2020 (Chang et al., 2021). Computational propaganda poses a new and evolving threat, and existing institutions designed to spot traditional information threats to elections, such as the FEC, are not sufficiently equipped to handle automated actors on social media.

- **Microtargeting:** Microtargeting, the practice of using social media data to reach finely defined groups or individuals, is a powerful tool at the heart of both commercial and political digital advertising strategies. Microtargeted campaign claims are targeted at those most likely to spread them further, and effectively targeted false or misleading claims become organic misinformation, which is more trusted by those in the network of targeted users. The Trump presidential campaigns employed microtargeting to maximize their digital strategies' effectiveness, including the notorious use of Cambridge Analytica's psychological profiling to target voters in 2016 (Andrews, 2018). Trump's 2020 campaign included many figures from the now-defunct firm and microtargeted voters to a far greater extent than the Biden campaign (Leon & Sharp, 2020). The campaign and pro-Trump super PACs used data collected for microtargeting to target millions of people with advertisements that contained false or misleading claims—one super PAC known for failing fact-checks (Fung, 2020) spent \$5.5 million on ads, including social media advertising, in the Milwaukee area in the weeks leading up to Election Day (Treene, 2020).
- **Encrypted Disinformation:** While often spreading like other forms of propaganda, disinformation on encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram adds another dimension to the problem. These apps cannot be easily monitored or studied, because, by design, no third party (including the platform itself) can see what messages or images are being sent. As a result, they are fertile ground both for propaganda to infiltrate voters' trusted networks and for disinformation actors to coordinate attacks on public platforms. This is particularly relevant for diaspora communities such as Hispanic Americans and Indian Americans, who are far more likely to use WhatsApp and other

encrypted messaging apps than non-Hispanic white and Black Americans (Gursky et al., 2021).

- **Narrowcast Disinformation:** Narrowcast disinformation refers to disinformation shared in smaller groups that are already predisposed to believe it, as opposed to a wider audience that may be more skeptical. This is enabled by precision targeting and allows disinformation actors to create echo chambers in which their content is uncritically received by vulnerable people. Narrowcast disinformation is “2-3 [times] as prevalent as viral misinformation,” according to internal Facebook documents, and represents a dangerous weaponization of social media’s power to create community (Anonymous, 2020). Furthermore, as marginalized groups are not homogenous political blocs, narrowcast disinformation risks fracturing and dividing existing communities. While it may be microtargeted, narrowcast disinformation is different from microtargeting in that it refers to the nature of the group receiving disinformation, not the way the disinformation is delivered. For instance, a non-microtargeted piece of disinformation may be broadcast in a public forum subject to critical scrutiny and narrowcast to small groups predisposed to believe it.
- **Influencers:** In this age of social fragmentation online, many users turn to influencers—high-activity accounts with large followings—for trusted information and political judgements. However, influencers exist as part of the same information ecosystem and may not be as independent as they appear. Not only do many political influencers repeat misinformation or act as creators of disinformation, but they also are now often coordinated behind the scenes because of their tremendous political and commercial potential. Specialized firms such as Wolf Global curate networks or “pods” of influencers who are paid or encouraged to spread a coordinated message in a manner not subject to public scrutiny (Goodwin et al., 2020). This is particularly important for micro-influencers, who previously may have been too small for political campaigns to use directly but now can be recruited en masse through coordinated off-platform networks. Because the coordinated nature of this process is hidden and smaller influencers will be trusted by their tight-knit followings, this is a particularly dangerous form of propaganda when aimed at marginalized groups.



## OTHER TYPES OF HARMFUL ELECTION-RELATED CONTENT

- **Inflammatory information:** Some content that is not necessarily untrue can still be harmful. Inflammatory information is content that is manipulated and presented to stoke tensions and create divisions in a way that affects Americans' ability to properly participate in the electoral process. Such information spreads rapidly on social media thanks to algorithms designed to maximize engagement and can cause people to support extremist candidates, attack the legitimacy of elections, and even engage in violence. When dealing with inflammatory information, it is important to distinguish genuine activism from attempts to create anger to attack elections, such as the Russian-linked deceptive "Blacktivist" campaign (Byers, 2017), but it is still possible to uncover deceptive or manipulative uses of such information without harming activists.
- **Voter Deterrence:** The use of political advertising and other campaigning tools to deter voters from choosing an opposing candidate is an endemic feature of modern political campaigning. It can be as simple as negative TV spots aimed at depressing turnout by attacking a candidate, but modern social media adds a dangerous aspect to this practice. When groups of voters are micro-targeted based on their propensity to support a political party, there will inevitably be a disparate impact on segments of the population—defined by race, age, or religion—that are strongly disposed toward one party. Those dynamics, combined with the legacy of historical suppression of the Black vote and ongoing racism, meant that Black Americans were disproportionately targeted by deterrence advertising in 2016 (Channel 4 News Investigations, 2020) and 2020 (Ryan-Mosley, 2020). Though social media companies have removed some targeting features, sophisticated methods of voter deterrence that do not explicitly use race nonetheless disproportionately affect certain marginalized groups. For example, residential segregation means that ZIP code-level targeting can be extremely effective at targeting communities of color. Although deterrence campaigning usually does not consist of disinformation or harassment directly, official campaigning may both include disinformation and inspire it. Hate groups and disinformation actors, too, are aware of the potential of voter deterrence in achieving their electoral objectives.
- **Targeted Harassment:** In addition to disinformation, coordinated hate can also affect participation in political discourse and the electoral process. Harassment campaigns targeted at political candidates, journalists, and activists harm their ability and willingness

to participate in the political processes. They can result in a “spiral of silence,” when the intimidation of high-profile figures makes it more difficult for other members of a community to speak publicly (Hampton et al., 2014). Even beyond the human costs of harassment, the chilling effect it creates has additional negative effects on the political conversation. Because women and communities of color are disproportionately targeted by harassment campaigns (Vogels, 2021), this problem has particular relevance to the political participation of marginalized groups.

- **Hateful Content:** While not always directly targeted at vulnerable groups, the presence of hateful content on social media creates a hostile environment that may affect their ability or willingness to participate in political life. Online hate thus has an indirect effect on the electoral process that parallels the United States’ long and ongoing history of voter intimidation campaigns, which may be part of the motivation for spreading such hate.

# DISINFORMATION IN RECENT U.S. ELECTIONS

A wide range of malicious actors including foreign governments and domestic political groups leverage digital propaganda and disinformation in order to undermine U.S. elections and further marginalize communities of color and other vulnerable groups that are integral to the success of American democracy. In order to unpack the scope of the issue, this section provides details on related efforts and cases between 2016 and today. The 2022 elections will undoubtedly be rife with similar information threats aimed at various segments of the public. With this in mind, we must understand the ways in which people in our country—particularly people of color—have experienced propaganda and disinformation in recent years.

## 2016 – 2018

While the 2016 election cycle brought computational propaganda— which allows individuals and groups to massively amplify disinformation and micro-target vulnerable voters—into the spotlight, many of its techniques were developed outside of the United States. Such tactics were already in use in the Spanish-language Internet, where “Peñabots” had been active since 2012 in support of then-President of Mexico Enrique Peña Nieto (Daniel, 2016), and in Russia, where the government continues to hone sophisticated and systematic transnational disinformation techniques that have been used in “active measures” campaigns dating back to the early Soviet era (Galeotti, 2019).

The 2016 election saw foreign disinformation break through as a major issue on social media. Russian disinformation, beyond supporting Donald Trump’s presidential candidacy, targeted Black voters to discourage them from voting for then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton (“Russian trolls’ chief target was ‘black US voters’ in 2016,” 2019). In addition to the Russian campaign, which focused on undermining the legitimacy of America’s democracy, for-profit disinformation came from diverse and unexpected sources. One small town in North Macedonia produced over 100 pro-Trump fabricated news websites in a profitable cottage industry (Silverman & Alexander, 2016). The polarized nature of the election, where the often-dubious claims of pro-Trump media caused supporters to seek out confirmatory news, created a market for false, partisan stories, and these actors responded to that economic incentive.

Americans, too, joined in the feeding frenzy. Conspiracy theories directly aimed at figures within the Clinton campaign, such as “Pizzagate,” spread rapidly in partisan spaces with the help of bot networks (Bleakley, 2021). Worse still, formerly fringe hate groups, emboldened by Donald Trump’s candidacy, poisoned social media websites with harassment campaigns and extremist material. While efforts have been made since 2016 to address some of these problems, at that time the United States and social media companies were simply unprepared for the scope and novelty of the information threats they faced.

In the 2018 midterm elections, as bad actors’ ability to target harmful content improved, other racial and religious minorities became the targets of tailored attacks. Researchers were able to discern specific tactics used by political trolls against marginalized groups, such as the use of Spanish-language disinformation aimed at Hispanic voters searching for information on candidates (Flores-Saviga & Savage, 2019). Social media companies struggled to deal with the more local nature of propaganda targeted at state elections. In addition to targeted disinformation, targeted harassment campaigns attempted to dissuade members of marginalized groups from political participation in 2018.

## **2020**

Many of these same pernicious patterns recurred in 2020, and disinformation was a major theme of the election. National-level disinformation spread through a network of high-profile actors, who were often inspired by the Trump campaign but took far-right messaging beyond even what the campaign officially endorsed. Network analysis has shown that, since 2016, far-right media outlets have become more distinct from the American mainstream, often spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories (Benkler et al., 2018). Microtargeted propaganda was aimed directly at many vulnerable groups, often bound up with issues such as health disinformation. Black voters were besieged by quantifiably higher levels of hate and disinformation on social media during the Black Lives Matter protests occurring throughout the summer than before the protests (Kumleben et al., 2020), and they then were targeted again with voter disinformation and deterrence campaigning in the run-up to Election Day. Tailored, culturally specific propaganda targeted Hispanic voters too, particularly in Florida where claims that Joe Biden was a socialist or Communist were designed to exploit Cuban American voters’ sensitivity on these issues. Religiously oriented disinformation also spread to manipulate Hispanic Catholics, both about hot-button issues like abortion and more baroque claims, such as alleging that then-vice presidential candidate Kamala Harris practices witchcraft (Mazzei &

Medina, 2020). The 2020 election represented a hitherto unparalleled level of election disinformation in the United States, particularly microtargeted disinformation aimed at vulnerable groups, and it is critical that this high-water mark is not reached again.

The context of the 2020 election during the COVID-19 pandemic also provided a windfall opportunity for conspiracy theorists, disinformation influencers, and political extremists to manipulate public opinion. Communities of color have been particularly vulnerable to some kinds of targeted health disinformation, in part because of their justified skepticism of the U.S. healthcare establishment based on its ongoing history of unfair and unethical treatment of people of color (Serchen et al., 2020). Beyond the deadly threat of COVID-19 disinformation itself, confusion and fear about the pandemic created an opportunity to attack the legitimacy of democratic elections. Uncertainty about public health measures responsive to the pandemic added fuel to disinformation about voting procedures, mail-in voting, ballot security, and many other aspects of the electoral process. Furthermore, people confused by or distrustful of the scientific narrative around COVID-19 who searched for alternative perspectives probably encountered other conspiracy theories along the way. COVID-19 thus provided bad actors a chance both to sow distrust in the electoral process and to convert distrust of science into political radicalization.

Immediately after the 2020 election, then-President Trump followed through with his threats to contest the legitimacy of the vote, and a maelstrom of disinformation descended upon battleground states. In Georgia, election officials received death threats, racist messages, and in-person harassment as a result of conspiracy theories about the election (So, 2021). In Wisconsin, a conspiracy theory that a misplaced USB drive was used to steal votes spread widely in Milwaukee after it was published by far-right news website The Gateway Pundit (Litke, 2020). Even more elaborate theories appeared in Arizona, where disinformation actors first claimed that ballots filled out with Sharpie markers were invalid (Sadeghi, 2020), then that false ballots made with bamboo fibers were flown in from China (Levine, 2021). These false claims and many more intertwined in the disinformation ecosystem into a concerted and coordinated attempt to delegitimize the election of President Joe Biden. Unfortunately, though these claims have not survived legal or journalistic scrutiny, they have persisted among Republicans as a group, 60 percent of whom continue to believe the Big Lie that Joe Biden's victory is the result of widespread election fraud, and, and to a lesser extent, in communities of color, with one recent poll finding 42 percent of Hispanic and 20 percent of Black respondents believed that the 2020 election should definitely or probably be overturned (National Tracking Poll, 2021). In the

run-up to 2022, it is critical that all stakeholders come together to affirm the legitimacy and security of American elections.



# DIGGING DEEPER: THREE CASE STUDIES OF TARGETED DISINFORMATION

In order to focus on the human and electoral impacts of targeted propaganda, our study will cover three key battleground states: Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin. The voters who live in these states are especially attractive targets for propaganda, because their voting behavior may decide the course of an election. Each of these states voted for Donald Trump in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020, so understanding their dynamics may help us determine how these factors are electorally relevant. Furthermore, they are each representative of a wider electorally important region—the Southwest, the Southeast, and the Midwest, respectively. Finally, because they are demographically distinct, these case studies will allow us to keep a consistent focus on targeted groups and address the specific but different dangers targeting Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans.

## ARIZONA: HISPANIC VOTERS AS TARGETS

The Hispanic community is the fastest-growing voting demographic in the country, and Hispanic voters are increasingly politically influential in many states, particularly in the Southwest. However, they face unique disinformation challenges that require additional research in order to tailor appropriate responses to propaganda and to ensure that disinformation does not prevent Hispanic voters from participating in elections. In Arizona, Hispanic Americans form a demographic plurality at 42.4 percent of the population, with 20.8 percent of Arizonans speaking Spanish as their primary language. Currently, 23.6 percent of eligible voters in the state are Hispanic, though the Hispanic vote will increase in importance as more Hispanic Arizonans receive citizenship or reach voting age (Pew Research, 2020). Hispanic voters face structural barriers to accessing accurate voting information that some other groups may not—including, among other things, language barriers and justified mistrust of government agencies due to concerns about immigration policies and enforcement—that make them more vulnerable to voting disinformation.

Hispanic Arizonans are targeted by campaign strategists of both parties to affect their turnout and sway their choice of candidate. Many Hispanic voters' views do not neatly align with either major political party's platform; while many prefer the Democratic Party's approach to immigration and economic policy, those same voters often also support the Republican Party's

policies on social issues such as abortion for religious reasons. In addition, because the U.S. Hispanic population has roots in many different countries, different Hispanic sub-communities have distinct vulnerabilities to disinformation campaigns targeting people from those countries with tailored, culturally specific messaging. These factors create an opportunity for both Democratic and Republican candidates to appeal to Hispanic voters, but they also create a chance for propaganda to manipulate Hispanic voters over deeply held beliefs that may not be obvious to non-Hispanic researchers or strategists. Furthermore, hostile and racist English-language disinformation attacking Hispanic people in the U.S., such as claims that “millions” of undocumented immigrants commit voter fraud (“Trump claims millions voted illegally in presidential poll”, 2016) and the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory (Charlton, 2019), may dissuade political participation by Hispanic voters by stoking fear and making them feel unwelcome.

Hispanic Americans face additional challenges with overt propaganda and political disinformation in Spanish. Translations of English content sometimes can be misinformation themselves. In one case in 2020, the difference between the connotations of the English “Progressive” and the Spanish “Progresista” meant that a video of Joe Biden was shared as “proof” that he identified as a socialist, turning a literal translation into organic misinformation (Gursky et al., 2021). The bulk of existing fact-checking infrastructure also focuses on English-language media rather than media in other languages, providing fewer resources for Spanish speakers to debunk voter disinformation spread in that language. These patterns have played out across the Hispanic community, though the targeting of Cuban and Venezuelan Americans in Florida has received the most media coverage (Mazzei, 2020).

Hispanic Americans are almost seven times more likely to use encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp to discuss politics than non-Hispanic whites (Gursky et al., 2021). WhatsApp is dangerously conducive to the community spread of disinformation due to the app’s features; its encrypted design means Facebook is unable to analyze disinformation networks on WhatsApp in the way it does for unencrypted platforms, and users’ ability to mass-forward messages allows false and misleading information to proliferate quickly. Despite the difficulty of verifying the authenticity of information on the app, WhatsApp groups often act as a trusted news source for users. The opacity of these apps makes qualitative research such as this project particularly important for the Hispanic community.

The most immediately pressing challenge facing Hispanic voters is politically and racially motivated voter suppression, including through disinformation. Many community activist groups focused on getting out the vote are doing excellent work to combat this threat, but more research is necessary to determine the specific nature of suppressive disinformation aimed at Hispanic voters. In our research, we will discuss these issues with Arizona voting rights activists and community leaders, both to assess the impact of online propaganda on the Hispanic community and learn about and amplify successful strategies for combating this threat.

### **NATIVE AMERICANS IN ARIZONA**

Native Americans represent a significant share of Arizona voters, and more than 10 percent of the country's Native population lives in Arizona. Historically, Native Americans did not fully receive the right to vote until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and they have continued to face significant structural barriers to exercising that right. These include lack of access in remote tribal areas to post offices, telephone service, and the Internet, as well as the lack of addresses in rural communities such as the Navajo Nation (Vasilogambros, 2019). As a result, Native voters' turnout rates have been lower than those of other racial groups, but rates are improving with help from voting advocacy groups. While disinformation about COVID-19 in Native communities has received more media attention, these groups also face misinformation about technical aspects of the voting process, which often includes additional complications in Native communities that risk suppressing voters and delegitimizing elections (Native American Resource Fund, 2020). However, because Native issues rarely receive adequate attention outside of their communities, our research will emphasize hearing directly from Native advocacy groups about the solutions they have found effective for overcoming disinformation.

### **GEORGIA: BLACK AMERICANS AND THE BALLOT BOX**

Voter suppression, driven by racism and enforced by violence, disenfranchised Georgia's large Black population until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Now, Black Georgians play a central role in state politics, representing 33 percent of eligible voters in Georgia and 48 percent of the increase in the voting population since 2000 (Budiman & Noe-Bustamente, 2020). Voting rights continue to be a contentious issue in Georgia, where current voting laws have a suppressive effect. Modern voter suppression, the dark legacy of Georgia's history, also has in part moved online, where it takes place through techniques similar to other forms of disinformation and harassment. The COVID-19 pandemic's effect on voting procedures,

Georgia's abrupt adoption of an electronic voting system, and extremist responses to Black Lives Matter protests also caused problems in 2020.

Voter disinformation designed to suppress Black votes is the central concern of our study of Georgia, as it is with much media coverage of disinformation issues in the state. Outright voter intimidation online was not unheard of in 2020, with attacks on election integrity serving as supposed justifications for false claims of "securing" polling places and other such veiled threats to voters (Fessler, 2020). Explicit threats by far-right extremists to Black Georgians went even further in an effort to suppress voters, though these threats were not carried out (Joyner, 2020). Moreover, confusion about COVID-19 voting procedures and mail-in voting laws created problems for Black voters, particularly elderly voters. Changes in voting procedures were complicated by the introduction of electronic in-person voting machines. Legitimate concerns have been raised about the speed with which Georgia transitioned to electronic voting, and reputable experts dispute the security of electronic voting in comparison to paper ballots (Niesse & Wickert, 2019). However, propaganda networks seized on these claims to spread unfounded conspiracy theories about Georgia's voting machines. Voters were told that private companies could rig elections and that their votes might not be counted, and disinformation actors sowed confusion about the technical aspects of voting.

In our study of Georgia, we will focus on interviewing voter advocacy and civil rights groups who fight suppressive disinformation. Georgia has a long tradition of civil rights activism, and these groups have seen information threats evolve over decades into the Internet age. We will also focus on those threats encountered by Black civil society groups that engage in get-out-the-vote activities, such as churches that host "Souls to the Polls" events. Understanding the local impact of voting disinformation is critical to building upon these organizations' strategies to keep citizens voting in the face of disinformation and technological changes to the voting process. We will also investigate the impact of hate speech and inflammatory information on Georgia voters, including from threats to polling places by white supremacists and propaganda designed to stoke racial fears such as the Russian impersonation of Black Lives Matter activists (Byers, 2017), and the extent to which such activity affects decisions to vote. Keeping a tight focus on propaganda in Georgia's Black community and the tactics with which the community has responded in this case study will allow us to promote strategies that can help this community and similar communities combat disinformation in 2022.

## **WISCONSIN: THE DARK SIDE OF “BUSINESS AS USUAL”**

Wisconsin as a case study provides a useful opportunity to perform qualitative research based on quantitative work and data journalism. Although Wisconsin’s population is predominantly white, the state is home to diverse communities of color, with no one group as a dominant racial or ethnic minority. According to census data, Wisconsin’s population is 6.7 percent Black or African American, 7.1 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 3 percent Asian, including a relatively large Hmong community. Wisconsin also includes the only county in the eastern half of the U.S. with a majority Native American population. Residential segregation persists in Wisconsin, and communities of color are concentrated in its urban areas. The Milwaukee area has the third highest proportion of African American residents in the Midwest, behind Detroit and Cleveland. It is also an important case study as one of several critical battleground states in the Midwest that voted for Donald Trump in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020. Studying how online propaganda targeted marginalized groups in Wisconsin thus gives us a greater opportunity for comparative analysis than in other states, where our study takes a more specific focus on individual groups. Wisconsin’s location in the Midwest also provides a test case for counter-propaganda efforts across several battleground states with similar cultures and demographics. Wisconsin has become increasingly diverse in recent years but has also seen increasing state-level political polarization for longer than some comparable states—according to many locals, since the bitter gubernatorial recall campaign of 2012 (Gilbert, 2014).

Heavy campaigning in Wisconsin in 2020 saw communities of color targeted both by traditional campaigning methods and the microtargeting of their members, either through geographic targeting based on residential segregation or through other targeting methods that functioned as a proxy for race. The combination of deterrence campaigning and microtargeting creates a persistent, systemic threat to these communities’ participation in the electoral process, particularly because of the inherently suppressive nature of turnout-based campaigning common in states such as Wisconsin. In both 2016 and 2020, the Trump campaign engaged in highly sophisticated targeting of deterrence campaigns that disproportionately targeted minority groups. According to Wisconsin Watch, the campaign “used demographic data to systematically dissuade voters in Milwaukee’s primarily Black neighborhoods from participating in the election” (Campbell & Schultz, 2020). A statistical analysis by Channel 4, which uncovered this phenomenon, clearly shows disproportionate targeting of minority voters in 2020, and internal campaign documents show attempts to target African American voters specifically in 2016 (“Revealed: Trump campaign strategy to deter millions of Black Americans from voting in

2016,” 2020). Local Republicans in Wisconsin also repeated misleading claims from the Trump campaign about the security of mail-in ballots in an attempt to deter voting by mail (Redman et al., 2020). Further investigation is necessary to assess the extent to which targeted groups were actually deterred from voting and how anti-democratic actors used social media to spread deterrence disinformation.

In our qualitative research, we will build on this analysis of suppressive deterrence campaigning in Wisconsin in order to discern the human impact and social effect of these practices, focusing on the community spread of political misinformation. By interviewing those victimized by and those fighting against microtargeted deterrence and suppressive propaganda, we will illuminate how Wisconsin voters of color experience the threat of political disinformation and how communities have responded. In addition to Black voters in and around Milwaukee, we will investigate the impact on Hispanic voters and the Hmong community. In this way, we will produce a snapshot of how propaganda harms marginalized voters in Wisconsin that may also provide insight for responding to disinformation issues in analogous communities across the region and the nation.



## CURRENT EFFORTS TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION

Both before and after the 2020 election, deplatforming malicious actors by removing their access to public social media accounts has proven somewhat successful in combating online propaganda insofar as it takes away these actors' public communication channels and access to large audiences (Jhaver et al., 2021), (Rogers, 2020). Researchers found that online misinformation about election fraud decreased by 73 percent after social media sites suspended Donald Trump and several allies (Dwoskin & Timberg, 2021). Deplatforming users who coordinate inauthentic behavior or who act as originators of propaganda has been particularly praised because it disrupts the entire disinformation ecosystem across platforms (Rogers, 2020). Facebook currently defines Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB) as “coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a strategic goal where fake accounts are central to the operation” (Facebook, 2021). CIB is the clearest use case for deplatforming, and social media companies have used quantitative analytics to remove entire coordinated networks at once. Deplatforming is more technically complex when dealing with other harmful behavior where a clear definition may be difficult to write and apply.

Deplatforming malicious actors from major platforms can, unfortunately, shift them onto more fringe or private platforms such as encrypted messaging apps. For instance, even while in the process of being deplatformed, the conspiracy theorist Laura Loomer posted on her remaining accounts asking followers to join her on the encrypted Telegram app (Sommer, 2019). While antidemocratic actors' reach may be smaller after being deplatformed, they are able to operate more covertly once their activity is hidden. These dark networks coordinate to organize seemingly organic activity—for instance, far-right extremists have used private Twitter rooms to manipulate real networks of Trump supporters into spreading harmful messages on the public side of Twitter (Musgrave, 2017). One technical solution to this issue is shadowbanning: throttling the reach of bad actors by reducing the visibility of their posts. While this does not remove their propaganda entirely, it is effective at limiting social network spread in a way that leaves individual users in the network less likely to go underground because they may be unaware they have been shadowbanned (Ali et al., 2021).

Lawmakers around the country are pursuing various goals related to protecting the rights of social media users. Several bills have been proposed to protect users of social media platforms from algorithmic discrimination, a practice that is particularly harmful to communities of color.

The COPRA (Consumer Online Privacy Rights Act, 2019) and SAFE TECH (SAFE TECH Act, 2021) Acts would both introduce civil rights protections to the governance of social media data, and the Algorithmic Justice and Online Platform Transparency Act would go further by establishing a harm standard by which social media companies would be responsible for discriminatory algorithmic processes (potentially including microtargeting harmful content) (Algorithmic Justice and Online Platform Transparency Act, 2021). Lawmakers have also made moves to provide transparent data access to researchers, such as the Social Media DATA Act (Social Media DATA Act, 2021), which would provide a full archive of paid advertisements and create a working group to inform future policy recommendations. Some states have begun to try to regulate deplatforming. Florida recently attempted to pass a law restricting deplatforming, which a judge quickly found to violate both the First Amendment and Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (Brodkin, 2021). Texas followed suit with a similar law, which is likely to meet a similar fate.

Administrative agencies, too, have looked to extend their oversight of social media. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which has extensive powers to regulate if so directed, has taken an interest in many aspects of tech regulation. Lawmakers are considering expanding its role, with the 21st Century FTC Act empowering the FTC to regulate deceptive practices on social media (21st Century FTC Act, 2021). The Federal Election Commission (FEC), which enforces campaign finance law, has been relatively quiet on this topic other than some rules on the disclosure of paid advertisements (Federal Election Commission, n.d.). While some experts, such as former FEC commissioner Ann Ravel, have called for stronger FEC oversight (Ravel et al., 2019), the FEC is currently still grappling with these issues, having only regained a quorum of commissioners at the end of 2020 (Buble, 2020).

## CONCLUSION: FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Improving the political information ecosystem online for communities of color will, in the long run, require more than simply disrupting harmful activity. In order to solve these problems, we must understand them much better, then communicate that understanding across the industry and the electorate. Researchers and regulators need greater access to data from social media companies in order to quantify propaganda and analyze networks, such as that promised by the Social Media DATA Act. But quantitative research alone is insufficient; both qualitative and quantitative research together are necessary to provide a complete picture.

The two types of research are necessary for different reasons. As propaganda is spread at scale through technological platforms, quantitative research including data science, network analysis, and big data approaches can discover and map out disinformation networks quickly and efficiently. This gives us a big picture viewpoint of the situation on a given platform and provides opportunities to root out stubborn information threats. It is also often more effective than qualitative research at studying specific trends over time and evaluating policies aimed at combating harmful content. Qualitative research, though, is needed to understand the cross-platform nature and social context of propaganda. It is difficult enough to perform quantitative research across multiple open platforms, but bad actors' use of encrypted apps such as Telegram make a fully quantitative account of the ecosystem impossible. Even on non-encrypted platforms, researchers often lack sufficient data to quantify structural inequalities in data use as experienced by communities of color, so qualitative research can be used to guide the data transparency initiatives necessary for understanding the harmful effects of algorithmic injustice. Furthermore, qualitative research such as this project is the only way to focus on the impact of propaganda on its victims, particularly marginalized communities who may be underrepresented in quantitative work. Without qualitative research, we risk perpetuating the same patterns of harm this study seeks to prevent.

Our study will center on interviews with community leaders, activists, and other prominent members of communities of color in the three states. We plan to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews, both in-person and through video software such as Zoom. Following receipt of the consent form, all interviews will be consensually recorded and carried out under the condition of anonymity. A diverse selection of participants will be identified through non-probability purposive sampling, specifically through the collection and analysis of news

articles about the ways in which civil rights groups focused on communities of color are experiencing and countering disinformation, news articles about the ways in which local and federal policymakers are countering disinformation, legal and academic texts, review of LinkedIn, and snowball sampling references and introductions garnered from interviewees (Handcock & Gile, 2011).

After each conversation, interviewers will create memos summarizing the most important themes and takeaways and then triangulate findings between interviewers. In addition, we will create thematic memos, which will “bring together the data from across several sources on an emerging theme” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 250). Through our analyses of the memos, we will be able to identify and substantiate a set of emerging themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) that we will compile into a report. We then will create resources based on the report and feedback from community groups. We will collaborate with those groups to produce public-facing educational materials for voters in the 2022 election cycle.

By centering the voices of historically marginalized communities and synthesizing the wider findings of disinformation researchers with their experiences, this project will help break the cycle of propaganda that perpetuates the disenfranchisement of millions of Americans of color.

---

**Protect Democracy** is a nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to preventing American democracy from declining into a more authoritarian form of government.

**For inquiries** about this project, please email [press@protectdemocracy.org](mailto:press@protectdemocracy.org).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

21st Century FTC Act, no. H.R.4447, 117th Congress (2021).

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/4447>

Algorithmic Justice and Online Platform Transparency Act, no. S.1896, 117th Congress (2021).

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/1896/text>

Ali, S., Saeed, M. H., Aldreabi, E., Blackburn, J., De Cristofaro, E., Zannettou, S., & Stringhini, G. (2021). Understanding the Effect of Deplatforming on Social Networks. *13th ACM Web Science Conference 2021*, 187–195. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3447535.3462637>

Andrews, E. (2018, April 12). *The Science Behind Cambridge Analytica: Does Psychological Profiling Work?* Stanford Graduate School of Business.

<https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/science-behind-cambridge-analytica-does-psychological-profiling-work>

Anonymous. (2020, October). *Supplemental Disclosure of Securities Law Violations by Facebook, Inc.* SEC Office of the Whistleblower.

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WPOaPE6MyWMdMV9f218nsSjGGrmSjnkW/view?usp=embed\\_facebook](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WPOaPE6MyWMdMV9f218nsSjGGrmSjnkW/view?usp=embed_facebook)

Austin, E. W., Borah, P., & Domgaard, S. (2021). COVID-19 disinformation and political engagement among communities of color: The role of media literacy. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-58>

Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Bleakley, P. (2021). Panic, pizza and mainstreaming the alt-right: A social media analysis of Pizzagate and the rise of the QAnon conspiracy. *Current Sociology*, 00113921211034896. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921211034896>

- Brodkin, J. (2021, July 1). *Judge tears Florida's social media law to shreds for violating First Amendment*. Ars Technica.  
<https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2021/07/judge-tears-floridas-social-media-law-to-shreds-for-violating-first-amendment/>
- Buble, C. (2020, December 10). *Election Commission Regains Quorum and Resumes Full Duties, Facing a Massive Backlog of Work*. Government Executive.  
<https://www.govexec.com/management/2020/12/election-commission-regains-quorum-and-resumes-full-duties-facing-massive-backlog-work/170680/>
- Budiman, A., & Noe-Bustamente, L. (2020, December 15). Black eligible voters make up 48% of growth in Georgia electorate since 2000. *Pew Research Center*.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/15/black-eligible-voters-have-accounted-for-nearly-half-of-georgia-electorates-growth-since-2000/>
- Byers, D. O. and D. (2017, September 28). *Exclusive: Fake black activist social media accounts linked to Russian government*. CNNMoney.  
<https://money.cnn.com/2017/09/28/media/blackactivist-russia-facebook-twitter/index.html>
- Campbell, C., & Schultz, L. (2020, October 21). *Wisconsin GOP leaders made it harder to vote, especially for Black residents*. Wisconsin Watch.Org.  
<https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/10/wisconsin-gop-leaders-made-it-harder-to-vote-especially-for-black-residents/>
- Chang, H.-C. H., Chen, E., Zhang, M., Muric, G., & Ferrara, E. (2021). Social Bots and Social Media Manipulation in 2020: The Year in Review. *ArXiv:2102.08436 [Cs]*.  
<http://arxiv.org/abs/2102.08436>
- Channel 4 News Investigations. (2020, September 28). *Revealed: Trump campaign strategy to deter millions of Black Americans from voting in 2016*. Channel 4 News.  
<https://www.channel4.com/news/revealed-trump-campaign-strategy-to-deter-millions-of-black-americans-from-voting-in-2016>
- Charlton, L. (2019, August 6). What Is the Great Replacement? *The New York Times*.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/us/politics/grand-replacement-explainer.html>



Consumer Online Privacy Rights Act, no. S.2968, 116th Congress (2019).

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/2968>

Daniel, L. (2016, March 8). *Rise of the Peñabots*. Data and Society.

<https://points.datasociety.net/rise-of-the-pe%C3%B1abots-d35f9fe12d67>

Dwoskin, E., & Timberg, C. (2021, January 16). Misinformation dropped dramatically the week after Twitter banned Trump and some allies. *Washington Post*.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/16/misinformation-trump-twitter/>

Facebook. (2019, November). *About ads about social issues, elections or politics*. Facebook Business Help Centre. <https://en-gb.facebook.com/business/help/167836590566506>

Facebook. (2021, October 11). September 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report. *Meta*.

<https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/september-2021-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-report/>

*Facebook: From Election to Insurrection*. (2021, March 18). Avaaz.

[https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/facebook\\_election\\_insurrection/](https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/facebook_election_insurrection/)

Federal Election Commission. (n.d.). *Advertising and disclaimers*. FEC.Gov. Retrieved October 29, 2021, from

<https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/advertising-and-disclaimers/>

Fessler, P. (2020, October 1). *Trump's Calls For Poll Watchers Raise Fears About Voter Intimidation*. Georgia Public Broadcasting.

<https://www.gpb.org/news/2020/10/01/trumps-calls-for-poll-watchers-raise-fears-about-voter-intimidation>

Fischer, S. (2020, December 22). "Unreliable" news sources got more traction in 2020. *Axios*.

<https://www.axios.com/unreliable-news-sources-social-media-engagement-297bf046-c1b0-4e69-9875-05443b1dca73.html>

- Flores-Saviga, C., & Savage, S. (2019). *Anti-Latinx Computational Propaganda in the United States*. Institute For The Future.  
[https://www.iff.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/downloads/ourwork/IFTF\\_Anti\\_Latinx\\_com\\_p.prop\\_W\\_05.07.19.pdf](https://www.iff.org/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/ourwork/IFTF_Anti_Latinx_com_p.prop_W_05.07.19.pdf)
- Fung, B. (2020, September 23). *Facebook allowed hundreds of misleading super PAC ads, activist group finds*. CNN.  
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/23/tech/facebook-super-pac-ads/index.html>
- Galeotti, M. (2019, June). *Active Measures: Russia's Covert Geopolitical Operations*. George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.  
<http://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/active-measures-russias-covert-geopolitical-operations-0>
- Gilbert, C. (2014, May 13). *For polarized Wisconsin, no consensus, little common ground*.  
<http://www.jsonline.com/news/statepolitics/polarized-wisconsins-legacy-no-consensus-little-common-ground-b99268173z1-258974221.html>
- Goodwin, A., Woolley, S., & Joseff, K. (2020, October). *Social Media Influencers and the 2020 U.S. Election: Paying 'Regular People' for Digital Campaign Communication - Center for Media Engagement - Center for Media Engagement*.  
<https://mediaengagement.org/research/social-media-influencers-and-the-2020-election/>
- Gursky, J., Riedl, M. J., & Woolley, S. (2021, March 19). *The disinformation threat to diaspora communities in encrypted chat apps*. Brookings.  
<https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/the-disinformation-threat-to-diaspora-communities-in-encrypted-chat-apps/>
- Hampton, K., Rainie, L., Lu, W., Dwyer, M., Shin, I., & Purcell, K. (2014, August 26). *Social Media and the 'Spiral of Silence.'* *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/08/26/social-media-and-the-spiral-of-silence/>

- Handcock, M. S., & Gile, K. J. (2011). Comment: On the Concept of Snowball Sampling. *Sociological Methodology*, 41(1), 367–371.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9531.2011.01243.x>
- Hardee, H. (2020, October 17). *Pro-Trump and pro-Biden PACs spread debunked Facebook ads in Wisconsin*. WisconsinWatch.Org.  
<https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/10/pro-trump-and-pro-biden-pacs-spread-debunked-facebook-ads-in-wisconsin/>
- Hawkins, D. (2016, November 3). No, you can't text your vote. But these fake ads tell Clinton supporters to do just that. *Washington Post*.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/11/03/no-you-cant-text-your-vote-but-these-ads-tell-clinton-supporters-to-do-just-that/>
- Heim, M., & Litke, E. (2020, November 4). *PolitiFact—Fact-checking the avalanche of Wisconsin election misinformation*. Politifact.  
<https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/nov/04/fact-checking-avalanche-wisconsin-election-misinfo/>
- Jhaver, S., Boylston, C., Yang, D., & Bruckman, A. (2021). Evaluating the Effectiveness of Deplatforming as a Moderation Strategy on Twitter. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5(CSCW2), 381:1–381:30. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3479525>
- Joseff, K., & Woolley, S. (2019). *The Human Consequences of Computational Propaganda: Eight Case Studies from the 2018 US Midterm Elections*. Institute For The Future.  
[https://www.iftf.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/downloads/ourwork/IFTF\\_Executive\\_Summary\\_comp.prop\\_W\\_05.07.19\\_01.pdf](https://www.iftf.org/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/ourwork/IFTF_Executive_Summary_comp.prop_W_05.07.19_01.pdf)
- Joyner, C. (2020, October 22). Georgia at high risk of militia threat around elections, new report says. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.  
<https://www.ajc.com/news/georgia-at-high-risk-of-militia-threat-around-elections-new-report-says/5ZWUJWXY35DMXHCCEN735CSPFY/>
- Kertscher, T. (2020, November 13). *PolitiFact—No proof Georgia Senate hopeful Warnock 'welcomed' Fidel Castro to his church*. Politifact.

<https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/nov/13/kelly-loeffler/no-proof-georgia-senate-hopeful-warnock-welcomed-f/>

Kumleben, M., Woolley, S., & Engler, M. (2020). *Computational Propaganda and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election: Antisemitic and Anti-Black Content on Facebook and Telegram*. Anti-Defamation League.

<https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/computational-propaganda-and-the-2020-election>

Leon, S., & Sharp, R. (2020, November 10). *Who micro-targeted political ads more—The Trump or Biden campaign?* Global Witness.

<https://en.blog/who-micro-targeted-political-ads-more-trump-or-biden-campaign/>

Levine, S. (2021, May 6). Arizona Republicans hunt for bamboo-laced China ballots in 2020 ‘audit’ effort. *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/06/arizona-republicans-bamboo-ballots-audit-2020>

Litke, E. (2020, November 17). *Fact check: Milwaukee elections flash drive transferred to county office without tampering*. USA TODAY.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/11/17/fact-check-milwaukee-flash-drive-incident-unrelated-biden-votes/6325022002/>

Mazzei, P. (2020, November 21). How Hispanic Voters Swung Miami Right. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/21/us/miami-hispanic-voters.html>

Mazzei, P., & Medina, J. (2020, October 21). False Political News in Spanish Pits Latino Voters Against Black Lives Matter. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/21/us/politics/spanish-election-2020-disinformation.html>

Mcgraw, M. (2021, October 27). *A fear grows in Trumpworld: Have we gone too conspiratorial?* POLITICO.

<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/10/27/trump-conspiracy-theories-election-517313>

- Musgrave, S. (2017, August 9). *'I Get Called a Russian Bot 50 Times a Day.'* POLITICO Magazine.  
<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/08/09/twitter-trump-train-maga-echo-chamber-215470>
- National Tracking Poll #2110134. (2021). Morning Consult + Politico.  
<https://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000017c-c00e-d3c9-a77c-cb9eab6a0000&nname=playbook&nid=0000014f-1646-d88f-a1cf-5f46b7bd0000&nrid=0000014e-f115-dd93-ad7f-f91513e50001&nlid=630318>
- Native American Resource Fund. (2020, June 4). Report: Obstacles at Every Turn. *Native American Voting Rights*. <https://vote.narf.org/obstacles-at-every-turn/>
- Niese, M., & Wickert, D. (2019, November 1). Georgia bets on new voting system amid high-stakes election. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.  
<https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/georgia-bets-new-voting-system-amid-high-stakes-election/XVR7Jw5i1J7MiZ11O8xUZK/>
- Pew Research. (2020, January 31). Mapping the 2020 Latino electorate. *Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project*.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/interactives/mapping-the-latino-electorate/>
- Quaranta, K. (2020, November 7). Disinformation tried to deceive Arizonans about the election. *Cronkite News - Arizona PBS*.  
<https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2020/11/06/social-media-disinformation-tactics-tried-to-deceive-arizonans-elections-2020/>
- Ramachandran, G. (2021, May 19). *Twitter Is a Cauldron of Misinformation About the Arizona 2020 Vote Audit* | Brennan Center for Justice. Brennan Center for Justice.  
<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/twitter-cauldron-misinformation-about-arizona-2020-vote-audit>
- Ravel, A. M., Woolley, S., & Sridharan, H. (2019). *Principles and Policies to Counter Deceptive Digital Politics*. MapLight.

<https://maplight.org.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/20190211224524/Principles-and-Policies-to-Counter-Deceptive-Digital-Politics-1-1-2.pdf>

- Raymond, J. (2020, October 5). *State Farm Arena triples number of voting machines on site for early voting period*. 11Alive.Com.  
<https://www.11alive.com/article/news/politics/elections/state-farm-arena-tripls-voting-machines-early-voting-atlanta/85-84db0c37-deee-4e6c-bb0f-56185f1fa233>
- Redman, H., August 31, W. E., & 2020. (2020, August 31). Wisconsin Republicans spread misinformation in elections roundtable. *Wisconsin Examiner*.  
<https://wisconsinexaminer.com/brief/wisconsin-republicans-spread-misinformation-in-elections-roundtable/>
- Rogers, R. (2020). Deplatforming: Following extreme Internet celebrities to Telegram and alternative social media. *European Journal of Communication*, 35(3), 213–229.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323120922066>
- Rossman, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2016). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research: Learning in the Field*. SAGE Publications.
- Russian trolls' chief target was "black US voters" in 2016. (2019, October 9). *BBC News*.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-49987657>
- Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to Identify Themes. *Field Methods*, 15(1), 85–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X02239569>
- Ryan-Mosley, T. (2020, October 20). *Inside the information war on Black voters*. MIT Technology Review.  
<https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/20/1010809/inside-the-information-war-on-black-voters/>
- Sadeghi, R. L. and M. (2020, November 4). *Fact check: Arizona election departments confirm Sharpies can be used on ballots*. USA TODAY.  
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/11/04/fact-check-sharpiagate-controversy-arizona-false-claim/6164820002/>



SAFE TECH Act, no. S.299, 117th Congress (2021).

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/299/text>

Serchen, J., Doherty, R., Atiq, O., & Hilden, D. (2020). Racism and Health in the United States: A Policy Statement From the American College of Physicians. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 173(7), 556–557. <https://doi.org/10.7326/M20-4195>

Silverman, C., & Alexander, L. (2016, November 3). *How Teens In The Balkans Are Duping Trump Supporters With Fake News*. BuzzFeed News.

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo>

So, L. (2021, June 11). Trump-inspired death threats are terrorizing election workers. *Reuters*.

<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-trump-georgia-threats/>

Social Media DATA Act, no. H.R.3451, 117th Congress (2021).

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3451/text?r=28&s=1>

Sommer, W. (2019, May 7). Laura Loomer and Milo Yiannopoulos Find Life After Facebook on Telegram. *The Daily Beast*.

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/laura-loomer-and-milo-yiannopoulos-find-life-after-facebook-on-telegram-an-encrypted-messaging-app>

Spencer, S. H., & Fichera, A. (2021, February 6). MyPillow CEO's Video Reshapes Debunked Election Fraud Claims. *FactCheck.Org*.

<https://www.factcheck.org/2021/02/mypillow-ceos-video-reshapes-debunked-election-fraud-claims/>

Swenson, A., & Seitz, A. (2021, April 20). *AP FACT CHECK: Trump tweets a tall tale of “deleted” votes*. AP NEWS.

<https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-trump-tweets-tall-tale-votes-13c104367924b8192b4fcec3334f7806>

- Thakur, D., & Hankerson, D. L. (2021). *Facts and their Discontents: A Research Agenda for Online Disinformation, Race, and Gender*. Center for Democracy & Technology.  
<https://cdt.org/insights/facts-and-their-discontents-a-research-agenda-for-online-disinformation-race-and-gender/>
- Treene, A. (2020, September 29). *Pro-Trump super PAC launches \$40 million ad blitz in sprint to election*. Axios.  
<https://www.axios.com/trump-super-pac-ad-blitz-e7fc9519-ba85-42e1-93a6-c05a03bc0584.html>
- Trump claims millions voted illegally in presidential poll. (2016, November 28). *BBC News*.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38126438>
- Vasilogambros, M. (2019, October 4). *For Some Native Americans, No Home Address Might Mean No Voting*. Pew Research Center. <https://pew.org/3549GQY>
- Vogels, E. (2021, January 13). *The State of Online Harassment*. *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/01/13/the-state-of-online-harassment/>
- Witynski, M., & Christoffer, J. (2020, August 15). *Skepticism Urged As Disinformation, Voter Suppression Wash Over Wisconsin*. Wisconsin Public Radio.  
<https://www.wpr.org/skepticism-urged-disinformation-voter-suppression-wash-over-wisconsin>
- Woolley, S. C., & Howard, P. N. (2018). *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media*. Oxford University Press.