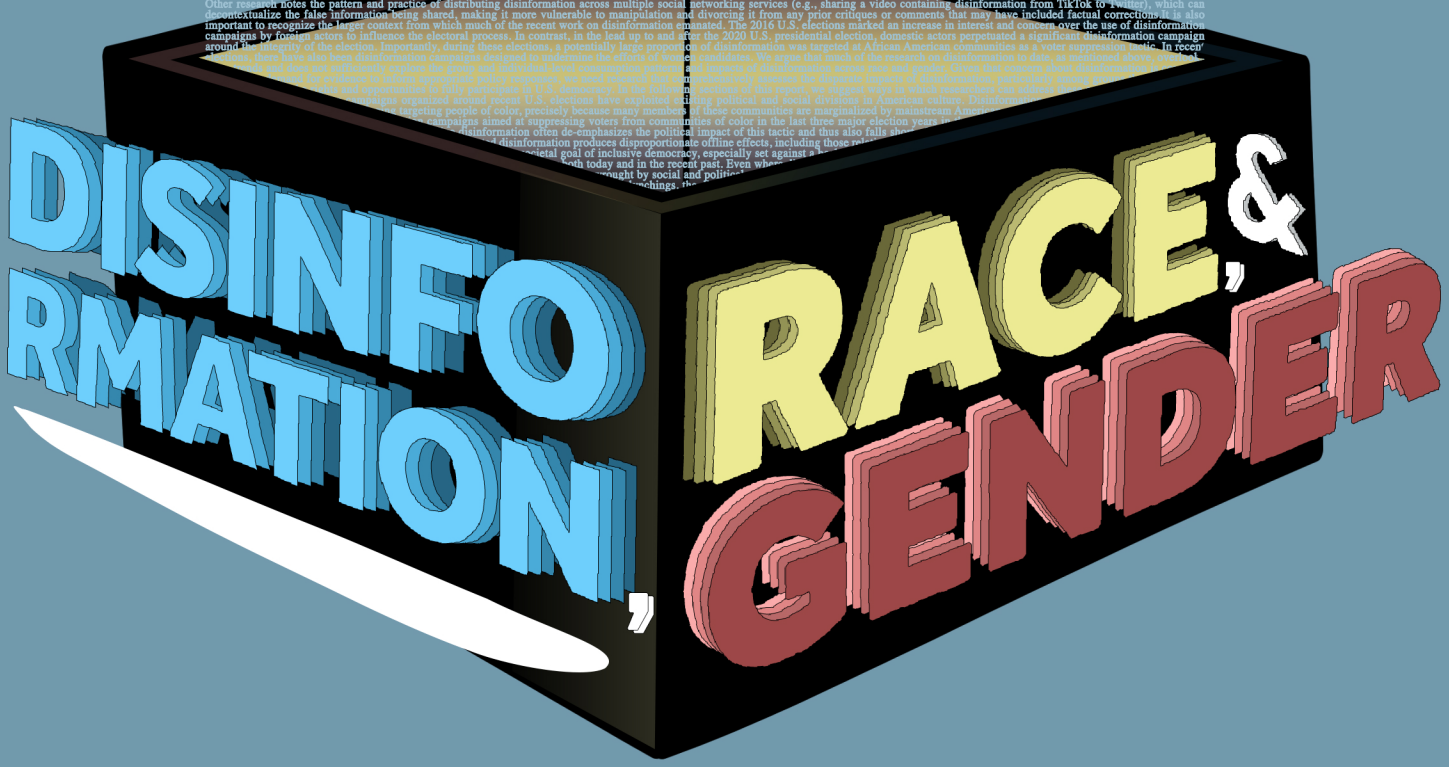
FACTS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS:

A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR



CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY & TECHNOLOGY

A CDT RESEARCH REPORT

CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY & TECHNOLOGY

Facts and their Discontents:

A Research Agenda for Online Disinformation, Race, and Gender

A CDT Research Report

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Executive Summary

The January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol demonstrated how online disinformation can have severe offline consequences. For some time, the problems and possible impacts on democracy caused by online mis- and dis-information have dominated public policy discussions and thus research about these topics has developed rapidly in the last few years. However, this research generally lacks a focus on the impact of disinformation and misinformation on people of color, women, LGBTQIA+ communities, and other voices that are less prominent in mainstream political discourse in the U.S.

Many disinformation campaigns are specifically designed with racist and/or misogynistic content, suggesting that disinformation is a tool used to promote ideologies like white supremacy and patriarchy.

In September 2020, CDT brought together an interdisciplinary and international group of experts to share and discuss research on this issue. This report presents some of those ideas and builds upon them to identify key research opportunities, including important unresolved questions around the intersections of online disinformation, race, and gender. This report also makes recommendations for how to tackle the related methodological and technical problems that researchers and others face in addressing these topics. This is important in generating research that will be directly relevant for developing policy solutions to address disinformation.

What We Know About Online Disinformation in General

- Producers of misinformation are motivated by different incentives, including political ideology, money, and status/attention.
- The methods and tools for spreading disinformation include social media, memes, and bots. Producers of disinformation also target journalists and influencers to amplify their false messages.
- Disinformation is designed to meet the demand for compelling and evocative content. A key feature of disinformation is that it commands people's limited attention and potential engagement, including their capacity to share content with others. Novel content that presents false information in new and unique ways is more likely to be shared.
- People who share false information are more likely to be part of online polarized communities, which act as echo chambers and limit members' exposure to alternative viewpoints that would counter disinformation.

What We Know About Online Disinformation, Race, and Gender

- From the few studies that do exist, we can say that:
    - There were racially targeted disinformation campaigns aimed at suppressing votes from communities of color in the last three major elections in the U.S.

- Tactics include the use of "digital blackface/brownface," where disinformation operatives representing themselves as African American activists attracted more online engagement than any other identity category.
- Spanish-speaking communities lack trusted sources that speak directly to them, and Latinx-oriented news outlets do not typically provide much information about American political candidates. This makes it easier for bad actors to spread disinformation unchallenged.
- Content moderation practices are not nearly as advanced or robust for Spanish-language content, or content in any other language besides English.
- Gendered disinformation campaigns promote the narrative that women are not good political leaders, and often aim to undermine women political leaders by spreading false information about their qualifications, experience, and intelligence, sometimes using sexualized imagery as part of their tactics.
- Women of color may be more likely to be the subject of disinformation when compared to others.

Major Research Gaps and Opportunities

- More work is needed on the definition and measurement of disinformation. A focus on race, gender, and intersectionality can help address this, possibly by improving how we assess impact and harm.
- We still lack evidence of the impact of disinformation on things like electoral outcomes, political opinions, and trust in political institutions, including where such disinformation is about or targeted at people based on race and gender.
- We need to better understand the needs of communities where information verification is currently more difficult or where data voids may exist, such as in Spanish-speaking communities.
- Understanding how disinformation leverages false narratives based on racism and/or misogyny may also improve efforts to counter disinformation, particularly as fact-checking alone may fall short.
- *Key questions include:* How can we better measure the degree and methods of coordination between different actors (organic or otherwise) who may be involved in a disinformation campaign? To what extent is coordination maintained through shared views of patriarchy and/or white supremacy?
- How can research better capture and understand the fluidity between misinformation and disinformation, particularly if these patterns vary across and within groups based on race, gender, and other factors?

Why These Research Gaps Are Important

Disinformation campaigns often rely on exploiting existing narratives of discrimination (e.g., mysoginistic views) or narratives that stem from historical discrimination (e.g., views within some African American communities about the criminal justice system) to build credibility for the false information being shared. By not sufficiently examining this feature, we may be missing the point of disinformation campaigns, which are sometimes intentionally designed to exploit existing forms of discrimination and often target people based on race, gender identity, or both.

The public policy stakes are too high to ignore the impacts on communities that together make up far more than half the U.S. population. Governments, industry, and civil society are understandably concerned and are hastily putting forward policy and legislative proposals, but without the comprehensive kinds of evidence that we call for, these solutions may fall short and could likely harm the same communities they aim to protect. We can start by building this body of evidence and taking advantage of the research opportunities described in this report.

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Introduction

Following the 2020 U.S. presidential and congressional elections, repeated warnings by journalists of the largest domestic disinformation campaigns ever[1] were borne out: doubt sown online about the results contributed to the attack on the U.S. Congress in Washington, D.C.[2] In the years since the 2016 U.S. elections, we have reached a greater understanding of how offline harms like these and others were shaped or propelled forward by disinformation campaigns.[3] While we don't have accurate data on the true scale of the problem, observers have noted that social networking services have removed hundreds of millions, and even billions, of fake accounts, bots, and false posts within the last year.[4]

Understandably, governments, companies, civil society, and ordinary people are concerned about the problems that stem from disinformation and misinformation and want to address them. At the Center for Democracy & Technology (CDT), our work on this issue to date has focused on helping election officials and other trusted sources counter misinformation and online voter suppression.[5] Much more research is required to effectively inform policy responses and industry solutions, particularly on the impact of disinformation and misinformation on people of color, women, LGBTQIA+ communities, and other voices that are less prominent in mainstream political discourse in the U.S. The prevalence of disinformation campaigns that are intentionally designed with racist and/or misogynistic content points to the need for interdisciplinary research and policy solutions.

In September 2020, CDT brought together an interdisciplinary and international group of experts to share and discuss research on this issue,[6] focusing on online disinformation and the research gaps that exist therein. This report presents some of those ideas (including those of the main presenters at the workshop), and builds upon them to identify and outline important

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[1] Coppins, M. (2020, February 10). The Billion-Dollar Disinformation Campaign to Reelect the President. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-2020-disinformation-war/605530/.

[2] Reader, R. (2021, January 7). How years of online misinformation erupted into real-world insurrection. Fast Company. https://www.fastcompany.com/90591738/misinformation-disinformation-trump-capitol-mob-insurrection.

[3] Senate Committee on Intelligence, 116th Congress. (2019). *Report of the United States Senate Committee on Intelligence on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2: Russia's Use of Social Media with Additional Views* (Congressional Report No. 116–XX; pp. 1–85). U.S. Senate. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf.

[4] Stengel, R. (2020, June 26). *We Should Be as Worried About Domestic Disinformation as We Are About International Campaigns*. Time. https://time.com/5860215/domestic-disinformation-growing-menace-america/.

[5] *See*, Knodel, M. (2020, October 9). Helping Election Officials Combat Election Misinformation: A Course Developed by CDT and CTCL. Center for Democracy and Technology. https://cdt.org/insights/helping-election-officials-combat-election-misinformation-a-course-developed-by-cdt-and-ctcl/ and Llansó, E. (2020, October 15). Online Voter Suppression: A Guide for Election Officials on How to Spot & Counter. Center for Democracy and Technology. https://cdt.org/insights/online-voter-suppression-a-guide-for-election-officials-on-how-to-spot-counter/.

[6] Thakur, D., & Magby, J. (2020, October 2). CDT Research Workshop: First Steps in Developing a Research Agenda to Address Disinformation, Race, and Gender. Center for Democracy and Technology. https://cdt.org/insights/cdt-research-workshop-first-steps-in-developing-a-research-agenda-to-address-disinformation-race-and-gender/.

unresolved research questions around the intersections of online disinformation, race, and gender, and to make recommendations for how to tackle the related methodological and technical problems that researchers and others face in addressing these topics.

We examine and pose these questions with a view towards generating research that will be directly relevant to pressing policy questions relating to disinformation. To identify these gaps, we reviewed and examined existing research from a variety of fields, including communication studies, political science, economics, gender studies, computer science, and race and ethnic studies. This report primarily focuses on research conducted in the U.S., though many of the findings will likely be relevant in other contexts.

Although we focus on disinformation in this report, we recognize that this analysis can yield insights for research on related forms of false information, such as misinformation. For example, in our discussion on race and disinformation below, we call for more research on how to address data voids, or the lack of accurate and trustworthy information, focusing specifically on data voids within Spanish-speaking online networks. Such research can also help combat misinformation on those networks, and where possible, we attempt to highlight these additional opportunities.

In general, some research exists that looks at disinformation and race or gender, and we review it in the sections that follow. This body of work includes a range of news media and other non-academic sources, as some of the issues and examples raised are recent (e.g., the 2020 U.S. elections). We then present an analysis of the key problems and opportunities for researchers to address in order to better understand the patterns and impacts of disinformation. We hope our review will contribute to greater attention, resources, and work towards a research agenda on disinformation, race, and gender.

Disinformation Research – Current Trends

We should acknowledge from the onset that there is no standard definition of disinformation, and that this lack of precision makes it difficult to research the problem. To advance this discussion, researchers have identified different types of false information in addition to disinformation. For example, misinformation can be described as "inaccurate information created or shared without an intent to mislead or cause harm and can include genuine mistakes of fact"; and malinformation as "accurate information presented in a misleading context."[7]

In this report, we focus on online disinformation, which can be understood to:

> *(i) involve false information;*
>
> *(ii) that is intentionally designed to be false or misleading;*

[7] *See*, Llansó, E. (2020, October 15) and Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Council of Europe. https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html.

(iii) that is distributed online in some coordinated manner; and

(iv) often has some political, social, or economic goal, including undermining trust in democratic institutions or other harms.[8]

One overarching challenge in the field of disinformation research is the difficulty in drawing bright lines between different types of false and misleading information online. The definitions of various categories of false information are not mutually exclusive; for example, disinformation can be considered a subset of misinformation, characterized by the intent to mislead.[9] Precise measurement of patterns and impact is difficult, and intent is rarely clear. Also, as disinformation is often linked to broad goals, the impacts may be diffuse and not targeted, making it harder to find evidence of harm.[10,11]

A growing body of research examines the subject of disinformation, much of which focuses on the production, distribution, and consumption of disinformation. For example, research suggests that some producers of disinformation may be motivated by one or more of three things: "ideology, money, and/or status and attention."[12] These producers strategically use social media, memes, and bots, and they target journalists and influencers to amplify their false messages.[13] Studies have also shown that disinformation campaigns may opportunistically use content they didn't produce, but that matches the false narrative being promoted.[14] A key feature of disinformation is that it is attractive, commands people's limited attention, and has potential for engagement (including click-throughs and sharing content with others).[15]

Indeed, disinformation is designed to meet people's demands for content that is compelling and evocative. We also know that the novelty of disinformation affects whether this content is

[8] *See*, Jack, C. (2017). Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information (p. 22). Data & Society. https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_LexiconofLies.pdf; *see*, Fallis, D. (2015). What is disinformation? *Library Trends*, *63*(3), 401–426. https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/15205/fallis_disinfo1.pdf; *see*, Starbird, K. (2019). Disinformation's spread: Bots, trolls and all of us. *Nature*, *571*(7766), 449–449. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-02235-x; *see*, Bennett, L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication*, *33*, 122–139. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317.

[9] Guess, A. M., & Lyons, B. A. (2020). Misinformation, Disinformation, and Online Propaganda. In *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform* (pp. 10–33). Cambridge University Press.

[10] Pielemeier, J. (2020). Disentangling Disinformation: What Makes Regulating Disinformation So Difficult? *Utah L. Rev.*, *4*(1), 917. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3629541.

[11] Note that while the aim of this report is not to solve these definitional problems, we do point to possible areas for improvement by taking a more targeted focus on impacts and harms. See the section Methodological Problems - Definitions and Approaches below.

[12] Marwick, A., & Lewis, R. (2017). *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online* (pp. 1–106). Data & Society. https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Hindman, M., & Barash, V. (2018). *Disinformation, "Fake News" and Influence Campaigns on Twitter* (pp. 1–62). Knight Foundation. https://knightfoundation.org/reports/disinformation-fake-news-and-influence-campaigns-on-twitter/.

[15] Guess, A. M., & Lyons, B. A. (2020). Misinformation, Disinformation, and Online Propaganda. In *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform* (pp. 10–33). Cambridge University Press.

shared widely.[16] While consumption of disinformation is typically higher in groups that have been targeted by a campaign, at the individual level, disinformation is a very small share of people's overall information diet.[17]

As to why people consume and share false information, some research suggests that this behavior is a product of polarized communities that act as echo chambers and limit members' exposure to alternative viewpoints that would counter disinformation.[18] Other research notes the pattern and practice of distributing disinformation across multiple social networking services (e.g., sharing a video containing disinformation from TikTok to Twitter), which can decontextualize the false information being shared, making it more vulnerable to manipulation and divorcing it from any prior critiques or comments that may have included factual corrections.[19]

It is also important to recognize the larger context from which much of the recent work on disinformation emanated. The 2016 U.S. elections marked an increase in interest and concern over the use of disinformation campaigns by foreign actors to influence the electoral process. In contrast, in the lead up to and after the 2020 U.S. presidential election, domestic actors perpetuated a significant disinformation campaign around the integrity of the election.[20] Importantly, during these elections, a potentially large proportion of disinformation was targeted at African American communities as a voter suppression tactic.[21] In recent elections, there have also been disinformation campaigns designed to undermine the efforts of women candidates.[22]

We argue that much of the research on disinformation to date, as mentioned above, overlooks these trends and does not sufficiently explore the group and individual-level consumption patterns and impacts of disinformation across race and gender. Given that concern about disinformation is correctly leading to a demand for evidence to inform appropriate policy responses, we need research that comprehensively assesses the disparate impacts of disinformation, particularly among groups that historically have been denied the rights and opportunities to fully participate in U.S. democracy. In the following sections of this report, we suggest ways in which researchers can address these gaps.

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press.

[19] Kraft, P. M., & Donovan, J. (2020). Disinformation by Design: The Use of Evidence Collages and Platform Filtering in a Media Manipulation Campaign. *Political Communication*, *37*(2020), 194–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1686094.

[20] Coppins, M. (2020, February 10). The Billion-Dollar Disinformation Campaign to Reelect the President. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-2020-disinformation-war/605530/.

[21] Overton, S. (2019). State Power to Regulate Social Media Companies to Prevent Voter Suppression. *UCDL Rev.*, *53*, 1793. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3582523.

[22] Oates, S., Gurevich, O., Walker, C., & Di Meco, L. (2019). *Running While Female: Using AI to Track how Twitter Commentary Disadvantages Women in the 2020 U.S. Primaries* (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3444200). Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3444200.

Disinformation and Race

Online disinformation campaigns organized around recent U.S. elections have exploited existing political and social divisions in American culture. Disinformation operators deployed a number of methods, including strategic messaging targeting people of color, precisely because many members of these communities are marginalized by mainstream American society. Researchers have identified what appear to be racially targeted disinformation campaigns aimed at suppressing voters from communities of color in the last three major election years in the U.S.[23] However, despite identifying these trends, research and subsequent policy discourse on online disinformation often de-emphasizes the political impact of this tactic and thus also falls short of articulating broader implications.

Disinformation operators deployed a number of methods, including strategic messaging targeting people of color, precisely because many members of these communities are marginalized by mainstream American society.

One of the outstanding questions in this area of research is whether racially targeted disinformation produces disproportionate offline effects, including those relating to offline violence[24] and voting participation. The disproportionate targeting of people of color online further undermines the larger societal goal of inclusive democracy, especially set against a backdrop of institutional practices and legislation in the United States that have limited opportunities for the democractic participation of people of color both today[25] and in the

[23] *See*, analysis of the 2016 election from Howard, P. N., Ganesh, B., Liotsiou, D., Kelly, J., & François, C. (2019). The IRA, social media and political polarization in the United States, 2012-2018. University of Oxford and *see*, research on the 2018 election from Mie Kim, Y. (2018, November 20). Voter Suppression Has Gone Digital | Brennan Center for Justice. https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/voter-suppression-has-gone-digital. *See*, news reports on the 2020 election from Mazzei, P., & Medina, J. (2020, October 29). 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.

[24] According to the FBI in 2018, hate crimes reached a 16-year high with the largest increase in crimes targeting the Latinx population (U. S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018). This increase is the result of repeated assaults on the character of [the Latinx] community [...].” Mercado, M. (2020). *Disinformation and Hate Speech Harm BIPOC* (pp. 1–18). The National Hispanic Media Coalition. https://www.nhmc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Disinformation-and-Hate-Speech-Harm-BIPOC-NHMC.pdf, at p. 3.

[25] Of the many domains of life in the U.S. that limit opportunities for the democratic participation of marginalized groups (including low-income Americans, and people of color), voter suppression efforts specifically provide a number of ready examples. These range from subtle unobstructive efforts like voter registration restrictions, elimination of voting sites, and reductions in early voting periods and voting hours to more overt actions like purges of voter rolls and systematic disenfranchisement, for example felony disenfranchisement. ACLU. (2020, February 3). *Block the Vote: Voter Suppression in 2020*. American Civil Liberties Union. https://www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/block-the-vote-voter-suppression-in-2020/. Thirty-six states have identification requirements at the polls when nearly 21 million U.S. citizens do not have

recent past. Even where disinformation operations do not exclusively target people of color, the harms to these communities are more aggravated because of embedded political disadvantages wrought by social and political practice. "The United States has a hateful track record of dehumanizing communities of color, and allowing violence to persist against them, such as the excusal and erasure of mass lynchings, the displacement of indigenous communities ...."[26] That disinformation agents would design campaigns with racial components underscores the U.S.' historical and contemporary relationship to white supremacy and patriarchy.

CDT's recent workshop sought to understand the ways disinformation campaigns deployed race-oriented strategies to further disseminate propaganda. This section describes the existing research on the nature of this problem, and underscores the difficulty in distinguishing between malevolent disinformation, misinformation shared with (potentially) good intentions, and longstanding political tactics used to influence voters and others through false information.

Identity Spoofing Online, Digital Blackface/Brownface

In 2016, foreign-driven social media disinformation campaigns aimed to inflame animosities between oppositional groups, pairing each group with a specific set of opponents.[27] While operators shifted messaging style and targets by platform, the larger goals were consistent across platforms. Broadly speaking, the 2016 Russian-based Internet Research Agency's (IRA) campaign targeted "conservatives," "progressives,'' and people of color, specifically African Americans on Twitter.[28] During CDT's workshop, Deen Freelon showed that messages targeting African Americans played on two main themes to establish credibility and build an audience before sharing misleading content: anti-racism messaging and the promotion of African American achievement.[29] His research on social media disinformation showed that foreign operatives representing themselves as African American activists attracted more online

government-issued photo identification. Research conducted by the Brennan Center also indicates that non-white citizens are less likely to possess a government-issued photo ID due to the expenses related to obtaining the underlying documents required to get an ID. Brennan Center for Justice. (2006). *Citizens without Proof: A Survey of Americans' Possession of Documentary Proof of Citizenship and Photo Identification* (Voting Rights & Election Series, pp. 1–3). Brennan Center for Justice. https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-without-proof.

[26] Mercado, M. (2020). *Disinformation and Hate Speech Harm BIPOC* (pp. 1–18). The National Hispanic Media Coalition. https://www.nhmc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Disinformation-and-Hate-Speech-Harm-BIPOC-NHMC.pdf, at p. 3.

[27] Freelon, D., & Lokot, T. (2020). Russian Twitter disinformation campaigns reach across the American political spectrum. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-003. *See also*, Stop Online Violence Against Women. (2018, October 11). *Press Release: Facebook Ads that Targeted Voters Centered on Black American Culture with Voter Suppression as the End Game.* https://stoponlinevaw.com/media/report-facebook-ads-that-targeted-voters-centered-on-black-american-culture/. This report describes the period of data collection as spanning May 2009 to October 2018. The results relate most directly to the 2016 election where the analysis showed that almost half (46%) of all activity from IRA Twitter accounts appeared in 2017.

[28] Freelon, D., & Lokot, T. (2020). Russian Twitter disinformation campaigns reach across the American political spectrum. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-003.

[29] Ibid.

engagement than any other identity category.[30] A core takeaway from this work is that racial identity presents a key variable for exploitation by disinformation campaigns. According to Freelon et al., "digital blackface/brownface," as it has been called, is "a highly effective tactic in an international disinformation campaign."[31]

Because political discourse in the U.S. is so polarized, it is likely that the post-mortem of the 2020 election cycle will show some resonance of disinformation messaging from both malicious operators and messaging from domestic actors, where they appear to be aimed at undermining trust in democractic institutions.

We know, for example, that the IRA's disinformation campaigns in 2016 were successful in part because they targeted African Americans by mimicking African American activists online. The success of this strategy has given way to what has been observed as a broader application of some of the same tactics in Latinx[32] communities,[33] though researchers have yet to produce comprehensive accounts of foreign disinformation activity in the 2020 election as the election took place recently. What is clear is that the landscape has shifted such that it is much harder to differentiate between intentional disinformation and political influence campaign tactics. However, because political discourse in the U.S. is so polarized, it is likely that the post-mortem of the 2020 election cycle will show some resonance of disinformation messaging from both malicious operators and messaging from domestic actors, where they appear to be aimed at undermining trust in democractic institutions. At the time of the writing of this report, there has been little analysis unmasking the identities of online actors to determine the level of racial

[30] Freelon, D. (2020, September 25) Black Trolls Matter and Other Conclusions from Analyzing State-Sponsored Disinformation, Presentation at the Center for Democracy & Technology Research Workshop on Disinformation: Understanding the Impacts in Terms of Race and Gender. September 2020. *See*, WSPA.Com, Channel 7 News, & WJZY Fox 46 Charlotte. (2020, October 16). *'Digital blackface': Twitter takes down fake accounts claiming to be Black Trump supporters*. https://www.wspa.com/news/national/digital-blackface-twitter-takes-down-fake-accounts-claiming-to-be-black-trump-supporters/.

[31] Freelon, D., Bossetta, M., Wells, C., Lukito, J., Xia, Y., & Adams, K. (2020). Black Trolls Matter: Racial and Ideological Asymmetries in Social Media Disinformation. Social Science Computer Review. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439320914853.

[32] In this report we use the term Latinx as a gender-neutral form of Latino or Latina to refer to communities of Latin American descent and heritage in the U.S.

[33] In a 2019 BuzzFeed article about extremists disproportionately targeted marginalized communities online Samuel Woolley, director of the Digital Intelligence Lab gave a prediction about disinformation in the 2020 election, saying "[expect] strategies like fomenting division, spreading disinformation, and co-opting narratives that were used by bad actors in the 2016 election to be employed in the upcoming 2020 election." *See*, Silverman, C., & Lytvynenko, J. (2019, May 7). *Extremists Disproportionally Target And Silence Latinos, Muslims, and Jews On Social Media* [News website]. BuzzFeed News. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/extremists-disproportionally-target-and-silence-latinos.

identity spoofing in the online activities surrounding the 2020 election. This is an important facet of any research on disinformation in the 2020 election.

Influencers: Unwitting Spreaders of Disinformation

Disinformation campaign tactics are often intertwined with organic online activity, making the messaging more accessible and allowing unwitting recipients to easily amplify the spread of messages, potentially strengthening their impact.[34] However, there are many unanswered questions about the role of influencers and their relationship to disinformation, including whether the actors we identify here as influencers are entirely "unwitting" and unaware of the electoral impacts of their online activity with regard to voter suppression. These open questions point to important areas for further research on disinformation in the wake of the 2020 election.

Over the course of the past year, researchers and journalists reported that disinformation activities leading up to the 2020 election targeted the Latinx community and that these campaigns relied on concentrated misinformation as a primary tactic.[35] Domestic nano-influencers[36] popular in Latinx online spaces contributed heavily to the problem,

[34] Starbird, K. (2019). Disinformation's spread: Bots, trolls and all of us. *Nature*, *571*(7766), 449–449. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02235-x.

[35] Although outside of the scope of this analysis on disinformation, we note that domestic political influence campaign tactics are similar to the tactics employed by foreign disinformation operators in 2016. Domestic political actors have long used organic online activism to gain political advantage, including by mining the political divisions within and between marginalized communities. More recently this activity has fueled partisan debates about immigration reform and labor rights. A late 2019 *New York Times* article provides more context on this point, as it details how domestic political operatives opposed to the American Descendents of Slaves (#ADOS) movement's core demand for reparations went on to amplify fringe aspects of the group's messaging online to undermine the group's credibility. *See*, Stockman, F. (2019, November 8). 'We're Self-Interested': The Growing Identity Debate in Black America (Published 2019). *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/us/slavery-black-immigrants-ados.html. One recent news report described a months-long domestic U.S. influence campaign run by political operatives that paid teenagers to use their own accounts to post disinformation repeatedly across social media. While we recognize that individuals may not be breaking the law by accepting payments for their online political support, we want to underscore the negative social impact of these methods. This campaign in particular relied on deceptive online tactics very similar to those used by the IRA. Representatives from the non-profit organization coordinating this operation say that their activities represent "sincere political activism conducted by real people." However, the Washington Post describes these activities as "the product of a sprawling yet secretive campaign that experts say evades the guardrails put in place by social media companies to limit online disinformation of the sort used by Russia during the 2016 campaign." In September of 2020, Twitter suspended at least twenty accounts involved in this campaign for platform manipulation and spam. The *Washington Post* article also quotes an expert contributor saying that, "the scale and scope of domestic disinformation is far greater than anything a foreign adversary could do to us." *See*, Stanley-Becker, I. (2020, September 15). Pro-Trump youth group enlists teens in secretive campaign likened to a 'troll farm,' prompting rebuke by Facebook and Twitter. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/turning-point-teens-disinformation-trump/2020/09/15/c84091ae-f20a-11ea-b796-2dd09962649c_story.html.

[36] The term nano-influencer is used to refer to people who have between 1,000 and 10,000 followers and are willing to use their social media platform to advertise products. *See*, Maheshwari, S. (2018, November 11). Are You Ready for the Nanoinfluencers? (Published 2018). *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/11/business/media/nanoinfluencers-instagram-influencers.html; *see*, *Social Media Influencers: Mega, Macro, Micro or Nano*. (2018, December 10). [Digital Media Industry Trade Publication]. CMSWire.Com. https://www.cmswire.com/digital-marketing/social-media-influencers-mega-macro-micro-or-nano/.

spreading false and misleading messages to niche audiences within the community. While this digital propaganda may have been organic and produced by "authentic" sources, it is unclear to what extent foreign operators may have leveraged the same messaging. It is important to understand the evolution of this dynamic; we know that in the 2016 election cycle, faked IRA personas generated intentionally misleading content themselves.[37]

In a significant number of cases, influencers have spread messaging that may have resulted in voter suppression. News reports from South Florida described Hispanic influencers spreading messaging that would have the effect of reducing Hispanic turnout,[38] and research from the Center for Media Engagements found "mommy" and "travel blogger" personalities being mobilized as political "nano-influencers," paid for digital campaign communication.[39] Ultimately these examples highlight the degree to which domestic influencers can be weaponized to undermine political participation. News reports and researchers have also observed domestic influencers who are members of the target community amplifying and generating messaging aimed to dissuade African Americans from voting – or instructing people on how to write in candidates, a tactic that in this case dampens African American voting power. In another example, reporting from *Politico* shows former Hispanic news anchors using their platform to spread "wild conspiracy theories" to Hispanic community members. Some Hispanic influencers and TV personalities are even expanding the reach of disinformation in the Latinx community by leveraging social media and TV platforms to spread false narratives.[40] The examples discussed in the following sections highlight disinformation operations targeting communities of color that play on the genuine fears of Latinx people who have fled authoritarian regimes, or manipulate the deep dissatisfaction African Americans feel toward political partisans of both parties.[41]

During her presentation at CDT's workshop, Mutale Nkonde described her recent research about an organization called the American Descendents of Slaves (#ADOS), a movement crafted

[37] Goodwin, A., Jossef, K., & Woolley, S. (2020). *Social Media Influencers and the 2020 U.S. Election: Paying 'Regular People' for Digital Campaign Communication*. Center for Media Engagement. https://mediaengagement.org/research/social-media-influencers-and-the-2020-election/.

[38] Rodriguez, S., & Caputo, M. (2020, September 14). *'This is f---ing crazy': Florida Latinos swamped by wild conspiracy theories* [Political News]. POLITICO. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/14/florida-latinos-disinformation-413923.

[39] Goodwin, A., Jossef, K., & Woolley, S. (2020). Social Media Influencers and the 2020 U.S. Election: Paying 'Regular People' for Digital Campaign Communication. Center for Media Engagement. https://mediaengagement.org/research/social-media-influencers-and-the-2020-election/.

[40] Rodriguez, S., & Caputo, M. (2020, September 14). *'This is f---ing crazy': Florida Latinos swamped by wild conspiracy theories* [Political News]. POLITICO. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/14/florida-latinos-disinformation-413923.

[41] Bond, S. (2020, October 30). Black And Latino Voters Flooded With Disinformation In Election's Final Days. NPR.Org. https://www.npr.org/2020/10/30/929248146/black-and-latino-voters-flooded-with-disinformation-in-elections-final-days. A JSTOR Daily article provides some background on why African Americans are distrustful of the U.S. democractic system: "Racialized social constraint might also explain why there are persistent groups of African Americans who do not vote. The Black American populace have long held a considerable distrust in the United States democratic system. The scholars Timothy Vercellotti and Paul R. Brewer, writing in the Journal of Black Studies, have correlated African Americans' distrust in the government with their alienation from white-owned media. . . " *See*, Gallon, K. (2020, October 7). The Black Press and Disinformation on Facebook. JSTOR Daily. https://daily.jstor.org/the-black-press-and-disinformation-on-facebook/.

to give a voice to working-class African Americans descended from enslaved Africans.[42] Nkonde's research has discussed the possibility of external influence within the #ADOS movement, and the strategic use of misinformation by authentic African Americans' accounts online to manipulate African American voter behavior in the 2020 general election.[43,44] In the case of #ADOS, and in other instances of amplification of disinformation, it is unclear whether domestic actors are aware that their actions may help to achieve the aims of coordinated disinformation operations.[45]

Persuasion strategies to influence voters' choices and turnout are not new, but the speed and reach of online "influencer" campaigns warrants ongoing attention.

Indeed, while domestic political influence campaigns are not improper and are most certainly legal, there are important concerns to be raised about the impact of certain types of messaging campaigns on political participation that depart from this report's focus on disinformation. Persuasion strategies to influence voters' choices and turnout are not new, but the speed and reach of online "influencer" campaigns warrants ongoing attention.

Spanish Speakers' Vulnerabilities to Disinformation Online

As a critically important voting block in the battleground states such as Texas, Florida, and Arizona, Latinx communities are appealing targets of disinformation. According to investigative reports cited in the *Guardian*, during the 2020 U.S. elections there was significant

[42] Nkonde, M. (2020, September 25) Blackish Face: The Role Inauthentic Accounts are Playing in the 2020 Election, Presentation at the Center for Democracy & Technology Research Workshop on Disinformation: Understanding the Impacts in Terms of Race and Gender

[43] Nkonde, M., Rodriguez, M., Cortana, L., Mukogosoi, J., King, S., Serrato, R., Martinez, N., Drummer, M., Lewis, A., & Malik, M. (2021). Disinformation creep: ADOS and the strategic weaponization of breaking news. The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review, 1(Special Issue on US Elections and Disinformation), 1–16. https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/disinformation-creep-ados-and-the-strategic-weaponization-of-breaking-news/; see, Nkonde, M. (2020). Disinformation Creep: How Breaking News Stories are used to Engage in Online Voter Suppression. Stanford PACS. https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/research/digital-civil-society-lab/disinformation-creep/.

[44] Nkonde, M., Brown, L., Cortana, L., McIlwain, C., & Rodriguez, M. (2020, June 24). Protecting the Black Vote During COVID-19 [Eventsite for a University think tank]. Digital Impact. https://digitalimpact.io/race-tech-civil-society-protecting-the-black-vote-during-covid19/.

[45] Rodriguez, S., & Caputo, M. (2020, September 14). *'This is f---ing crazy': Florida Latinos swamped by wild conspiracy theories* [Political News]. POLITICO. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/14/florida-latinos-disinformation-413923.

disinformation activity wherever large Latinx populations resided.[46] These attack campaigns included disinformation about basic voting details (place and manner of voting) and messaging intended to intimidate Latinx voters.[47] During the 2020 election season, as well as in 2018, political campaigns poured enormous resources into swaying Latinx voters. While it's too early to have a full inventory of all of the actors, there were also efforts to suppress Latinx votes that may have come from foreign actors.[48] We need more research to understand the extent and nature of foreign-driven disinformation efforts to suppress Latinx votes in those elections.

Reports about 2020 U.S. election disinformation in Spanish describe a chain of messages designed to manipulate the Latinx vote spreading from platform to platform.[49] Potentially well-intentioned recipients spread misinformation on Twitter that sought to pit Latinx and African American voters against one another, and feed fears about socialism.[50] While it is unclear whether this recent deluge of false information was part of a coordinated attack strategy, it is clear that these examples of mis- and disinformation spread very quickly in online Spanish-language communities, in part because they were being distributed in private

[46] These disinformation campaigns aimed to depress the Latinx vote and to prevent Latinx people from participating in politics online. The narratives used took advantage of genuine fears of communist rule, falsely describing then presidential candidate Joe Biden as a socialist. Other false narratives targeted Hispanic Catholics by claiming that Joe Biden would make abortion the "law of the land," setting off coordinated disinformation messaging across Spanish-language pages on Facebook. Articles claiming that President Trump's life was in mortal danger were posted following a speech where the President said, "this may be the last time you see me for a while." One narrative aimed to inflame animosities between the Latinx community and African American activists with messaging aimed to discredit Black Lives Matter (BLM) and paint the organization as violent, while also claiming that BLM protests were being secretly controlled by Venezuelan dictator Nicolas Maduro. A number of Spanish language social media and Internet fora also connected Joe Biden to pedophilia, describing him as a "superpredator." *See*, Dave, C. B., Elizabeth Culliford, Paresh. (2020, November 7). Spanish-language misinformation dogged Democrats in the U.S. election. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-disinformation-spanish-idUSKBN27N0ED; *see*, Ryan-Mosley, T. (2020, October 12). *"It's been really, really bad": How Hispanic voters are being targeted by disinformation*. MIT Technology Review. Retrieved October 21, 2020, from https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/12/1010061/hispanic-voter-political-targeting-facebook-whatsapp/; *see*, Rogers, K., & Longoria, J. (2020, October 20). Why A Gamer Started A Web Of Disinformation Sites Aimed At Latino Americans. *FiveThirtyEight*. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-a-gamer-started-a-web-of-disinformation-sites-aimed-at-latino-americans/; *see*, Rivero, N. (2020, November 5). *Social media companies failed to stop election misinformation in Spanish* [Business-focused international news site]. Quartz. https://qz.com/1928357/social-media-platforms-didnt-curb-fake-election-news-in-spanish/. Post-election, the New York Times reported that influential Spanish-language Twitter and Facebook accounts were making repeated false claims that President Trump had already won the election and that Joe Biden was making attempts to steal the election. *See*, Mazzei, P., & Perlroth, N. (2020, November 5). False News Targeting Latinos Trails the Election. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/04/us/spanish-language-misinformation-latinos.html.

[47] Yee, A. (2020, October 22). Latinos are the targets of election disinformation – but activists are fighting back. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/22/latinos-targets-election-disinformation.

[48] A New York Times article published the day after the 2020 election reports anecdotally that election officials and security experts had discovered that Russians had been caught hiring people in Mexico and Venezuela to disseminate Instagram and Facebook content. Mazzei, P., & Perlroth, N. (2020, November 5). False News Targeting Latinos Trails the Election. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/04/us/spanish-language-misinformation-latinos.html.

[49] Ibid.

[50] This tactic of pitting Latinx and African American voters against each other, attempting to draw clear distinctions between Black and Latinx voters has gained traction even though Afro-Latinx people make up a significant proportion of the Latinx community. Mazzei, P., & Medina, J. (2020, October 29). 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.

messaging apps like WhatsApp between trusted social groups. Some researchers characterize WhatsApp as "an incubator for disinformation that spreads organically in private groups of trusted family and friends."[51] WhatsApp is exceptionally popular with people in the Latinx community and more broadly with people who have family members outside of the United States.[52]

A number of recent reports also suggest that much of the disinformation targeting Spanish language-dominant communities was designed to suppress the vote.[53] A report in the *MIT Technology Review* cites a Florida resident who, when asked about disinformation targeting Hispanic voters during the 2020 election, said it "has been really really bad with fake calls, fake texts, manipulated things." These anecdotal reports suggest the technical sophistication of disinformation campaigns, which have also included micro-targeted messages on social media focused on swaying Hispanic voters or suppressing their votes entirely.[54]

Disinformation campaigns exploit a number of vulnerabilities associated with the online information environment that Latinx communities inhabit. In the next sections, we discuss two of these vulnerabilities: data voids and digital platform practices around Spanish-language content moderation.

Data Voids

During CDT's workshop, Saiph Savage described her research on disinformation and the Latinx community. Her study analyzed Reddit posts mentioning Latinx people during the time leading up to the 2018 U.S. midterms to understand more about the propaganda targeting Latinx communities. By examining how Latinx people are targeted on social media, and how people participate and engage with disinformation, this research uncovered a dangerous vulnerability in online Latinx spaces in the form of data voids.[55] Data voids can emerge anywhere on the web

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[51] Ryan-Mosley, T. (2020, October 12). *"It's been really, really bad": How Hispanic voters are being targeted by disinformation*. MIT Technology Review. https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/12/1010061/hispanic-voter-political-targeting-facebook-whatsapp/.

[52] Mazzei, P., & Medina, J. (2020, October 29). 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.

[53] *See*, Mazzei, P., & Medina, J. (2020, October 29). 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*; See,'This is f---ing crazy': Florida Latinos swamped by wild conspiracy theories* [Political News]. POLITICO. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/14/florida-latinos-disinformation-413923; *see* also, Ryan-Mosley, T. (2020, October 12). *"It's been really, really bad": How Hispanic voters are being targeted by disinformation*. MIT Technology Review. https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/12/1010061/hispanic-voter-political-targeting-facebook-whatsapp/.

[54] Ryan-Mosley, T. (2020, October 12). *"It's been really, really bad": How Hispanic voters are being targeted by disinformation*. MIT Technology Review. Retrieved October 21, 2020, from https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/12/1010061/hispanic-voter-political-targeting-facebook-whatsapp/.

[55] The term "data void" was coined in 2018 by Microsoft's Michael Golebiewski in a report exploring the problem in detail. *See,* Golebiewski, M., & Boyd, D. (2018). *Data Voids: Where Missing Data Can Easily Be Exploited* (pp. 1–8). Data & Society. https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Data_Society_Data_Voids_Final_3.pdf.

where available data is limited, non-existent, or devoid of trustworthy information. They are easily exploited by bad actors who take advantage of the lack of high-quality information.[56]

> *By examining how Latinx people are targeted on social media, and how people participate and engage with disinformation, this research uncovered a dangerous vulnerability in online Latinx spaces in the form of data voids.*

Research being conducted on disinformation strategies targeting U.S.-based Spanish-speaking citizens (or other U.S.-based non-English dominant communities) is sparse, and there are gaps in understanding about the flow of information in this online universe. What is known is that there is very little high-quality Spanish-language content about political candidates or Latinx voting rights. Spanish-language dominant communities lack trusted sources that speak directly to them,[57] and Latinx-oriented news outlets do not provide very much information about American political candidates.[58] Additionally, when political campaigns de-prioritize direct engagement with Latinx communities, that makes it possible for bad actors to spread disinformation unchallenged. *Politico* reports that "... unlike the conspiracy theories that circulate in English-language news media and social media, there's relatively little to no Spanish-language media coverage of the phenomenon nor a political counterpunch from the left."[59]

Data voids are a vastly under-appreciated liability.[60] Political trolls exploited data voids to sway the political discourse and impact decision-making for Spanish speakers during the 2018 U.S.

[56] These actors took advantage of data voids which are essentially information gaps online, using sophisticated techniques to produce eye-catching content about the U.S. election targeting Latinx people. The absence of alternative information channels made it difficult for people to recognize the inaccuracy of the claims.

[57] *See*, Rogers, K., & Longoria, J. (2020, October 20). Why A Gamer Started A Web Of Disinformation Sites Aimed At Latino Americans. *FiveThirtyEight*. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-a-gamer-started-a-web-of-disinformation-sites-aimed-at-latino-americans/.

[58] Schneider, A. (2020, November 3). *How Trolls Are Weaponizing "Data Voids" Online*. Slate Magazine. https://slate.com/technology/2020/11/data-voids-election-misinformation.html.

[59] Rodriguez, S., & Caputo, M. (2020, September 14). *'This is f---ing crazy': Florida Latinos swamped by wild conspiracy theories* [Political News]. POLITICO. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/14/florida-latinos-disinformation-413923.

[60] Golebiewski, M., & Boyd, D. (2018). *Data Voids: Where Missing Data Can Easily Be Exploited* (pp. 1–8). Data & Society. https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Data_Society_Data_Voids_Final_3.pdf.

midterms.[61] Researchers also found that neutral actors contributed to the data void problem by neglecting engagement with Latinx audiences online.[62]

In late 2020, opinion poll analysis and political news source FiveThirtyEight published a report detailing the financial incentives around the production of Spanish-language disinformation. There are reported instances where U.S.-based entrepreneurs targeted disinformation to Latinx communities because it was profitable.[63] According to cited experts, these actors "target communities that have fewer trusted sources that cater directly to them… and amplify misinformation originating from extremist communities."[64]

Digital Platform Practices Around Spanish-Language Content Moderation

Another key challenge for Latinx communities online with respect to disinformation relates to content monitoring and removal. Moderation practices for content in Spanish or any other language are not nearly as advanced or robust as they are for English-language content.[65] The fact that so much Spanish disinformation is able to slip through content filters is an indication that social networking services have not done enough to address the problem in Spanish, in the election context.[66,67] The algorithms and human moderators whose job it is to identify and slow down disinformation are trained using English-language content. These gaps in companies' anti-disinformation policies, specifically in Spanish, contributed to a wave of targeted

[61] Flores-Saviaga, C., & Savage, S. (2019). Anti-Latinx Computational Propaganda in the United States. *ArXiv:1906.10736 [Cs]*. http://arxiv.org/abs/1906.10736.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Rogers, K., & Longoria, J. (2020, October 20). Why A Gamer Started A Web Of Disinformation Sites Aimed At Latino Americans. *FiveThirtyEight*. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-a-gamer-started-a-web-of-disinformation-sites-aimed-at-latino-americans/.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Rivero, N. (2020, November 5). *Social media companies failed to stop election misinformation in Spanish*. Quartz. https://qz.com/1928357/social-media-platforms-didnt-curb-fake-election-news-in-spanish/.

[67] Experts on Latinx disinformation say that while there may be more disinformation in English-speaking Hispanic digital spaces, there is also better monitoring. "[Social media companies] will sometimes flag this false content in English, the same material in Spanish won't always get flagged." Ryan-Mosley, T. (2020, October 12). *"It's been really, really bad": How Hispanic voters are being targeted by disinformation*. MIT Technology Review. Retrieved October 21, 2020, from https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/12/1010061/hispanic-voter-political-targeting-facebook-whatsapp/. In an interview with fivethirtyeight.com, researchers working on disinformation targeting Latin Americans online described lax moderation practices for Spanish language content, saying that, "[...] while social media platforms have been cracking down on English-language misinformation to a certain degree, Spanish-language disinformation doesn't always receive the same treatment." Rogers, K., & Longoria, J. (2020, October 20). Why A Gamer Started A Web Of Disinformation Sites Aimed At Latino Americans. *FiveThirtyEight*. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-a-gamer-started-a-web-of-disinformation-sites-aimed-at-latino-americans/. Reuters spoke with First Draft investigative researcher, Daniel Acosta Ramos for a report about social media platforms' responsiveness to Spanish language disinformation where he is quoted as saying, "on Facebook and the other platforms it takes them longer to flag and take action when the post is in Spanish than English." Reuters also notes that this particular complaint has been voiced by four other experts. *See*, Dave, C. B., Elizabeth Culliford, Paresh. (2020, November 7). Spanish-language misinformation dogged Democrats in U.S. election. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-disinformation-spanish-idUSKBN27N0ED.

messaging to Latinx voters, and in an election year where Latinx voters comprised the largest share of non-white voters.[68] Leaders from media reform advocacy groups interviewed by *The Hill* said that social networking services "certainly need teams of people who are native speakers, who understand dialects, idioms, understand casual speech in all the major languages that are spoken and used on [their platform]."[69, 70] Other Latinx leadership groups like the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) have engaged their staff to monitor social media and flag posts spreading disinformation in Spanish, but have found platform search tools inadequate for non-English content.[71]

Presenting at the CDT workshop, Saiph Savage examined the impact of fact-checker organizations on disinformation narratives in Spanish-langauage online spaces, particularly around COVID-19.[72] The primary finding was that foreign political actors co-opted messaging produced by fact-checker organizations, which effectively led users to doubt verified, impartial COVID-19 information.[73] These foreign actors politicized authoritative health information by sowing doubt and discrediting the organizations themselves.[74] This study ultimately reinforces the notion that, in a polarized political environment, it is difficult for information to be presented as impartial and that any type of information can be weaponized and exploited.

As discussed previously, person-to-person messaging services like WhatsApp are extremely popular among immigrant communities. These person-to-person services are nearly impossible to fact-check, and there is no easy way for researchers to monitor disinformation and bad actors. Although WhatsApp owner Facebook has introduced limits to sharing "highly forwarded messages," there may simply be some disinformation that is out of reach.[75] Researchers should

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[68] Gamboa, S. (2019, January 30). *Latinos on track to be largest share of nonwhite voters in 2020, Pew says*. NBC News. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/first-time-latinos-be-largest-non-white-share-eligible-voters-n964571.

[69] Perks, A. (2020, November 19). Tech firms fall short on misinformation targeting Latino voters, advocates say [Political News]. TheHill. https://thehill.com/latino/526619-tech-firms-fall-short-on-misinformation-targeting-latino-voters-advocates-say.

[70] Global civic organization Avaaz has produced preliminary data from their 2020 research on disinformation which suggests that unsubstantiated claims in Spanish were not labeled on social media at the same rate as English ones. "Avaaz analyzed 10 of the highest-performing posts on Facebook promoting such claims in both English and Spanish and found that while 5 out of 10 of the highest performing posts repeating the claims from Powell and Giuliani in English had been labeled by Facebook, just 1 out of 10 of the highest-performing posts repeating the claims in Spanish had been labeled." *See*, Perks, A. (2020, November 19). Tech firms fall short on misinformation targeting Latino voters, advocates say [Political News]. TheHill. https://thehill.com/latino/526619-tech-firms-fall-short-on-misinformation-targeting-latino-voters-advocates-say.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Savage, S. (2020, September 25) Anti-Latinx: Understanding Computational Propaganda Targeting the Latinx Community, Presentation at the Center for Democracy & Technology Research Workshop on Disinformation: Understanding the Impacts in Terms of Race and Gender. September 2020.

[73] Ibid.

[74] A New York Times article published the day after the 2020 election reports that election officials and security experts had discovered that Russians had been caught hiring people in Mexico and Venezuela to disseminate Instagram and Facebook content. Mazzei, P., & Perlroth, N. (2020, November 5). False News Targeting Latinos Trails the Election. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/04/us/spanish-language-misinformation-latinos.html.

[75] WhatsApp announced a new app feature that would limit the number of forwards in April of 2020. Messages identified as "highly forwarded"— messages sent through a chain of five or more people—can now only be forwarded to a single person. This update is designed to slow the speed with which information moves across the platform, "putting truth and fiction on a more event footing." WhatsApp. (2020). *WhatsApp FAQ - About forwarding limits* [Person-to-person communications app

look to develop methods to test the efficacy of forwarding limits and other tactics to address disinformation on such messaging services.

Companies have considered introducing other points of friction: labeling systems to reduce the spread of disinformation,[76] implementing message forwarding limits, removing certain accounts or keywords from services' recommendation algorithms, and promoting more diverse content.[77] Given the threat of harm to efforts to build inclusive democracy and to public health in the case of coronavirus disinformation, there are a number of open questions about how to best approach anti-disinformation efforts especially as they relate to communities marginalized by mainstream society.

Given the threat of harm to efforts to build inclusive democracy and to public health in the case of coronavirus disinformation, there are a number of open questions about how to best approach anti-disinformation efforts especially as they relate to communities marginalized by mainstream society.

Areas for further research should build on the work of CDT presenter Saiph Savage and others on the role of fact-checker organizations, and examine the effect of improving user awareness among communities of color online. Can fact-checker organizations effectively tackle the problem of disinformation with high-quality information, designed to compete with and lessen the allure of false and extremist content, particularly in the contexts described here? Other areas of further research should examine the role of news organizations in redirecting people's attention online to trustworthy sources. As disinformation tactics evolve, researchers will have an important role to play in analyzing the effectiveness and trade-offs of potential interventions.

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product site]. WhatsApp.Com. https://faq.whatsapp.com/general/chats/about-forwarding-limits/?lang=en; *see*, Vishwanath, M. (2020, April 27). *WhatsApp sees 70 percent drop in 'viral' forwards after imposing limits globally* [CNBC local news station website]. Cnbctv18.Com. https://www.cnbctv18.com/technology/whatsapp-sees-70-percent-drop-in-viral-forwards-after-imposing-limits-globally-5785441.htm.

[76] Initial evidence on the effectiveness of content labels indicates that it does little to reduce the spread of false content, but more research is needed to fully understand how this strategy will impact the substance of online political discussions. Silverman, C., & Mac, R. (2020, November 16). *Facebook Labels On Trump's Lies Do Little To Stop Spread* [News website]. Buzzfeednews.Com. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-labels-trump-lies-do-not-stop-spread.

[77] *See*, Frenkel, S., & Hsu, T. (2020, September 18). Facebook Tried to Limit QAnon. It Failed. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/18/technology/facebook-tried-to-limit-qanon-it-failed.html.

Independent Media, Disinformation, and Race

Combating disinformation will require collaboration between a number of stakeholder groups, particularly given the overwhelming amount of distinct narratives aimed at depressing votes, sowing division, and mining social traumas. Researchers focused on freedom of information in the context of electoral disinformation have long highlighted the essential role of free, independent, and diverse media in ensuring free and fair elections,[78] but in recent years, social media platforms in the United States have grown enormously in importance as distributors of news and other information. This shift in how media are amplified has been accompanied by a rise in disinformation.[79]

Given research discussing the relationship between the independent media and the spread of disinformation generally,[80] in this section we present studies that examine these issues with respect to the widespread harms of disinformation on communities of color.

The absence of independent media bears greater significance for communities of color generally as mainstream media, by and large, is not structured to meet the specific information needs of non-white communities.[81] African American independent media has historically

[78] The JSTOR Daily cites journalists discussing the relationship between having an independent press and a thriving democracy where they are quoted saying "the Facebookisation of news has the potential to destabilise democracy by, first, controlling what we read and, second, by destroying the outlets that provide that material." *See*, Gallon, K. (2020, October 7). The Black Press and Disinformation on Facebook. JSTOR Daily. https://daily.jstor.org/the-black-press-and-disinformation-on-facebook/.

[79] In 2019 Pew Research Center reported that 55% of U.S. adults got their news from social media either "often" or "sometimes." This figure grew by over 8% from the previous year when it was only 20%. *See*, Shearer, E., & Grieco, E. (2019, October 2). Americans Are Wary of the Role Social Media Sites Play in Delivering the News [Thinktank]. *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*. https://www.journalism.org/2019/10/02/americans-are-wary-of-the-role-social-media-sites-play-in-delivering-the-news/; *See also*, Shearer, E. (2018, December 10). Social media outpaces print newspapers in the U.S. as a news source [Thinktank]. *Pew Research Center*. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/10/social-media-outpaces-print-newspapers-in-the-u-s-as-a-news-source/.

[80] The European Commission recognizes disinformation as a "major challenge for Europe." It has declared that "[d]emocracy in the European Union rests on the existence of free and independent media." *See*, European Commission, EU Economic and Social Committee, & EU Committee of the Regions. (2019). *Tackling online disinformation: A European Approach* (Brussels, 26.4.2018 COM(2018) 236 final; pp. 1–17). European Commission. https://perma.cc/W3K9-PSXJ; *see*, European Commission. (2016). *Media pluralism and democracy: Outcomes of the 2016 Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights* (pp. 1–16). European Commission. http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/image/document/2016-50/2016-fundamental-colloquium-conclusions_40602.pdf.

[81] In research published on social media communities of color, CDT workshop presenter Deen Freelon describes that the news and information needs of a plurality of black American experiences are not covered in mainstream media outlets. This study makes similar assertions about the lack of mainstream media coverage of Asian-Americans issues. The paper explains that, for example, Black Twitter developed, "as a space in which black people discuss issues of concern to themselves and their communities—issues they say either are not covered by mainstream media, or are not covered with the appropriate cultural context. For these users, Black Twitter allows everyday black people to serve as gatekeepers for the news and information needs of a plurality of black American experiences—with coverage, perspective and consideration not found elsewhere." *See*, Freelon, D., Lopez, L., Clark, M., & Jackson, S. (2018). *How Black Twitter and other social media communities interact with mainstream news* (pp. 1–92). Knight Foundation. https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media_elements/files/000/000/136/original/TwitterMedia-final.pdf. In a retrospective analysis on the 1967 Kerner Commission report, FreePress, a media justice organization explains that, "now, half a century later, the problems outlined in this report persist. There is still a lack of journalists and editors of color working in established news organizations, and news coverage still fails to serve the information needs of [POC] communities." *See*,

provided significant protection against harmful disinformation and voter suppression led by domestic actors, and according to scholars, the loss of these sources risks increasing vulnerability to both foreign and U.S. based disinformation operations.[82] For instance, African American owned news outlets like the Chicago Defender and the *AFRO* newspaper were bulwarks against disinformation and domestic election interference that targeted African American voters. Historical records show a 1909 editorial in the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper challenging other media outlets' assertion that poll taxes, literacy tests, and other devices were not intended to disenfranchise African American votes.[83]

Many of these newspapers have now migrated to social media platforms as a means of surviving a rapidly changing media landscape. However, scholars argue that African American newspapers' migration to digital platforms make them and their audiences vulnerable to "masquerading opportunists and bigots" who inflame racial tensions and sow seeds of distrust in the electoral process.[84]

In the past, independent African American-owned newspapers were a trusted voice for African American audiences. Can these entities effectively counter the narratives aimed at diminishing the political participation of people of color? And to what extent is the digital black/brown face phenomenon more or less common in the digital orbit of legacy independent media outlets? Further research in this area should also examine how independent media outlets online impact the spread of disinformation— whether owned or operated by people of color.

Gendered Disinformation

Gender and Gender Identities Online

In addition to race, another important element of the sociopolitical context in which disinformation exists is gender. Gender is a complex multi-dimensional concept and can represent a range of socially constructed characteristics associated with masculinity, femininity, neither, or a combination of both.[85] For our purposes, we focus on different forms of gender expression that people identify with online (e.g., using pronouns and descriptions such as she,

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Torres, J. (2018, March 7). *Racism in the Media Persists 50 Years After Kerner Report* [Website for a media justice organization]. Free Press. https://www.freepress.net/our-response/expert-analysis/insights-opinions/racism-media-persists-50-years-after-kerner-report ; A CNN Opinion series about the challenges facing the media adds that, "in the absence of an inclusive environment, the quality of journalism suffers. Certain stories are simply not reported, or are told without the nuance or perspective the circumstances require. The black press has filled that void for generations." *See*, Love, D. (2017, November 30). Why the black press is more relevant than ever [Network news media outlet]. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/30/opinions/newsroom-diversity-mainstream-media-opinion-love/index.html.

[82] *See*, Gallon, K. (2020, October 7). The Black Press and Disinformation on Facebook. JSTOR Daily. https://daily.jstor.org/the-black-press-and-disinformation-on-facebook/.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Everett, A. (2009). *Digital Diaspora A Race for Cyberspace*. State University of New York Press.

[85] Ridgeway, C. L., & Correll, S. J. (2004). Unpacking the gender system: A theoretical perspective on gender beliefs and social relations. Gender & Society, 18(4), 510–531.

he, they, ze, non-binary, transgender, etc.), which can also include and sometimes overlap with sexual orientation. More importantly, societal beliefs about gender influence how power is distributed and the ways in which discrimination takes place.[86] In the United States, for example, explicit forms of discrimination against women or LGBTQIA+ persons were once legal (e.g., restrictions on voting and marriage). While same-sex marriage is now protected in the U.S. and (mostly white) women gained the right to vote 100 years ago, there are still many implicit forms of gender-based discrimination with significant impacts (e.g., the gender wage gap[87]). Whether explicit or not, these forms of discrimination flow from patriarchy and the set of beliefs that privilege the decisions and power of (cis-gendered straight) men throughout different parts of society (e.g., in the family, the workplace, and in politics).

Indeed, much of how we engage with others offline and online is influenced by our beliefs about gender and reactions to different gender identities. Engagement shaped by gender includes gender-based violence (GBV), which is a common and significant problem online. Online harassment and abuse based on one's gender expression can take a range of forms: verbal abuse, threats of violence, non-consensual image/video sharing, stalking, theft of private data, doxing (publishing or sharing someone's personal data online without their consent), creating and sharing fake images/video without consent, and more. As with GBV in general, most online GBV is targeted at women and has been a major problem for some time now in the U.S. and around the world.[88] This also holds true in politics, especially in representational politics. A recent study that examined social media abuse targeting U.S. Congressional candidates in the 2020 elections found that, among Republican candidates, women received twice as much abuse as men, and among Democratic candidates, women received ten times as much abuse as men.[89] Another study of electoral politics — this time from Canada — found that even where women and men face similar levels of abuse, attacks against women tend to be more violent.[90]

Disinformation flows from the same heteronormative patriarchal context in which people experience online GBV, and in some cases there maybe an overlap between gendered disinformation and online GBV. One way to think of the difference between the two is that gendered disinformation involves intentionally spreading false information *about* persons or

[86] Ibid.

[87] Institute for Women's Policy Research (2020) "Same Gap, Different Year. The Gender Wage Gap: 2019 Earnings Differences by Gender, Race, and Ethnicity." IWPR. https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/employment-and-earnings/same-gap-different-year-the-gender-wage-gap-2019-earnings-differences-by-gender-race-and-ethnicity/.

[88] For examples, see global reports such as Amnesty International. (2018). *Toxic Twitter: A Toxic Place for Women*. Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/; Plan International. (2020). *Free To Be Online?* PlanInternational.Org. https://plan-international.org/publications/freetobeonline; and World Wide Web Foundation (2015) Women's Rights Online: Translating Access into Empowerment. World Wide Web Foundation.

[89] Guerin, C., & Maharasingam-Shah, E. (2020). *Public Figures, Public Rage: Candidate abuse on social media*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/public-figures-public-rage-candidate-abuse-on-social-media/.

[90] Tenove, C., & Tworek, H. (2020). Trolled on the Campaign Trail: Online Incivility and Abuse in Canadian Politics | Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions. Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions, University of British Columbia.

groups based on their gender identity, and online GBV involves *targeting* and abusing individuals based on their gender identity. Gabrielle Bardall[91] argued during CDT's workshop that while threatening a woman online can be classified as online GBV, it is not necessarily gendered disinformation, which may instead consist of false information about her qualifications for political leadership. In this way some forms of gendered disinformation could be subject to defamation laws, whereas online GBV might not be. These ideas could be a starting point for more theoretical and other research to better delineate between the two concepts.

> *Gendered disinformation is designed to make use of existing gender narratives, language, and ultimately discrimination to achieve certain social and political goals, including maintaining the status quo of gender inequality or creating a more polarized electorate.*

Gendered disinformation not only holds negative views of women, but it also seeks to reinforce that bias. It is designed to make use of existing gender narratives, language, and ultimately discrimination to achieve certain social and political goals, including maintaining the status quo of gender inequality[92] or creating a more polarized electorate.[93] At the CDT workshop, Kristina Wilfore noted that gendered disinformation campaigns about women politicians often include several false narratives.[94] They may characterize women candidates as not being qualified for the position, lacking the requisite knowledge, intelligence, or experience for the role; or as persons who lie, are too emotional for the task, prone to aggression, or lacking sanity.[95]

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[91] Bardall, G. (2020) Gendered Disinformation as a distinct form of Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP), Presentation at the Center for Democracy & Technology Research Workshop on Disinformation: Understanding the Impacts in Terms of Race and Gender. September 2020.

[92] Judson, E., Atay, A., Krasodomski-Jones, A., Lasko-Skinner, R., & Smith, J. (2020). *The Contours Of State-Aligned Gendered Disinformation Online*. Demos. https://demos.co.uk/project/engendering-hate-the-contours-of-state-aligned-gendered-disinformation-online/.

[93] Sessa, M. G. (2020). Misogyny and Misinformation: An analysis of gendered disinformation tactics during the COVID-19 pandemic. EU DisinfoLab. https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/misogyny-and-misinformation:-an-analysis-of-gendered-disinformation-tactics-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/.

[94] Wilfore, Kristina. (2020, September 25) Disinformation and Women's Leadership. Presentation at the Center for Democracy & Technology Research Workshop on Disinformation: Understanding the Impacts in Terms of Race and Gender. September 2020

[95] These specific false claims against women are extremely old and have a history in U.S. culture. i.e. women as hysterical or insane. See for example, Gilman, C. P. (1892). The Yellow Wallpaper: A Story. The New England Magazine, 11(5). https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006786569.

Patterns and Motivations

As with the work on disinformation and race, there is currently a dearth of research on gendered disinformation, with only a handful of studies to date. As an exploratory issue, some researchers have looked at the distribution patterns of gendered disinformation. One unsurprising finding, in keeping with research on online GBV, is that when it comes to gendered disinformation there is a disproportionately negative impact on women. For example, one study looking at the 2020 U.S. primary elections found that women candidates were more likely than male candidates to be the focus of fake accounts, which are an important tool of many disinformation campaigns.[96]

As Lucina Di Meco[97] noted in her presentation at the CDT workshop, these kinds of attacks on women aim to undermine their ability to participate in representative politics, ultimately harming the quality of our democracy.[98] A recent study looking at state-sponsored or state-supported gender disinformation campaigns in Poland and the Philippines observed a similar motivation behind coordinated disinformation campaigns about women politicians— to push the narrative that women are not good political leaders.[99] The authors of the study on the 2020 U.S. primary elections also arrived at this conclusion, suggesting that disinformation about women candidates was consistently aimed at keeping them out of politics.[100]

One difficult question around gendered disinformation (and some disinformation in general) is who is behind these coordinated campaigns; not much evidence exists. Regarding U.S. elections, Wilfore suggested that many of the disinformation campaigns about Democratic women candidates involved far-right online personalities and their supporters.[101] The study of Poland and the Philippines noted that domestic groups aligned with governments in those countries (e.g., pro-Duterte supporters within the Philippines government and also outside of it) employed coordinated online campaigns to undermine women political leaders.

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[96] Oates, S., Gurevich, O., Walker, C., & Di Meco, L. (2019). *Running While Female: Using AI to Track how Twitter Commentary Disadvantages Women in the 2020 U.S. Primaries* (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3444200). Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3444200.

[97] Di Meco, Lucina (2020, September 25) Gendered Disinformation: Conceptual Framework, Evidence & Missing Links. Presentation at the Center for Democracy & Technology Research Workshop on Disinformation: Understanding the Impacts in Terms of Race and Gender. September 2020

[98] *See*, Sessa, M. G. (2020). Misogyny and Misinformation: An analysis of gendered disinformation tactics during the COVID-19 pandemic. EU DisinfoLab. https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/misogyny-and-misinformation:-an-analysis-of-gendered-disinformation-tactics-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/.

[99] Judson, E., Atay, A., Krasodomski-Jones, A., Lasko-Skinner, R., & Smith, J. (2020). *The Contours Of State-Aligned Gendered Disinformation Online*. Demos. https://demos.co.uk/project/engendering-hate-the-contours-of-state-aligned-gendered-disinformation-online/.

[100] Oates, S., Gurevich, O., Walker, C., & Di Meco, L. (2019). *Running While Female: Using AI to Track how Twitter Commentary Disadvantages Women in the 2020 U.S. Primaries* (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3444200). Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3444200.

[101] Wilfore, Kristina. (2020, September 25) Disinformation and Women's Leadership. Presentation at the Center for Democracy & Technology Research Workshop on Disinformation: Understanding the Impacts in Terms of Race and Gender. September 2020

Unfortunately, this pattern may exist in other countries, particularly in authoritarian regimes that have continued to systematically undermine women's rights.[102]

The overarching influence of patriarchal attitudes is also reflected in the nature of gendered disinformation. The few studies that do exist all point to more sexualized attacks against women as compared to men, including attacking women's physical appearance.[103] For example, Di Meco's study noted that a survey of women legislators around the world found that approximately 42% reported that sexualized images of themselves were spread online, and that the offending posts were often done through fake accounts and/or bots in a coordinated way.[104] Similarly, the study of Poland and the Philippines found that state-sponsored gendered disinformation campaigns also focused on distributing sexualized images of targeted women.

Potential Impacts

Gendered disinformation can shift the discourse away from policy issues to the personal. By trying to regularly refute personal attacks and falsehoods, women candidates will have less time to focus on substantive issues and the wider discussion about them will follow that pattern as well.[105] Researchers have also pointed to other potential impacts, including the broad aim of some gendered disinformation campaigns to create barriers for women in politics to succeed. Di Meco's study included interviews with women politicians around the world who felt that these kinds of disinformation campaigns can make other women who are interested in politics more likely to reconsider their ambitions.[106]

A related problem are the chilling effects that disinformation campaigns pose, particularly for those in political positions or who seek such positions. During the CDT workshop, Gabrielle Bardall noted the chilling effect from online violence against women in politics[107] and women in general,[108] and suggested that there may be a similar impact from gendered disinformation.[109]

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[102] Bardall, G. (2019, October 30). *Autocrats use feminism to undermine democracy*. Policy Options. https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/october-2019/autocrats-use-feminism-to-undermine-democracy/.

[103] Jankowicz, N. (2017, December 11). How Disinformation Became a New Threat to Women. Coda Story. https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/how-disinformation-became-a-new-threat-to-women/.

[104] Di Meco, L. (2019). *#ShePersisted Women, Politics, & Power in the New Media World* (pp. 1–58). The Wilson Center. https://www.she-persisted.org/s/191106-SHEPERSISTED_Final.pdf, quoting Julia Gillard, 27th Prime Minister of Australia.

[105] Oates, S., Gurevich, O., Walker, C., & Di Meco, L. (2019). *Running While Female: Using AI to Track how Twitter Commentary Disadvantages Women in the 2020 U.S. Primaries* (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3444200). Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3444200.

[106] Di Meco, L. (2019). *#ShePersisted Women, Politics, & Power in the New Media World* (pp. 1–58). The Wilson Center. https://www.she-persisted.org/s/191106-SHEPERSISTED_Final.pdf, quoting Julia Gillard, 27th Prime Minister of Australia.

[107] *See*, Amnesty International. (2018). *Toxic Twitter: A Toxic Place for Women*. Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/.

[108] Plan International. (2020). *Free To Be Online?* PlanInternational.Org. https://plan-international.org/publications/freetobeonline.

[109] Bardall, G. (2019, October 30). *Autocrats use feminism to undermine democracy*. Policy Options. https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/october-2019/autocrats-use-feminism-to-undermine-democracy/.

More research to understand this problem is needed. Another potential and longer-term effect relates to how women who are the subject of these campaigns recover. As Wilfore noted, given their severe nature, some of these attacks can include longer recovery times for the women, with implications for their political careers.[110]

Where does all this leave women? Di Meco describes "the double edged sword of social media": like other public figures, candidates have to be on social media for community and professional purposes, so they don't have the luxury of getting offline to avoid disinformation and other attacks.[111] Ultimately, we need more research to understand how these two patterns relate to each other — how, for example, are the online activities of women politicians modified to respond to disinformation about them, and what impact does that have on their policy agendas, electoral chances, and other priorities?

While much of this research focuses on women (including those in politics) as the subject of disinformation and the concomitant repercussions that follow, it is essential to note that many others (e.g., trans and LGBTQIA+ people) face discrimination and may be also be the focus of disinformation campaigns.

Finally, while much of this research focuses on women (including those in politics) as the subject of disinformation and the concomitant repercussions that follow, it is essential to note that many others (e.g., trans and LGBTQIA+ people) face discrimination and may be also be the focus of disinformation campaigns.

Much of the existing research focuses on disinformation campaigns about women and their political efforts and not necessarily women as consumers of disinformation. We can ask how gender identity influences how we process disinformation we receive, but there is little research on this issue.[112] In contrast, as described above, the research on race and disinformation does start to explore impacts within African American or Latinx communities. This gap could exist in part because much of the research looking at disinformation is not disaggregated in terms of both race and gender.

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[110] Wilfore, Kristina. (2020, September 25) Disinformation and Women's Leadership. Presentation at the Center for Democracy & Technology Research Workshop on Disinformation: Understanding the Impacts in Terms of Race and Gender. September 2020

[111] Di Meco, L. (2019). *#ShePersisted Women, Politics, & Power in the New Media World* (pp. 1–58). The Wilson Center. https://www.she-persisted.org/s/191106-SHEPERSISTED_Final.pdf, quoting Julia Gillard, 27th Prime Minister of Australia.

[112] An example of initial research related to this question: Cassese, E. C., Farhart, C. E., & Miller, J. M. (2020). Gender Differences in COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory Beliefs. Politics & Gender, 16(4), 1009–1018. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000409.

Intersectionality: Race, Gender, and Disinformation

This report has considered the ways in which disinformation campaigns are designed to exploit some of the major drivers of historical oppression in the U.S. and elsewhere: white supremacy and patriarchy. Of course, our reality does not fit into neat categories made separate for research purposes. Individuals traverse multiple identities all the time, and disinformation can also operate across race, gender, and other aspects of identity simultaneously. Recognizing the reality of intersectional identities challenges researchers to understand both how a person may have to contend with multiple sources of oppression at the same time, and the unique impact from this multifaceted oppression. This concept of intersectionality was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who initially based it on women of color who contend with both sexism and racism.[113]

In terms of both race and gender, disinformation campaigns rely on existing discriminatory narratives to build credibility for the false information being shared.[114] Intersectional disinformation may therefore draw on multiple narratives, tropes, and stereotypes to build credibility around a false message. Unfortunately, based on our review, no significant research appears to take an intersectional approach when examining patterns in the spread of disinformation or its impacts. What could such research look like? We could start, for example, by understanding the unique kinds of discrimination that Latina women may face by being brown women, and the narratives that reflect that experience. We could then examine how disinformation campaigns that make use of data voids in Latinx communities may exploit those narratives and biases when targeting Latina political candidates.

Disinformation undermines democracy for all when it targets specific groups of people, and limiting our analysis to large group identities may undermine our ability to effectively counter disinformation campaigns.

Of course, intersectionality goes beyond race and gender identity alone. Disinformation is used to exploit existing forms of discrimination, so we also need to consider a range of other identities — including disability status, LGBTQIA+ communities, age, and immigration status — given the social, political, and economic context of the polity in question. One argument against investing in this kind of research is that we may begin to focus on smaller and smaller groups of

[113] Crenshaw, K. (1990). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241–1299. *See also*, Smith, B. (1978). Toward a Black Feminist Criticism. The Radical Teacher, 7, 20–27. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20709102.

[114] Ultraviolet (2020). Reporting in an Era of Disinformation: Fairness Guide for Covering Women and People of Color in Politics. Ultraviolet. http://weareultraviolet.org/fairness-guide-2020/.

people. On the other hand, using a less narrow group identity such as gender might obfuscate how disinformation could exploit multiple forms of simultaneous discrimination, and how having access to multiple identities may mediate the impacts of disinformation on individuals. As noted earlier, disinformation undermines democracy for all when it targets specific groups of people, and limiting our analysis to large group identities may undermine our ability to effectively counter disinformation campaigns.

Although we have no significant examples of intersectional approaches to disinformation research, we do have some related evidence and research from online GBV which may be instructive. One 2020 international survey of young women and girls in 22 countries found that 42% of those who identify as LGBTQIA+ reported being harassed online because of their identity, as did 14% of those with a disability and 37% of those with an ethnic minority identity.[115] A 2018 study of Twitter found that women of color were 34% more likely to be mentioned in an abusive tweet when compared to white women, with Black women in particular subject to more abuse — they were 84% more likely to be mentioned in abusive tweets compared to white women.[116] In addition, there is no shortage of news media reports that highlight the kinds of abuse that women of color face on social media.[117]

Looking at select U.S. Congressional candidates across party, gender, and racial categories in the 2020 elections, another study found that women of color faced more abuse than any other type of candidate on the social network services Twitter and Facebook. For example, Democratic Congresswoman Ilhan Omar (a Somali American) received the highest proportion of abuse and harassment on Twitter, and Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (a Puerto Rican American) received the most abuse on Facebook. The same study noted that while men overall faced much less abuse than women, male candidates of color received the same level of abuse as white men (although the nature of the abuse was different),[118] pointing to the potential for even a basic intersectional analysis to illustrate clear patterns.

One recent analysis examined social media conversations about Kamala Harris (an African American and Indian American woman) during the 2020 U.S. Presidential election campaign, and found that she was the subject of four times as much misinformation when compared to white men in similar campaigns over the last four years.[119] A similar trend was noted by at least one study looking at disinformation efforts across different social networking services during

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[115] Plan International. (2020). *Free To Be Online?* PlanInternational.Org. https://plan-international.org/publications/freetobeonline.

[116] Amnesty International. (2018). Troll Patrol Findings. Troll Patrol Report. https://decoders.amnesty.org/projects/troll-patrol/findings.

[117] *See*, Young, D. (2013, October 28). *What Does #StopBlackGirls2013 Mean?* [Online Magazine]. HelloBeautiful. https://hellobeautiful.com/2678735/what-is-the-stopblackgirls2013-hastag-on-twitter-about/.

[118] Guerin, C., & Maharasingam-Shah, E. (2020). *Public Figures, Public Rage: Candidate abuse on social media*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/public-figures-public-rage-candidate-abuse-on-social-media/.

[119] The report did not explain what was meant by "targeted misinformation." *See,* Seitz, A. (2020, October 29). Harris is a target of more misinformation than Pence, data shows. AP NEWS. https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-race-and-ethnicity-media-misinformation-50d958ff5d534179bad07bcf607590cc.

the 2016 U.S. elections.[120] The authors argued that, in contrast to research about the targeting of African Americans by disinformation campaigns on Twitter, campaigns with the most engagement on Facebook and Instragram focused on the women's movement, the LGBTQIA+ community, Latinx, and Muslim Americans.[121] They suggested that further research on specific impacts of disinformation should examine divisions across a range of social and political issues and between groups, and that studies looking at only one political or social group would be too limited. Research should also consider variances in gender, race, and other forms of expressions across platforms, suggesting that an intersectional approach may also require methods that examine multiple social networking services.

In general, when confronting disinformation, researchers — including us — have yet to really incorporate intersectional approaches to our work. Others, including some civil society advocates, already recognize the importance of this approach. One recent guidebook for journalists covering election disinformation suggests that journalists treat candidates as multi-dimensional and, in so doing, avoid perpetuating the negative narratives that are the focus of the disinformation campaign in question.[122] This is useful advice for researchers too.

Building a Research Agenda

Summary Table of Research Questions/Opportunities on Disinformation, Race, and Gender

General Concerns

- We still lack evidence of the impact of disinformation on electoral outcomes, political opinions, trust in political institutions, political polarization, and individual behavior more broadly.
- We have only a limited understanding of the role and effectiveness of fake accounts and bots as tools in disinformation campaigns.
- It's unclear which issues and topics are more vulnerable to coordinated manipulation.
- There is a need to develop and test new models for information provenance through (for example) new kinds of metadata.
- It's important to understand the needs of communities where information verification is currently more difficult, as is common in non-English speaking communities on the major social networking services.

[120] Liotsiou, D., Ganesh, B., & Howard, P. N. (2020, October). Predicting Engagement with the Internet Research Agency's Facebook and Instagram Campaigns around the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. *ArXiv:2010.14950 [Cs]*. http://arxiv.org/abs/2010.14950.

[121] Ibid.

[122] Ultraviolet (2020). Reporting in an Era of Disinformation: Fairness Guide for Covering Women and People of Color in Politics. Ultraviolet. http://weareultraviolet.org/fairness-guide-2020/

Methodological Problems

- More work is needed on the definition and measurement of disinformation, and a focus on race, gender, and intersectionality can help address this — possibly by improving how we assess impact and harm.
- How can research better capture and understand the fluidity between misinformation and disinformation, particularly if these patterns vary across and within groups based on race, gender, and other factors? And how can we better understand the role of unwitting participants in concerted disinformation campaigns?
- How can we measure the degree and methods of coordination between different actors (organic or otherwise) who may be involved in a disinformation campaign? To what extent is coordination maintained through shared views of patriarchy and/or white supremacy?
- We need research designs that can examine false narratives across different services, particularly those that match the information and media consumption patterns for targeted groups based on race and gender. A related question is, what are the potential cumulative effects of disinformation consumption across these services?
- We also need to develop research designs to address disinformation spread through private communications tools.
- The problem requires more interdisciplinary and participatory research.

Patterns and Impacts

- One immediate gap to address is for researchers to conduct analysis of disinformation using a framework of race, gender, and, where possible, intersectionality.
- What are the implications for political discourse when disinformation may help normalize misogyny? For example, how do disinformation campaigns about women politicians or targeting African American voters influence how those groups engage with politics, and how others engage with them?
- Understanding how disinformation leverages false narratives based on racism and/or misogyny may also improve efforts to counter disinformation, particularly as fact-checking alone may fall short.
- It's unclear if disinformation eventually moves from the fringe to more popular media and gains legitimacy, particularly those based on racist and/or sexist narratives.
- What is the role of independent media in the disinformation ecosystem, including those owned or operated by people of color — and to what extent can such media help counter the spread of disinformation in targeted communities?

Disinformation Ecosystem

- What kinds of evidence will help social networking services improve how they address disinformation based on race and gender?
- How effective is labelling and other interventions to address the spread of disinformation, and specifically for disinformation targeted at groups based on race, gender, and other categories?
- Where gendered disinformation may include a combination of false information and abuse, how can interventions (such as nudging) address both problems, one about veracity and the other about violence?
- Researchers should also examine what kinds of design features are more contextually relevant for different communities, and possibly for different types of content, to help reduce the spread of disinformation.
- Greater transparency in the targeting of political ads may also help us better understand the tactics used when it comes to disinformation campaigns based on race and gender.

Research Infrastructure

- We still need more data and research on the prevalence and impacts of disinformation based on videos and images, which are harder to analyze than text-based content.
- Researchers have struggled to gain access to content from social media companies that would support more detailed research into disinformation trends. Additionally, we still lack effective models for privacy-protecting data collection and sharing — especially for communities whose privacy and others rights may have been undermined by research in the past.
- Civil society groups may be more advanced in thinking about research on disinformation, race, and gender than traditional institutions of research, and we should therefore seek to learn from and build collaborative relationships with them.

Disinformation, although a relatively old concept, has gained prominence in recent years given the increased scale of its distribution through social media, and concern about potential negative impacts on the integrity of recent elections and democracy in general. However, as researchers examine this emerging topic, we still have many more questions than answers. Several scholars have pointed to issues that research on disinformation can address:[123] for example, one of the most significant gaps is in terms of understanding impacts. As Kate Starbird argues, “we have to go beyond trying to measure the impact of individual disinformation

[123] *See*, Tucker, J. A., Guess, A., Barberá, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A., Sanovich, S., Stukal, D., & Nyhan, B. (2018). Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature. Hewlett Foundation. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/87402/1/Social-Media-Political-Polarization-and-Political-Disinformation-Literature-Review.pdf.

campaigns using simple models of inputs (for example, messages posted by bots or trolls) and outputs (such as likes, retweets or even votes)" to understanding how disinformation changes behavior.[124]

In other words, while there is evidence of the large scale and availability of disinformation online, we still lack evidence of its impact on electoral outcomes, political opinions, trust in political institutions, political polarization, and individual behavior more broadly. We also have only a limited understanding of the role and effectiveness of fake accounts and bots as part of disinformation campaigns. There is disagreement on whether disinformation in general has any meaningful effect on individual political beliefs or actions, driven in part by a lack of common definitions and understanding of concepts among researchers.[125]

While the above questions typically focus on social media, we can also look to Wikipedia — given its scale and use — as an important space for research as well. Researchers have highlighted key areas relating to Wikipedia that require further research.[126] These include identifying which issues and topics are more vulnerable to coordinated manipulation, and the need to develop and test new models for information provenance through (for example) new kinds of metadata. Many of these potential research topics could be beneficial to understanding similar content issues on social networking services. Finally, researchers argue that it's important to understand the needs of communities where information verification is currently more difficult; an illustration of this is our earlier point about data voids in some Latinx communication spaces.

Methodological Problems – Definitions and Approaches

While acknowledging the importance of the above indicators for new research, we also want to highlight other critical areas and research questions based on our discussion of disinformation, race, gender, and intersectionality. A starting point can be the definition of "disinformation" used in research. As noted above, key components of disinformation include false information, design intended to cause some political, social, or economic harm, and coordinated distribution. There are challenges in operationalizing this definition, including determining intent and harm. However, while some disinformation campaigns may have broad ambiguous targets and therefore more diffused impact (e.g., falsely linking mobile 5G technology and COVID-19),[127] our review shows that many disinformation campaigns on race and gender have

[124] Starbird, K. (2019). Disinformation's spread: Bots, trolls and all of us. Nature, 571(7766), 449–449. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-02235-x.

[125] Tucker, J. A., Guess, A., Barberá, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A., Sanovich, S., Stukal, D., & Nyhan, B. (2018). Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature. Hewlett Foundation. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/87402/1/Social-Media-Political-Polarization-and-Political-Disinformation-Literature-Review.pdf.

[126] Zia, L., Johnson, I., Mansurov, B., Morgan, J., Redi, M., Saez-Trumper, D., & Taraborelli., D. (2019). Knowledge Integrity-Wikimedia Research 2030. Wikimedia Foundation. doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.7704626.

[127] *See*, Hatmaker, T. (2020, April 10). Coronavirus conspiracies like that bogus 5G claim are racing across the internet. TechCrunch. https://social.techcrunch.com/2020/04/10/coronavirus-5g-covid-19-conspiracy-theory-misinformation/.

narrower targets and potentially more identifiable harm, such as changing voter behavior and discouraging political representation. While not necessarily solving the problem of showing intent, a focus on race, gender, and intersectionality can help improve how we assess impact and harm. For example, it might be more feasible to study the impacts of targeted disinformation on different types of political candidates, based on gender identity, race, etc., including perceptions among voters and the positions of the candidates themselves. Indeed, this approach may also help advance how we define disinformation altogether.

As others have recognized, the distinctions between disinformation and other types of false information (e.g., misinformation) are not always clear. In reality, people may combine how they consume these different types of false information. For example, what starts as a coordinated campaign (disinformation) can include organic elements (such as those described in the section on "Influencers" above) that lead people to unintentionally share false (mis)information with their family and friends. How can research better capture and understand this fluidity, particularly if these patterns may vary across different groups and within groups based on race, gender, and other factors? And how can we better understand the role of unwitting participants in concerted disinformation campaigns?

A related question is how to measure the degree and methods of coordination between different actors (organic or otherwise) who may be involved in a disinformation campaign. For example, researchers have noted the role of influencers in some communities — to what extent is coordination maintained through shared views of patriarchy and/or white supremacy? This review has also discussed state-sanctioned and other types of disinformation about women politicians. Here again, it will be important to understand how these types of disinformation campaigns are coordinated, even if the coordination is not explicit.

From a methodological point of view, we need to recognize the reality that disinformation flows within and across social networking services, and indeed through traditional media as well.

From a methodological point of view, we need to recognize the reality that disinformation flows within and across social networking services, and indeed through traditional media as well. To adequately understand this disinformation ecosystem, we need research designs that can examine false narratives across different services, particularly those that match the information and media consumption patterns for targeted groups. A related question is, what are the potential cumulative effects of disinformation consumption across these services?

In examining different communication services, private messaging in particular places additional challenges on researchers. This paper earlier described the need to look at services

such as WhatsApp, which is popular in Latinx and immigrant communities. Some researchers are concerned that the increased use of such private services makes it difficult to examine disinformation.[128] An important area of focus will be developing interventions to address disinformation in a world of private communications, such as testing ways to increase user awareness about the problems of disinformation within available tools, ethnographic research within communities using such communication services, or other forms of user reporting such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

Finally, given these challenges and the type of research agenda on disinformation discussed above, researchers should strive to be interdisciplinary, relying on expertise in areas such as computational social science, political science, sociology, gender studies, and critical race theory. Such research should also be participatory, including the community or group being targeted in a way that can ensure they benefit directly from the research outputs.

Patterns and Impacts

Much of the research we cite on race and gender refers only to a handful of studies. One immediate gap to address is for researchers to conduct analysis of disinformation using a framework of race, gender, and where possible, intersectionality. To reiterate, research focused on disinformation in general may overlook the different tactics and patterns that exist when targeting is based on race and gender or both, and may also fail to understand potential impacts fully by not examining how a disinformation campaign may use existing narratives of race, gender, or intersectional forms of discrimination to support its false claims. Ultimately, more focused analysis may also improve industry and public policy responses to the problems raised by disinformation, and this can also advance our understanding of other forms of false information such as misinformation.

> *What are the implications for political discourse when disinformation may help normalize misogyny? How do disinformation campaigns about women politicians, or targeting African American voters, for example, influence how those groups engage with politics, and how others engage with them?*

More importantly, such delimited research can help uncover the causal and potentially bidirectional mechanisms that explain the impacts on individuals, communities, and society as a

[128] Persily, N., & Tucker, J. A. (2020). Conclusion: The Challenges and Opportunities for Social Media Research. In Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform (p. 313). Cambridge University Press.

whole. Rather than looking at disinformation primarily from the lens of numbers and scale of campaigns, we also need to connect those narratives to the wider political context and examine the relationship between the two. What does it mean for the quality of democracy when half the population is more likely to be subject to disinformation campaigns involving sexualized and personal attacks? What are the implications for political discourse when disinformation may help normalize misogyny? How do disinformation campaigns about women politicians, or targeting African American voters, for example, influence how those groups engage with politics, and how others engage with them? One way to help understand these questions is by combining research on disinformation patterns and tactics with public polling.[129] Understanding how disinformation leverages false narratives based on racism and/or misogyny may also improve efforts to counter disinformation, particularly as fact-checking alone may fall short.[130]

Another question at hand is the role of information laundering[131] within the disinformation ecosystem. This is the concept that racist or misogynistic content moves across services and platforms to gain legitimacy, even including traditional news media. Although information laundering suggests that extremist content eventually moves from the fringe to more popular media and gains legitimacy, it's unclear if disinformation works in this way.[132] Addressing this question is crucial to understanding how disformation narratives targeting groups based on race and gender are able to ultimately influence how others (e.g., white men) may view those targeted groups, and how those groups view themselves. A related question raised above also refers to the media, and specifically the role of independent media, in the disinformation ecosystem, including those owned or operated by people of color. To what extent can such media help counter the spread of disinformation in targeted communities?

Although this field of research is still nascent, we should still ask about the long-term impacts of exposure to disinformation over time, for example between election cycles. This can include relationships with other groups, diversity in news/sources consumption, political polarization, beliefs about gender identity, and political efficacy, etc.

Disinformation Ecosystem

We also need to better understand the ways in which social networking services function, how people interact with each other on those services, and how these factors influence the promulgation of disinformation, particularly disinformation targeted at or about people based

[129] Wilfore, Kristina. (2020, September 25) Disinformation and Women's Leadership. Presentation at the Center for Democracy & Technology Research Workshop on Disinformation: Understanding the Impacts in Terms of Race and Gender. September 2020

[130] Beckett, L. (2021, January 1). Facts won't fix this: Experts on how to fight America's disinformation crisis. The Guardian. http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/01/disinformation-us-election-covid-pandemic-trump-biden.

[131] Klein, A. (2012). Slipping racism into the mainstream: A theory of information laundering. *Communication Theory*, *22*(4), 427–448. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2012.01415.x.

[132] Wilfore, Kristina. (2020, September 25) Disinformation and Women's Leadership. Presentation at the Center for Democracy & Technology Research Workshop on Disinformation: Understanding the Impacts in Terms of Race and Gender. September 2020

on race and gender. While advances have been made in addressing disinformation generally among these services, there are still areas for improvement given challenges in moderating content around race[133] and online GBV,[134]and the lack of perceived responsiveness to these problems.[135] As researchers, we should ask what kinds of evidence will help social networking services improve how they moderate disinformation based on race and gender. This may involve testing how the services address different types of disinformation, including those that do not ostensibly include targeting around race and gender.

There is a growing body of work that looks at how changes within a user interface can help reduce the problem of disinformation. One approach is nudging,[136] which refers to small but important design changes in a social networking service's interface that may lead to improved discernment among users about what is false information. This can take the form of a reminder about the facts in a given context (e.g, adding labels to problematic content), or an accuracy nudge where the user is asked to consider the accuracy of a statement, prior to getting the option to act on (share or forward) a potential piece of misinformation.[137]

When applied to disinformation, this research is still nascent. For example, how effective is labelling generally, and specifically for disinformation targeted at groups based on race, gender, and other categories? Also relevant is understanding the impacts of nudging and labeling when the disinformation relies on racist or misogynistic narratives. Is there a difference, for example, between the effectiveness of nudging to combat false information about "voting by mail," and the false narrative that Kamala Harris is not a U.S. citizen? Similarly, where gendered disinformation may include a combination of false information and abuse, how can nudging address both problems, one about veracity and the other about violence?

A general problem noted above is the lack of comparable moderation between English and Spanish language content for Latinx communities. While social networking services need to invest more to address such gaps, researchers should also examine what kinds of design features are more contextually relevant for different communities, and possibly for different types of content, to help reduce the spread of disinformation. This can be particularly relevant where the existing user interface may distract from or incentivize the user not to make

[133] Solon, O. (2020, July 23). Facebook management ignored internal research showing racial bias, current and former employees say. NBC News. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/facebook-management-ignored-internal-research-showing-racial-bias-current-former-n1234746.

[134] Amnesty International. (2020, September 22). Twitter is still a toxic place for women. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/09/twitter-failing-women-over-online-violence-and-abuse/.

[135] Hampton, R. (2019, April 23). The black feminists behind #YourSlipIsShowing, a campaign against Twitter trolls masquerading as women of color with the fake hashtag #EndFathersDay. Slate.Com. https://slate.com/technology/2019/04/black-feminists-alt-right-twitter-gamergate.html.

[136] Weinmann, M., Schneider, C., & Vom Brocke, J. (2016). Digital nudging. Business & Information Systems Engineering, 58(6), 433–436.

[137] Pennycook, G., McPhetres, J., Zhang, Y., Lu, J. G., & Rand, D. G. (2020). Fighting COVID-19 misinformation on social media: Experimental evidence for a scalable accuracy-nudge intervention. Psychological Science, 31(7), 770–780.

decisions based on factual accuracy (e.g., the desire to get more "likes").[138] Ultimately, social networking services need to determine which design features and user behaviors contribute to the problem, even those that prioritize engagement and profits.[139]

There is also the need for greater transparency within the operations of social networking services for us to truly understand the scope and nature of disinformation. This remains an unresolved issue. For example, there is concern that online political ads are used in some cases to spread disinformation on social networking services[140] or fund disinformation websites.[141] Greater transparency in the targeting of political ads[142] could help us better understand the tactics used when it comes to disinformation campaigns based on race and gender. In addition, improved transparency — and more collaboration with independent researchers — on research within these companies to test methods to combat disinformation will also be helpful.

Some suggestions to improve how social networking services deal with disinformation call for greater collaboration across companies to share findings and avoid silos.[143] While we still need to develop and test models for this kind of collaboration, a critical factor in the success of these approaches will again include transparency around, for example, what content is being removed, under what criteria, and based on what definitions of disinformation (or misinformation). Some previous attempts at collaboration between social networking services to counter harmful content have lacked this transparency, and it will be important for researchers to design and test collaboration models based on these lessons.[144]

Research Infrastructure

Apart from these questions, challenges unique to research on disinformation remain. For example, most research to date on disinformation focuses on textual data, and so we need more work on understanding the prevalence and impacts of disinformation based on videos and images. This limitation may exist in part because many researchers have focused on disinformation on the social networking service Twitter, which makes some data available publicly.

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[138] Ibid.

[139] Starbird, K. (2019). Disinformation's spread: Bots, trolls and all of us. Nature, 571(7766), 449–449. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-02235-x.

[140] Overton, S. (2019). State Power to Regulate Social Media Companies to Prevent Voter Suppression. *UCDL Rev.*, *53*, 1793. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3582523.

[141] Global Disinformation Index. (2020, July 8). Why is ad tech paying US$25 million to COVID-19 disinfo sites? – GDI. https://disinformationindex.org/2020/07/why-is-ad-tech-paying-us25-million-to-covid-19-disinfo-sites/.

[142] *See*, NYU Ad Observatory. (2020). *Ad Observatory by the NYU Online Political Transparency Project* [Thinktank website]. AdObservatory.Org. https://adobservatory.org/aboutUs.

[143] Wilson, T., & Starbird, K. (2020). Cross-platform disinformation campaigns: Lessons learned and next steps. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, *1*(1). https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/cross-platform-disinformation-campaigns/

[144] *See*, Llansó, E. (2020, July 30). Human Rights NGOs in Coalition Letter to GIFCT. Center for Democracy and Technology. https://cdt.org/insights/human-rights-ngos-in-coalition-letter-to-gifct/.

This brings up the larger problem of data availability, or the lack thereof, since much of what we observe as disinformation is located on social networking services, where research data is not always available.[145] Even where such data may be made available, there is the critical need to protect individual privacy and gain proper user consent to use such data for research (an issue related to the transparency problem above), which is also important for communities that have historically been deprived of these rights. Here we still lack effective models for privacy protecting data collection and sharing, with some calling for more collaboration between platforms, end-users, and governments to make such data available for research purposes.[146]

We already highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary research networks, particularly when it comes to understanding patterns and impacts around race and gender. However, we may need to take this collaboration even further by working strategically with research communities outside of what are typically viewed as research settings (universities, policy centers, think tanks, etc.). Given the severity of the problem, some civil society groups (e.g., the Disinformation Defense League, a coalition of civil society groups) have already engaged in research looking at the same topics and concerns raised here, tracking patterns and impacts of disinformation against communities of color and across gender identity.[147] Civil society groups may be more advanced in thinking about research on this topic than traditional institutions of research, and we should therefore seek to learn from and build collaborative relationships with them.

Looking in the Mirror

Throughout this paper we have highlighted the gaps around research on disinformation, race, gender, and intersectionality; the importance to everyone of addressing those gaps; and how to resolve some of the challenges along the way. We humbly offer these identified gaps and open questions to researchers as ways to advance our understanding of the problem of disinformation. Race and gender inevitably shape the dynamics of disinformation, and we must come to understand how they do so.

The realities of race- or gender-based disinformation are not surprising to some given the wider context of white supremacy and heteronormative patriarchy upon which the U.S. and many of its social, economic, and political institutions are founded. By overlooking what in fact should not be surprising, researchers may develop a blind spot for the importance of certain research questions. In effect, we may miss the point of disinformation campaigns that are sometimes

[145] For a discussion on specific research data needs see, Amazeen, M. A., Benevenuto, F., Brashier, N. M., Bond, R. M., Bozarth, L. C., Budak, C., Ecker, U. K., Fazio, L. K., Ferrara, E., & Flanagin, A. J. (2020). Tackling misinformation: What researchers could do with social media data. The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review, 1(8).

[146] Persily, N., & Tucker, J. A. (2020). Conclusion: The Challenges and Opportunities for Social Media Research. In Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform (p. 313). Cambridge University Press.

[147] Birnbaum, E. (2020, November 3). Meet the researchers and activists fighting misinformation. Protocol. https://www.protocol.com/election-day-2020-misinfomation-disinformation.

intentionally designed to exploit existing forms of discrimination and often target people based on race, gender identity, or both.

As researchers we need to recognize and modify our research agendas on disinformation to actively look at race, gender, and intersectionality. If we do not, we may in fact be helping to maintain the status quo of discrimination against many of the groups mentioned above, including families, friends, colleagues, and even ourselves. An introspection of our own understandings of race, gender, and intersectionality could be a first step to make our work more intentional in addressing the problems of those most likely to be targeted by disinformation.

While we can point to others doing this work, it really should not be left to primarily those who themselves are frequently the target of disinformation campaigns — such as people of color and/or women — to research and work against this problem. The public policy stakes are also too high for us to ignore the impacts on far more than half the U.S. population. Governments, industry, and civil society are understandably concerned and are hastily putting forward policy and other proposals, but without the comprehensive kinds of evidence that we are calling for here, these solutions may fall short. We can start by building this body of evidence and taking advantage of the research opportunities described in this report.

While we can point to others doing this work, it really should not be left to primarily those who themselves are frequently the target of disinformation campaigns — such as people of color and/or women — to research and work against this problem.

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