News

When a Journalist Becomes a Disinformation Agent | Scientific American

By Jen Schwartz

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I am not the editor in chief of a propaganda farm disguised as a far-right breaking news outlet. But one day last February, just before the world shut down, I got to play one.

About 70 journalists, students and digital media types had gathered at the City University of New York to participate in a crisis simulation. The crisis at hand was the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The game was designed to illuminate how we, as reporters and editors, would respond to a cascade of false and misleading information on voting day—and how public discourse might respond to our coverage. The exercise was hosted by First Draft, a research group that trains people to understand and outsmart disinformation.

After a morning workshop on strategies for reporting on conspiracy theories and writing headlines that don't entrench lies, the organizers split us up into groups of about 10 people, then gave each "newsroom" a mock publication name. Sitting around communal tables, we assigned ourselves the roles of reporters, editors, social media managers and a communications director. From our laptops we logged into a portal to access the game interface. It looked like a typical work desktop: There was an e-mail inbox, an intraoffice messaging system that functioned exactly like Slack, a microblogging platform that worked exactly like Twitter and a social feed that looked exactly like Facebook. The game would send us messages with breaking events, press releases and tips, and the feeds would respond to our coverage. Several First Draft staffers at a table were the "communications desk," representing any agency, person or company we might need to "call" to answer questions. Other than that, we received no instruction.

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