

A Blueprint for Documenting and Debunking Misinformation Campaigns | Nieman Reports

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October 21, 2020

In 2020, amid a pandemic and protests and a presidential election, misinformation lays in wait everywhere. It's on our social media feeds, coming out of the mouths of our politicians, and printed in pamphlets mailed to our doors, intermingling indistinguishably with facts. The World Health Organization has termed this an infodemic. Some of it is the result of intentional media manipulation campaigns, scams, hoaxes, and grifts cooked up by people with an agenda. This disinformation, like a virus, is contagious and potentially deadly—to individuals and democracy itself.

It didn't start this way. The advent of online communication, and the vast possibility for connection that came with it, enabled people to find each other based on interest and affinity like never before, and new toolkits for those engaged in cultural production. Scientific innovators, advocacy groups, and independent media all flourished with new advances in networked communication and broadband technology, establishing their communities on the open web and social media.

But as the naivete of the techno-utopian era fades into the horrors of the infodemic, we now see platforms running defense after knowingly allowing radicalization to flourish. The direct harm caused by ransomware attacks on our vital institutions, the cyber-troopers of oppressive regimes, for-profit disinformation outfits, harmful conspiracy theories grounded in anti-Semitism and medical misinformation, and the celebration of extremist violence are breaking our institutions, which have little or no ability to identify the source of these attacks.

We at the Technology and Social Change team at Harvard's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Policy are publishing the Media Manipulation Casebook to help cut through this noise. The Casebook is a database of media manipulation campaign case studies, some old, some ongoing, that we hope will provide a

framework to analyze this phenomenon. We intend this research platform to be both a resource to scholars and a tool to help researchers, technologists, policymakers, civil society organizations, and journalists know how and when to respond to the very real threat of media manipulation.

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