

Can disinformation be stopped? | Harvard Magazine

By Jacob Sweet

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“Stop the Steal” was first trotted out during the 2016 Republican primaries. As the Republican National Convention approached, Donald Trump’s campaign consultant Roger Stone coined the phrase, urging people to resist the allegedly corrupt “establishment” Republicans who wouldn’t let Trump win. When he prevailed, it became irrelevant. Stone brought the term back for the general election, but when Trump won again, the phrase lost steam.

But on and after Election Day 2020, as the results appeared increasingly less favorable to the incumbent president, Joan Donovan, research director at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, watched a constellation of what she calls “disinformers” rally around the phrase again. In 24 hours, the most prominent “Stop the Steal” Facebook group—promoted across social media by outspoken conspiracy theorists, and algorithmically recommended to likely supporters by the site itself—attracted more than 300,000 members. She saw the online movement shift to the streets, with provocateurs like Alex Jones and Ali Alexander showing up at state capitols across the country, pressing representatives not to certify the election and riling up those who believed the process to be a sham.

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