Smart Social Listening
What to Look for and What to Do
August 2021
Agenda

1. Defining the threat of mis/disinformation
2. Understanding right-wing tactics on social media
3. Assessing what *really* matters and adhering to best practices
4. Discussion and possible next steps
DEFINING THE THREAT OF MIS/DISINFORMATION
Global problem, constantly evolving, grim outlook

Democrats fight to keep up with the changing landscape of political disinformation

Scots voters targeted in online Iranian ‘disinformation’ election campaign to break up UK

Germany is main target of Russian disinformation, EU says

Opinion: India is facing an epidemic of misinformation alongside covid-19

MENA Monitor: Arabic COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation Online

Ethiopia elections: The misinformation circulating online

How China Ramped Up Disinformation Efforts During the Pandemic

Indonesia’s election riots offer a lesson on the perils of fake news

How Have Information Operations Affected the Integrity of Democratic Elections in Latin America?
Many players in the “game,” with different incentives

Right-wing infrastructure is deeply connected, often overlaps

Other core players

Social media/tech platforms
Mainstream news

Average users/voters

Foreign actors

RW think tanks
Extremist
2A
MOC/candidates
Fake local news
MAGA
Manosphere
Anti-vaxx
Anti-POC
Nationalist
RW media
Dark $
Conspiracy
GOP

Anti-choice
Anti-LGBTQ+
Reopen
Fake local news
Manosphere
Anti-POC
Nationalist
RW media
Dark $
Conspiracy
GOP

Other core players
Social media giants are good at PR, bad at solving issues

- Policy violations are inconsistently labeled and removed
- Content removal is slow, allowing widespread sharing before enforcement
- Poor moderation of foreign accounts and in languages beyond English
- Algorithms still actively recommend some mis/disinformation to users
- Simple enforcement-evasion techniques are often effective
- Consistently allow paid advertising with false or misleading claims
Impact on Latinx and Spanish-speaking communities

Targeted to Latinx Communities

• Broad, national right-wing narratives: anti-COVID, anti-Dems/Biden, harmful immigration framing, disinfo about media control, etc.
• Harassment and hate speech from fringe communities
• Propaganda around conservative issues
• Anti-socialism messaging
• Exploitation of information voids in Latino and Hispanic news; especially on popular apps like WhatsApp

About Latinx Communities

• Anti-immigration and anti-migrant fear mongering, sustained by the right-wing
• Attacks on Democrats for releasing “dangerous criminals,” using examples and images of Latinx individuals
• False information around relief and benefits offered to non-citizens
• Placing blame on immigrants for rising COVID-19 rates, esp in states like FL/TX
UNDERSTANDING RIGHT-WING TACTICS ON SOCIAL MEDIA
5 Tactics to Know

1. Prioritize major platforms
2. Cross-channel repetition
3. Build topic momentum
4. In-network sharing
5. Lean into algorithms
Most Americans are using YouTube and Facebook

7 in 10 Facebook users say they use it daily
Only 23% of US adults use Twitter
Among 18-29: 65% use Snapchat, 48% use TikTok, and 42% use Twitter

*Note: Data sourced from 2021 Pew Research report on social media usage.
Right-wing sources consistently perform better on Facebook

**Top Web Publishers on Facebook: June 2021**

1. Daily Wire  
2. Daily Mail  
3. Fox News  
4. Rumble  
5. CNN  
6. BBC  
7. The Blaze  
8. The Guardian  
9. NBC News  
10. Western Journal  

*Data from NewsWhip*
### Right-wing accounts are also more active on Facebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 10 pro-voting tweets</th>
<th>Top 10 anti-voting tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Only 1 tweet has a corresponding FB post</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 4 of the 10 authors <strong>do not have</strong> an active FB account</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Average engagement is <strong>lower</strong> on FB post than corresponding tweets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 5 of 10 have a corresponding FB post</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• All 10 authors <strong>have</strong> an active FB account</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Average engagement is <strong>higher</strong> on FB posts than corresponding tweets</td>
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*Pulled using Meltwater; Jan 21 – May 17, 2021, excluding duplicate authors*
5 Tactics to Know

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Right-wing content often sees speedy cross-channel repetition

- Biden's Open-Borders budget would:
  - Eliminate $1.5 billion in border wall funding
  - Cut CBP funding for "Procurement, Construction and Improvements" by 50%
  - Slash ICE funding in that area by 47%

This is #BidenBorderCrisis.

Biden's First 100 Days Accomplishments:
- Kill Keystone XL Pipeline
- Gas Lines
- $3 Gas (National Avg)
- Inflation
- Crumbling Dollar
- Rising Unemployment
- Open Border Crisis
- Antifa Terror Squads
- Skyrocketing Homicides
- Israel Burning
- China Rising
- Vaccinated Masking

11:17 AM · May 11, 2021 · TweetDeck

Biden's Open-Borders Agenda Is Anything But Humane | Chad Wolf on Fox Business

611 views • Jun 2, 2021
5 Tactics to Know

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The Left leads on HR1/FTPA; the Right leads on voting. Why?

• Right/Left have similar post and interaction trends when it comes to HR 1 or state election policies.
• Right-leaning pages dominate more generic terms related to voting and elections.
Volume of conversation about critical race theory*, January 1 – June 15, 2021

*Note: Social media data pulls from Meltwater firehose and other publicly available social data; Facebook and Instagram are under-represented; cable data courtesy of Media Matters for America
They use events to make *moments* and raise salience of their issues

- **Media Matters data shows:**
  - Fox News increases immigration coverage after Biden’s inauguration
  - Fox amplifies, sets terms of the “border crisis” narrative.
  - Right-wing social media helps to amplify framing further.
  - CNN and MSNBC adopt framing, belatedly follow with “border crisis” mentions.
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Local and in-network disinformation is the most dangerous

- Bad actors want to **bypass credible sourcing** of information.
- Bad actors **want us sharing the content within our networks** – so it seems more credible.
- Breaking this down helps curb the spread of disinformation – people do not like to be conned but you cannot just call out the con – have to break down the con.
Rise in political Facebook groups to seed messaging locally

**OPPOSING COVID RESTRICTIONS**
- Reopen Arizona
  - ~1.2K members
  - Based in AZ
- ReOpen PA
  - 105K members
  - Based in PA
- ReopenVA
  - 2.7K members
  - Based in VA

**SUPPORTING TRUMP/GOP**
- Kayleigh McEnany Fan Club
  - 470.4K members
- The Recall Movement - of Michigan
  - 2.7K members
  - Based in MI
- The Party of Trump
  - 126.4K members

**INTERESTS (E.G. GUNS)**
- Gun Lovers
  - 41.3K members
- Right To Bear Arms
  - 11.5K members

**OPPOSING COVID RESTRICTIONS**
- Supporting Trump/GOP interests (e.g., guns)
5 Tactics to Know

1. Prioritize major platforms
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5. Lean into algorithms
Algorithms!

• The “secret sauce” or a fixed series of steps used by a computer model to make something happen.

• This is how social media platforms determine what will show up in your newsfeed, what is considered “trending”, what should be shown to fewer people, etc.

• Algorithms change all the time and it’s important to follow the news around changes.

• Algorithms can be and are often manipulated.
What do algorithms reward?

• Platforms don’t give us a clear explanation of how their algorithms work. But goal is to keep people on site.

Case in Point:
What do algorithms reward?

• Platforms don’t give us a clear explanation of how their algorithms work. But goal is to keep people on site.
• On Facebook, organic reach is declining on average. Since 2018, branded content is deprioritized in favor of in-network sharing.
• Factors the algorithm considers:
  ✓ Likes, shares, comments
  ✓ View time
  ✓ Amount and speed of engagement
  ✓ Video content
  ✓ New features (stories, reels, live video)
  ✓ Relationships
  ✓ Recency and timing
  ✓ Groups
Example: Gaming platform algorithms

- Far-right influencers and other bad actors often experiment with algorithms, including asking followers directly for help getting an organic boost
- Includes direct asks for users to take new actions to engage with content in order to maximize reach – often feeds the “conservative tech censorship” narrative too
Example: Coordinated network sharing

Posts shared at nearly the same time, with nearly the same caption, across networks
ASSESSING WHAT *REALLY* MATTERS AND RESPONDING
Please do not panic.
First decision: How bad is it? How bad could it be?

Most important criteria: REACH vs. IMPACT

**REACH** = Are real people seeing it, or is it stuck in partisan spaces?

**IMPACT** = Will it change the offline situation: turnout, reputation, support?

**Considerations within Reach/Impact**

- Time horizon? Immediate vs. long-term impact
- Who are the actors? GOP, far-right, foreign, conspiracy theorists, etc.
- Types of accounts? Bots, fake news, trolls, deep fakes, etc.
- Type of disinfo? True, false, out-of-context, character attacks
- Platform violations? Behavior vs. content
- Impact? Effective vs. attempted
### Have a plan and a framework for responding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REACH: Likelihood of disinformation, etc. targeting key constituencies*</th>
<th>IMPACT: Likelihood we are losing support or will lose support **</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High</strong></td>
<td><strong>Med</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Platform takedown request</td>
<td>• Rapid response/Change the subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Change the subject</td>
<td>• Damage control with journalists/donors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attack messenger</td>
<td>• Arm organizers with talking points and inoculation messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Outreach to communities</td>
<td>• Consider targeted response to impacted communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Press statement or earned media play</td>
<td>• Explore takedown options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Run paid campaign</td>
<td>• Monitor for escalation/suspect features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Deploy digital organizers or field</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Response from allies or influencers or media coverage</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Monitor for topic momentum</td>
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<tr>
<th>Med</th>
<th>Med</th>
<th>Med</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Determine strategy on messenger</td>
<td>• Consult available experts</td>
<td>• Flag for experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Consider content campaign options</td>
<td>• Arm organizers with talking points and/or inoculation messages</td>
<td>• Monitor for escalation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Arm organizers with talking points and inoculation messages</td>
<td>• Get handle on press/opinion elite if needed</td>
<td>• Do nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Consider reaching out to the press</td>
<td>• Check in with regional/target influencers on the ground</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Consider engaging allies</td>
<td>• Monitor for escalation; put field leads on alert</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Put leads on alert</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Send in incident</td>
<td>• Flag for someone else</td>
<td>• Do nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Flag for issue experts, policy experts, other</td>
<td>• Do nothing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Request outreach to affected communities for awareness ONLY if appropriate/time</td>
<td></td>
<td>Do nothing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When should we issue a more direct response?

When reach/impact is high
• People are the victim, not you! This is an opportunity to connect with voter frustrations
• Take action to expose the source and motive
• Communicate in a way that will actually reach supporters
• Give information from trusted sources
• Change the narrative – do not overly harp

When you are a DIRECT target
• Sometimes a direct, simple denial can shut it down

When the potential impact is severe
• Always report threats to platforms and authorities
Effective messaging for disinformation

Always avoid arguments and confrontation; you may deepen their belief.

1. **Acknowledge shared concerns.**
   - “This pandemic has been hard on everyone…”
   - “I also get frustrated when health guidance changes…”

2. **Undermine the messenger.**
   - “That source actually has a history of lying and promoting biased information. I prefer to trust…”
   - “Some people are trying to make it seem like this vaccine does XYZ because they benefit from the confusion and division, but health officials agree…”

3. **Return to the truth and share positive, proactive information.**
   - “This is why it’s so important that people like you and me get vaccinated.”
   - “That’s why I think you should just talk to your doctor about what you heard.”

Goal is always to pivot to a more positive, proactive story.
Thank you

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