

Misinformation in your backyard

Insights from researching online
conversations in Colorado, Florida,
Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin

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All misinformation is local PAGE 3

Notes on the power of misinformation that breeds locally.

Voter fraud claims about mail-in ballots PAGE 5

Why misinformation about mail-in ballots is hard to debunk, and the challenge of reporting on local election administration.

📍 CASE STUDY: COLORADO

Viral photos misinterpreted PAGE 7

How photos of crowds and dramatic confrontations travel quickly online, but often lack context.

📍 CASE STUDY: FLORIDA

Data mining and transparency in advertising PAGE 9

When online political advertising is used as a tactic for manipulating the public.

📍 CASE STUDY: MICHIGAN

Doxing and harassment of health officials PAGE 11

How publicizing personal information about individuals online can lead to real-world consequences.

📍 CASE STUDY: OHIO

Conspiracy theories about government surveillance PAGE 13

How misinformation flourishes when it contains a kernel of truth and ways of fighting it.

📍 CASE STUDY: WISCONSIN

About the 2020 Local News Fellows PAGE 15

Meet our five fellows based in Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin.

All misinformation is local

“All politics is local,”
so the saying goes,
and the same is true for
online misinformation.

The 2016 elections brought forth images of Macedonian teens pulling quick profits and Russian agents seeding polarization across the United States. But 2020 is teaching us that whatever the origins of a rumor, misleading meme or photo, it is the particular local twist and organic amplification that give it power — often leading to impact offline.

In five states that will be key in the upcoming election — Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin — First Draft has collected dozens of examples of information disorder playing out via private Facebook groups, text messaging and other platforms. In an echo of national trends, local influencers and elected officials — state representatives, sheriffs and political candidates — play a key role in amplifying and spreading misleading or harmful information about the pandemic and other issues. Confusion among the public, whether about

the process of mail-in voting or the efficacy of mask-wearing, proves fertile ground for creating confusion and encouraging distrust.

While local news organizations enjoy more public trust than national sources, and are well-positioned to provide information to counter information disorder, they are under increasing financial stress. Even before the economic burden of the pandemic, local newsrooms had already been contracting and shutting down as advertising dollars migrated to social media platforms, resulting in local news deserts. And even in their previously financially stable state, newsroom staff lacked diversity. According to recent research by Gallup and the Knight Foundation, more than two-thirds of Americans think it is important for the media to represent the diversity of the US population, but nearly 40 per cent think the media is doing a poor job with diversity efforts. ►

In today's challenging environment, many local newsrooms lack the resources to devote staff members to tracking local information disorder. But through collaboration, they can share resources and encourage on-the-ground efforts, bringing newsrooms together.

All these trends have worsened during the pandemic. The Poynter Institute is keeping a continually updated list of newsrooms that have cut services and staff in recent months. One estimate puts the number of news jobs lost at 36,000, even though the audience has increased from a public seeking answers to local questions.

First Draft has dedicated its 2020 US program to training local reporters and increasing resources for combating local information disorder. In a tour of 14 states, First Draft extended its training on responsibly tracking and countering local misinformation to more than 1,000 local reporters.

In March, First Draft launched the Local News Fellows project, training and investing in five part-time reporters embedded in their communities to serve as central resources in their state. The driving concept: In today's challenging environment, many local newsrooms lack the resources to devote staff members to tracking local information disorder. But through collaboration, they can share resources and encourage on-the-ground efforts, bringing newsrooms together.

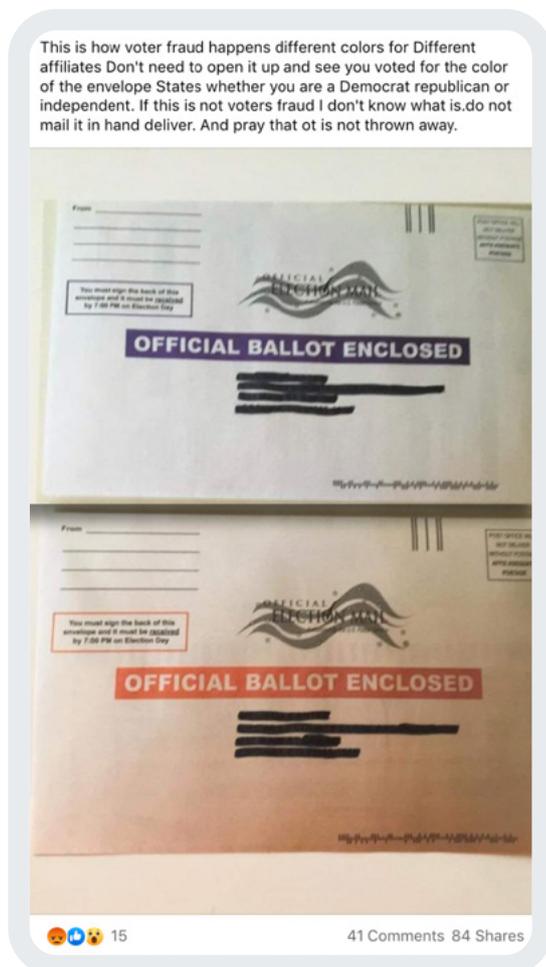
The material in this report was all sparked by their daily monitoring of local online conversations.

First Draft has prepared case studies on five examples from Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin. They are small snapshots of information disorder in these particular states, but they also paint a broad picture of how the same themes and tactics cross state borders and flourish nationally. ●

— NANCY WATZMAN

Voter fraud claims about mail-in ballots

Why misinformation about mail-in ballots is hard to debunk, and the challenge of reporting on local election administration



A TALE OF TWO BALLOTS

In a Facebook group for political discussions in Montrose, Colorado, one member posted a photo of two mail-in ballots: one printed with blue ink, and one with red. Both the caption and some of the comments suggested that the color coding is a way to circumvent the anonymity of political affiliation, throw away ballots or otherwise “control” the vote.

UNEXPECTED CONFUSION

Montrose County is relatively small: it has a population of fewer than 43,000 people, and this particular Facebook group has just over 250 members. Colorado is also one of the few states that has voted by mail statewide since 2013. So it was surprising to see a concern about mail voting fraud gain so much attention on Facebook (84 shares) in a group where most posts don’t receive any shares at all. ➡

THE CHALLENGE OF REPORTING ON MISINFO LOCALLY

We have seen similar claims about mail voter fraud nationally, especially as states expand mail voting systems under the pressure of the pandemic. The problem with addressing these claims broadly is that the workings of election administration are often hyper-local and difficult to explain.

In this example, for instance, the way color-coding works varies by county. Some county clerks color-code ballots to speed up processing by identifying different groups of voters: for example, those who still need to submit valid identification. Other counties might have ballots coded according to party affiliation for their primary elections. The result is a complicated system that varies widely and makes it difficult to address rumors on social media ballots or otherwise “control” the vote.

SIMILAR RUMORS FROM MICHIGAN AND THE PRESIDENT

In a Michigan group with more than 5,000 users, one Facebook user incorrectly identified ballot applications mailed to their house as actual ballots. The post was shared widely.

A since-deleted tweet from President Donald Trump in late May cast doubt on Michigan’s plans to mail absentee ballot applications. It came just hours after two dams breached in Midland, Michigan, prompting the governor to issue a state of emergency. The tweet also implied that Michigan would be slow to receive federal emergency funding for disaster relief because of its move toward absentee ballots.

REPORTING TIPS

Remember that “debunks” never reach as many people as the rumors they are addressing. Articles about voting fraud rumors online may have the effect of further spreading the misleading information. Instead, evergreen content on how mail-in voting works in your state, such as [this piece](#) from the Montrose Press, can help inoculate the public against misinformation about the voting system.

When reporting about confirmed cases of voting fraud, be careful to use current information and place examples in context of how the system performs as a whole. ●

Viral photos misinterpreted

Photos of crowds and dramatic confrontations are powerful and travel quickly online, but often lack context



SAM GREENWOOD/GETTY

VIDEO: Jacksonville made national headlines yesterday for the partial reopening of beaches. Unfortunately, many of those reports carried old photos and videos of crowded beaches causing many in the U.S. to ask, 'what in the heck is going on down there?' Here's drone video of what it actually looked like. Stay safe!



42.6K +36.1K Post Views

289.4K Total Views

122x 📺 2,242 +2,196 🗨️ 1,082 +1,068 📌 7,918 +7,904

AN EASY TARGET FOR OUTRAGE

When Jacksonville, Florida partially reopened its beaches in mid-April, this photo (top) was picked up worldwide by media outlets including CNN, NBC News and the Daily Mail. Outrage about social distancing — or the supposed lack thereof — followed, with derogatory hashtags such as #Floridamorons trending. While the image is genuine, some reports on the beach reopenings used stock photos. There were also many photos, taken at different angles and different times of day, that showed a much sparser crowd (left). ➡

A QUESTIONABLE DEPICTION OF RISK?

While crowd photos have become a staple of the pandemic, camera angles and other variables mean they are not always accurate depictions of risk. Given what is now known about how Covid-19 is spread, beaches are one of the less risky environments. Yet news outlets continue to use photos of beaches to accompany articles about rising caseloads.

THE POWER OF IMAGES

Visuals are some of the most powerful vehicles of misinformation, even when they are genuine. They tug at people's fears and biases, quickly travel across the web and often lose context when they do. Here are more examples of viral images and the stories they ended up telling.



This photo of pro-reopening protesters at the Ohio Statehouse, taken April 13, quickly traveled around the world. Along with photos of reopen protests in Michigan, Colorado and other states, these photos communicated drama and conflict, although polling showed that most Americans supported shutdowns.



This photo of a Michigan protestor by Jeff Kowalsky for Getty Images sparked online speculation that the protestor pictured was a right-wing activist from California. This fed a narrative that protesters had been shipped in from other locations. Research by First Draft showed that the man was indeed a Michigan native, not the California activist.



In this photo, taken by Alyson McClaran at a Denver reopen protest in April, the people dressed in medical wear were not confirmed to be health care workers. However, some news organizations identified them as such. This discrepancy in information inspired reopen activists to share conspiracy theories online about the identities of the protestors. ●

Data mining and transparency in advertising

When online political advertising is used as a tactic to manipulate the public



A POLITICAL AD BY ANY OTHER NAME

In early July, an advertisement on a Facebook page that appeared to be for coronavirus resources in Michigan was encouraging people to sign up to “join the fight” on who gets coronavirus relief. The ads were not labeled as “political” in Facebook’s database, which means they don’t have to disclose as much information. However, the Facebook page promoting the ads linked back to a website called “Take Back Control,” featuring an “election” page that provided details on deadlines for upcoming elections and linked viewers to the Michigan Secretary of State’s response to the pandemic. ▶

SIGNS POINT TO DATA MINING

Based on a reverse analytics search, First Draft found that the site shared an analytics ID with [SBDigital](#), a Washington, D.C.-based digital firm. According to its website, SBDigital has partnerships with data aggregators, “which when combined, allow SBDigital to match your voter, member, subscriber, or other lists of targets directly to their personal identifiers.” The firm says that they then serve digital ads directly to those identifiers. SBDigital’s clients include Democratic candidates and organizations. Records on election finance tracker [opensecrets.org](#) showed that SBDigital received more than \$1 million in payments in 2020, including more than \$900,000 from Mike Bloomberg 2020.

A PROBLEM OF TRANSPARENCY

Political ads that mislead users, purport to be something they are not and lack transparency continue to flourish on social platforms. The fact that some advertisements with clear political content lack the “political” designation makes them harder to track and understand the interests behind them.

We see these kinds of ads targeting other battleground states in the election as well. Take Back Control, for example, also has websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter handles for Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. And in Colorado, a group called the Story Network Foundation runs multiple [Facebook pages](#), one of which identifies itself as a “media/news company” even though the group [spent over \\$40,000](#) on political ads.

INVESTIGATING POLITICAL ADS

Check the Facebook Ad Library for top spenders in your state. You can do this by going to Facebook’s [Ad Library Report](#) and scrolling down to “Spending by location.”

You can use tools like [DNSlytics](#) to find domains that share the same analytics ID. This can help unearth relationships between websites and organizations.

[Opensecrets.org](#), which tracks money in US politics, and [Ad Observatory](#) are other free tools that can aid in your investigation and augment data from the Facebook Ad Library.

Don’t rely on social media labels to determine which ads are “political.” If a page or advertiser lacks transparency, it is a sign you should dig deeper. ●

Doxing and harassment of health officials

How publicizing personal information about individuals online can lead to real-world consequences



FROM HEALTH ORDERS TO HATE SPEECH

Amy Acton, the former Ohio Department of Health director, got national attention for her swift response in the early days of the pandemic, but almost as swiftly saw the accolades turn into online harassment and hate speech. Some of the most notable comments came from the Facebook account of Ohio State Rep. Nino Vitale, who in one instance called Acton a “Globalist Health Director” signing orders in “the dark of the night.” Acton is Jewish, and “globalist” is often levied as an anti-Semitic slur.

FROM ONLINE TO OFFLINE HARASSMENT

On other instances, Vitale used his Facebook posts to call Acton a “medical dictator,” a “tyrant” and a “doctor of doom,” and these posts received thousands of reactions. His May 1 post (left) received over 2,000 comments and 7,000 shares. On May 2, protesters showed up outside Acton’s house with guns. She stepped down on June 11. ▶



PHYSICIANS DOXED, TARGETED ACROSS THE US

A joint investigation by Kaiser and the Associated Press found that at least 27 state and local health leaders have resigned, retired or been fired since April across 13 states. Physicians have been targets of threats and doxing as well, and several examples we have seen come from Facebook groups that are about reopening the economy.

→ In one such Facebook group in Colorado, photos were posted of Emily Brown, former director of the Rio Grande County Board of Health, along with those of several other colleagues. The photos were accompanied by gruesome references to armed citizens and bodies hanging from trees.

→ In a similar group for Wisconsinites, one Facebook user posted an email exchange with her physician in which she requested a mask exemption letter based on an anxiety disorder. She was refused. In the post it appears that she had attempted to black out the names and email addresses on her screenshot, but it was poorly done and the details were easy to read. Commenters found the clinic in question almost immediately and began talking about flooding the office with calls and emails.

ON DOXING

Doxing, the practice of researching and broadcasting someone's private or identifying information, poses a big problem for both private and public individuals. Here are some tips for reporters to avoid the worst.

Protect yourself, your colleagues and your sources. Make sure your social media accounts have 2-factor authentication, you are using VPNs when needed, and are otherwise careful about where and how you store information about your sources.

When public officials or private individuals are targeted online with hate speech and/or doxing, news organizations should carefully consider what kind of coverage to provide, if any, to avoid amplifying a potentially explosive situation.

Be careful to stick to confirmed facts: Doxers don't always get the facts right, and sometimes people are misidentified. ●

Conspiracy theories about government surveillance

Misinformation often flourishes when it contains a kernel of truth — but there are ways of fighting it

URGENT ACTION NEEDED if you know people who think like we do and live in Appleton, bad stuff is about to happen at the council meeting tonight. I copied this from someone else. They apparently really want to push this through. 😬

For those living in Appleton the city council is voting TONIGHT (Wednesday the 17th) whether or not to approve 1.2M in gov. funding for contact tracing, isolation measures for those with or suspected COVID, etc. All cities are being faced with this decision per Evers. There are now cameras set up all over for surveillance. Please call or email the 15 members of city council. See page 6 of 8 then open the pdf. Share the link and copy paste this post please

<https://cityofappleton.legistar.com/View.ashx...>

Also I'm hearing there's a county wide meeting in outagamie cty next week 22 or 23. If anyone has info please share it with all on here. And looking for brown county info as well. Thanks I'm advance

😬😬👍 386

231 Comments

BIG BROTHER IN APPLETON, WISCONSIN?

In a Facebook group about reopening Wisconsin, a post encouraged readers to oppose the Appleton Common Council's acceptance of up to \$1.2 million in state reimbursement for its public health response to Covid-19. It warned that “there are now cameras set up all over for surveillance,” drawing hundreds of reactions and comments online. The council received a swarm of questions — including some from people who did not even live in Appleton — about contact tracing and quarantine protocols. ➡

CONTACT TRACING MISTRUST

Contact tracing is a disease control strategy that identifies and informs people who have been in contact with someone who has tested positive for Covid-19. Public health experts say that along with widespread testing, it is a crucial part of the strategy for fighting the pandemic. In Wisconsin, the Department of Health Services hired 1,000 tracers to get in touch with people who may have come into contact with the virus and ask them to voluntarily quarantine.

But mistrust of contact tracers rapidly developed on social media. Some theories alleged that Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers was selling people's personal information and that tracers were working with Child Protective Services to remove children from homes. As a result, some public health employees have reported threats and harassment on and offline. Because of this, the health department's logo was removed from its vehicles, according to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

A CHALLENGE FOR REPORTING

Reporting on conspiracy theories comes with hurdles that can be difficult to cross.

For one, people process information in biased ways. When articles threaten a person's worldview, those most fixed in their views double down. This is called the worldview backfire effect. Unfortunately, much reporting on conspiracy theory uses threatening and derogatory language.

Like a lot of misinformation, some conspiracy theories contain a kernel of truth. In this case, it is true that governments can and do misuse personal data. But while caution about private data is certainly justified, these sensationalist criticisms end up casting doubt on a critical health program because people lack trusted information.

COVERING CONSPIRACY THEORY

When reporting on conspiracy theories, avoid using ridicule or derogatory language. Frame debunks in ways that are less threatening to a person's worldview.

Create service journalism pieces about how contact tracing programs will work, including context on how they have been successful in preventing the spread of disease in other situations and time periods.

Do due diligence on accountability reporting about pandemic interventions. Acknowledge the "kernel of truth" in the conspiracy theory — that governments sometimes abuse personal data — and address any questions that arise from it. ●

Colorado

Sandra Fish trains and shares tips with Colorado newsrooms on misinformation through the [Colorado Media Project](#), along with the [Colorado News Collaborative \(COLab\)](#), which includes dozens of news organizations, from legacy print to digital startups to family-owned rural newspapers. She has done seven webinars on verifying, monitoring and reporting on misinformation for nearly 140 journalists and community members.



Florida

First Draft fellow Damon Scott is sponsored by [WLRN Miami](#), and shares insights with more than 160 news organizations representing cities across the state through the Florida Press Association newsletter. He most recently conducted a misinformation webinar for students in the South Florida Media Network at Florida International University.



Michigan

First Draft fellow Serena Maria Daniels is sponsored by [Bridge Detroit](#), a statewide news site. She shares insights on circulating misinformation via the Michigan Press Association newsletter, and as founder of [Tostada Magazine](#), which publishes journalism on food issues and immigrant communities. Her most recent event in collaboration with PEN America, “Untangling Misinformation in Detroit BIPOC Communities,” was attended by 56 journalists and community leaders.



Ohio

First Draft fellow Shana Black, founder of Black Girl in the CLE, works with sponsor organization Eye on Ohio to share insights with journalists about online misinformation circulating in the state. She has held two virtual trainings for local reporters, and has more events in the works for greater Ohio community members to learn about misinformation and media literacy.



Wisconsin

First Draft fellow Howard Hardee is sponsored by Wisconsin Watch, a statewide investigative news site. His stories on information disorder in Wisconsin have been published by more than 20 local newspapers, and he shares local insights with a newsletter to more than 500 media partners throughout the state. Hardee has worked with Wisconsin Watch to train students at the University of Wisconsin, and has appeared in webinars and virtual community events to talk about misinformation.



Other contributors

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Thank you