



The University of Texas at Austin  
Center for Media Engagement  
*Moody College of Communication*

CENTER FOR MEDIA ENGAGEMENT  
**ANNUAL REPORT**  
**2020**

## DEAR FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS,

On behalf of everyone at the Center for Media Engagement, we hope that this note finds you, your friends, and your family well. 2020 has been an unbelievable year; I think we will be unpacking it for years to come. Through it, I could not have been prouder to work with the people at the Center for Media Engagement and to know people like you, who share our vision of a vibrant media ecosystem that helps people learn, engage in the exchange of ideas, and work together.

Looking at what we've accomplished this year, you would hardly know it has been filled with challenges. For that, I am grateful to work with people who see difficult times and rise to the occasion, working harder out of a commitment to making a difference and a belief that media engagement is a critical piece of the puzzle. As the country closed down due to the coronavirus pandemic, we got to work analyzing what the public wanted to know from local news and whether the information was available. When protests against police brutality broke out across the

country, Associate Director Dr. Gina Masullo put a team together to study how journalism could better serve Black Americans. As the election approached, Program Director of Propaganda Dr. Sam Woolley and his team reported on campaign use of new technologies and shared their expertise with media outlets around the world. As the media became critical conduits for information and belonging, Program Director of Media Ethics Dr. Scott Stroud and his team published their 100th case study and saw more use of their work as many moved to online learning. And as science communication took center stage, Program Director of Science Communication Dr. Anthony Dudo and his team investigated how to diversify the scientists that communicate with the public and how to help the public learn about the pandemic. Throughout all of these efforts, students at the university worked with the center, gaining valuable experience and helping to push our work forward despite an interrupted educational experience.



“Society only works if people have reliable information, trust the institutions providing them with that information, and come together for a mission bigger than any one person or political party.”

— Talia Stroud, Director

This year has reinforced for me why we do what we do. Society only works if people have reliable information, trust the institutions providing them with that information, and come together for a mission bigger than any one person or political party. The media are the most important and efficient means for building these critical societal foundations. Our work supports, bolsters, and improves the media ecosystem.

As I look to 2021, I hope it is less tumultuous. I hope it is a year of renewal. We are committed to doing our part, with projects in the works on the use of geo-targeting, the media's connection to the Latinx community, the influence of social media in the U.S. election, how platforms can signal trust and create more public-friendly spaces, and what the public thinks about how scientists communicate.

The center is able to do this work thanks to generous funding from organizations like the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Democracy Fund, the Hewlett Foundation, Omidyar Network, the Open Society Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the Rita Allen Foundation, and contributions from individual donors. We are grateful for support from the Moody College of Communication and The University of Texas. We are truly appreciative of supporters like you who read, use, and share our work. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for believing in our mission.

Sending you and yours very best wishes for 2021 and my deepest thanks,

*Natalie Stroud*

**NATALIE (TALIA) JOMINI STROUD, PH.D.**

Director, Center for Media Engagement



# 2020 HIGHLIGHTS

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## 22 RESEARCH REPORTS

published in the fields of journalism, propaganda, and science communication



## 43 MEDIA ETHICS CASE STUDIES

published and in use by more than 90 schools, colleges, universities, and learning platforms



## 24 OP-EDS AND BLOGS

written for trade and media organizations



## 34 PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES

published in journals



## 30 NEWSROOMS

collaborated with us on research



## 2,603 CITATIONS

of our publications



## 1 VIRTUAL EVENT

reflecting on the [media's role](#) in 2020 events. Featuring Washington Post reporter David Fahrenthold, co-anchor for America's News Headquarters on Fox News Arthel Neville, and Emmy Award and Peabody Award-winning national evening news anchor Dan Rather



## 21 NEW TEAM MEMBERS

2 senior faculty research associates, 4 full-time researchers, 1 part-time researcher, 1 research fellow, 3 graduate assistants, 8 undergraduate research assistants, 1 staff member, and 1 student technology assistant welcomed to the team

# UPDATES FROM OUR PROGRAMS

## JOURNALISM

The journalism program at the Center for Media Engagement conducts research alongside newsrooms, social media platforms, and organizations looking to influence media practices for the benefit of democracy.

In 2020, we published 18 reports, including several studies that explored [media coverage of coronavirus](#) and offered guidance for newsrooms; a ground-breaking study done in partnership with Gannett-owned newsrooms and Coral that tested the [value of news comment sections](#); a study that shared approaches journalists can take to bridge the divide between the [media and Black communities](#); and several studies that offered guidance on finding [common ground](#) in spite of political differences. We also published 18 academic articles and reached journalists, academics, thought leaders, and policymakers through our participation in conferences and events.

[Research >](#)

[Publications >](#)

[Press >](#)

## MEDIA ETHICS

The Media Ethics Initiative at the Center for Media Engagement endeavors to promote and produce research on cutting-edge topics in media and journalism ethics.

In 2020, we published 43 [case studies](#) that explored difficult issues in media and journalism ethics and covered topics such as political communication, free speech, digital ethics, journalism ethics, advertising and public relations, art and aesthetics, health communication, and South Asian media. These case studies were used by more than 90 schools, colleges, universities, and learning platforms. We also reached a milestone with the release of our [100th case study](#) in October and co-sponsored “Press Freedom in the Age of Alternative Facts,” a virtual event where David McCraw, deputy general counsel for The New York Times, explored the ethical challenges awaiting journalists and the American public that arise at the intersection of law, ethics, and technology.

[Case Studies >](#)

## PROPAGANDA

The propaganda program at the Center for Media Engagement focuses on how emergent technologies are used in and around global political communication.

In 2020, we published three reports that explored political manipulation on [encrypted messaging applications](#), the phenomenon of [social media influencers](#) as an avenue for political campaign communications, and how new forms of direct communication are allowing [political campaigns](#) and groups to spread disinformation.

We also published numerous [op-eds](#) in publications such as Wired, MIT Technology Review, TechStream, Slate, Foreign Affairs, Fast Company, and The Georgetown Law Technology Review. Our team reached thought leaders in disinformation, business, design, and technology by participating in events hosted by organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy, Facebook, The Information Society Project (ISP), the Hammer Museum, and The Center for Internet and Society at Stanford Law School

[Research >](#)

[Publications >](#)

[Press >](#)

## SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

The science communication program at the Center for Media Engagement focuses on building relationships between scientists and media organizations to improve public engagement with science.

In 2020, we published 14 peer-reviewed [journal articles](#) and a report that explored the important role science engagement fellowships can have in [closing the gaps](#) between scientists' interest in communicating with a broader public and their ability to do so. Our team reached science communication researchers and practitioners, leading scientists, educators, policymakers, journalists, and students by participating in events and trainings for organizations such as the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) Toxicology Branch, the Rita Allen Foundation Civic Science Learning Lab, and the Civic Science Fellows Launch Convening.

[Publications >](#)



# NEW FACULTY

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## **DR. LUCY ATKINSON**

Senior Faculty Research Associate

Dr. Lucy Atkinson is an associate professor in the Stan Richards School of Advertising & PR in the Moody College of Communication at The University of Texas at Austin and a senior faculty research associate at the Center for Media Engagement. Her research looks at communication in the context of sustainability and the environment. She focuses on the ways message components (like visual elements, argument frames, source factors) in environmental communication campaigns influence environmental attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.

Dr. Atkinson has received research funding from the Department of Energy, the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, the Waterhouse Family Institute for the Study of Communication and Society, and the Arthur W. Page Center at Penn State. Her work has appeared in top-ranked flagship journals like the Journal of Advertising, International Journal of Communication, Environmental Communication, and Science Communication. Outside of academia, her work has been covered in



international and national news media, including the Guardian (UK) newspaper, National Public Radio's Weekend Edition, and On Point with Tom Ashbrook.

Dr. Atkinson is a faculty affiliate with the Environmental Science Institute, the Center for Health Communication, the Center for Women's & Gender Studies, and the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service. She teaches classes on advertising history, environmental communication, integrated communication campaigns, and consumer psychology. In 2016, she was named a recipient of the UT System Regent's Outstanding Teaching Award and in 2017 was named a Provost Teaching Fellow.

# NEW FACULTY

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## **DR. LEE ANN KAHLOR**

Senior Faculty Research Associate

Dr. Lee Ann Kahlor is an associate professor in the Stan Richards School of Advertising & PR in the Moody College of Communication at The University of Texas at Austin and a senior faculty research associate at the Center for Media Engagement. Her primary research interest is in health and environmental risk communication with an emphasis on information seeking and processing. She has explored information behaviors in contexts ranging from cancer to nanotechnology to carbon capture and storage. A secondary interest is in cultural and racial norms related to health behaviors and message processing.

Dr. Kahlor has published more than 50 peer-reviewed research articles, book chapters, and white papers, and has co-edited two books. Her work has appeared in myriad journals including Health Communication, Human Communication Research, Science Communication, Mass Communication and Society, Communication Theory, Environment and Behavior, and Indoor and Built Environment. Dr. Kahlor also has a robust funding portfolio; she is co-principal investigator on a \$4.5 million grant from the National Science Foundation and has received additional funds from the Alfred P.



Sloan Foundation, the U.S. Department of Energy, and the oil and gas industry to fund her work in science communication.

Dr. Kahlor's undergraduate teaching has been recognized with a Moody College Teaching Excellence Award and a University of Texas System Regents Outstanding Teaching Award. She currently is a Provost's Teaching Fellow. In terms of service to students, Dr. Kahlor is the Stan Richards School's minority liaison, working extensively with students from underrepresented backgrounds, and she leads the Stan Richards School's Diversity and Inclusion Student Council. Prior to academia, Kahlor worked in journalism, as a freelance writer, and as communication officer for a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation national program office.



# OUTREACH

As we continue to expand our reach, we look for innovative ways to connect with newsrooms, platforms, and policy leaders. We look forward to new partnerships in the coming year.

Our team reached **diverse audiences around that globe** at events hosted by organizations such as:

American Association for the Advancement of Science  
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication  
Cyber Policy Center at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies  
Facebook  
Hammer Museum  
International Communication Association  
International Symposium of Online Journalism  
IT Pro  
Knight Media Forum  
National Endowment for Democracy  
NYU Center for Social Media and Politics  
Points of Light  
Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy  
The Center for Internet and Society at Stanford Law School  
The Information Society Project

Our work was covered by a variety of [trade publications and media outlets](#), including:

American Press Institute

BBC Radio 4

Bloomberg Government

Business Insider

CBS News

CNBC

International News Media  
Association

Forbes

Los Angeles Times

MIT Technology Review

NBC News

Nieman Lab

Politico

Poynter

Radio Television Digital News  
Association

Salon

Techworm

The Associated Press

The New Yorker

The New York Times

The Texas Tribune

The Wall Street Journal

The Washington Post

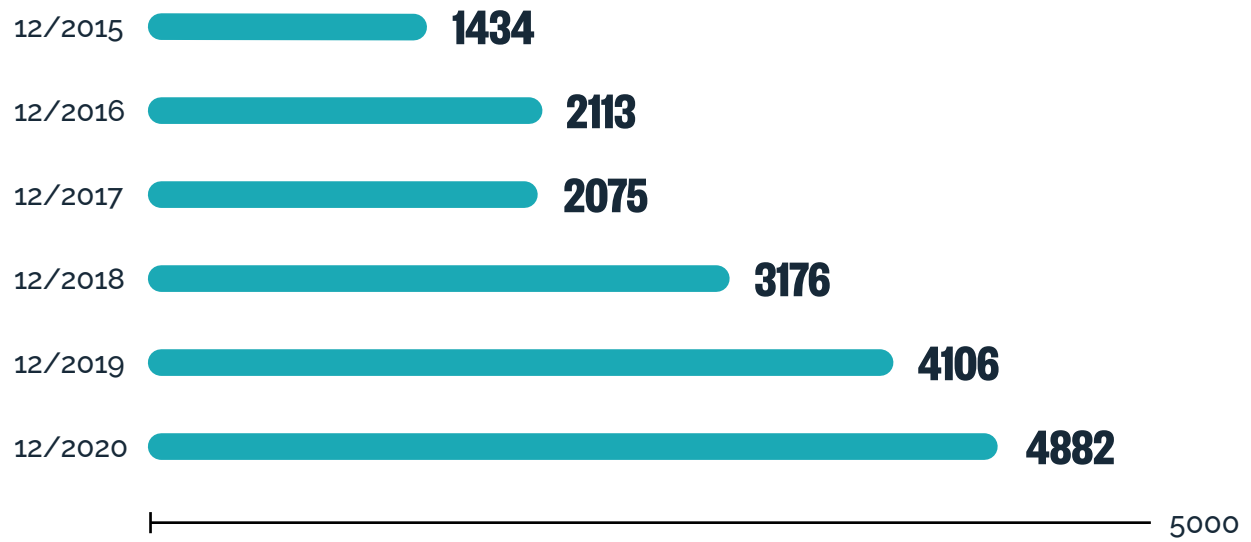
Time

Vice

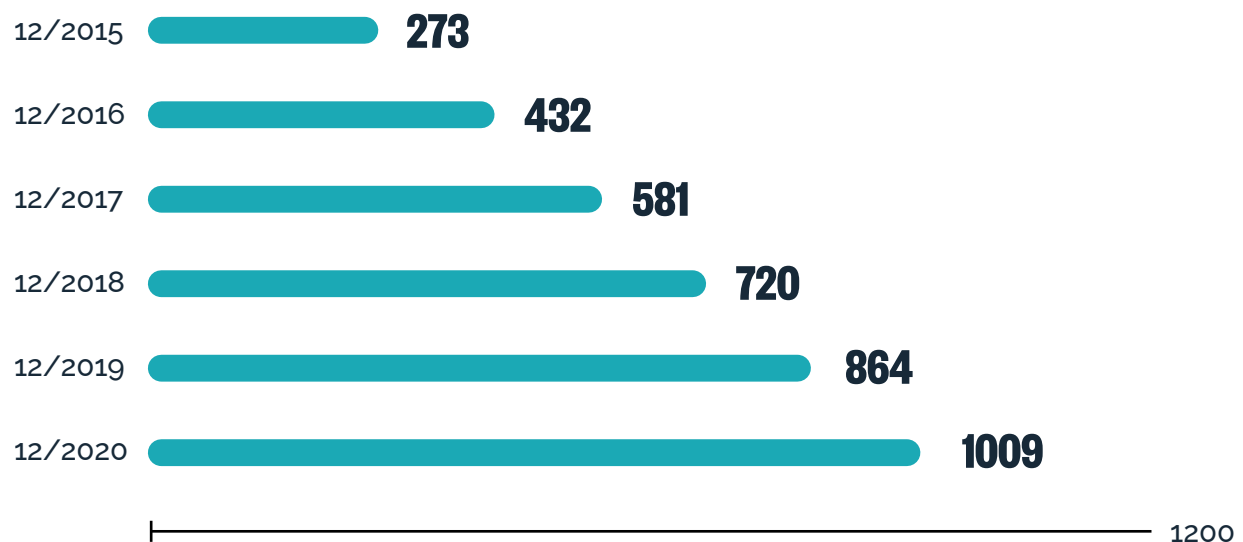
Wired

# SOCIAL MEDIA GROWTH

## TWITTER FOLLOWERS



## FACEBOOK FOLLOWERS



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# ANNUAL REPORT 2020

For more information and to support our future work, please contact us.

## CENTER FOR MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

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