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

CENTER FOR MEDIA ENGAGEMENT
ANNUAL REPORT
2021

DEAR FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS,

2021 has been an uneven year. For some, this year's developments have brought a sigh of relief. For others, the year has raised new anxieties. For most, I suspect, it has been a mix of both.

Through it all, the media have played a pivotal role: fueling political activity; providing information (and sometimes misinformation) about vaccines, new variants, and the politics of the day; and offering a space for people to connect and support one another.

As I reflect on everything that has happened over the course of the past year, the need for the Center for Media Engagement seems sharply obvious. For democracy to function, the public needs an information ecosystem that helps them to learn, that enables the exchange of ideas, and that facilitates people working together. Much is amiss. Without people and organizations trying to make it better, nothing will change. It is with this

steadfast dedication that that the Center for Media Engagement conducts research, develops tools, and hosts workshops and conferences to share what we've learned and to learn from others.

Over the past year, there is much to be proud of. Our work has directly influenced newsroom practices, pedagogy in college classrooms, platform strategies, and behaviors among science communicators. Research from the center has been featured in numerous news articles and has informed policymakers. Our conferences and workshops have reached thousands. The center continues to grow and is now home to 10 faculty investigators and an increasing number of engaged, dedicated, and amazing staff and students.

And yet, there's an urgency to what we have not yet accomplished and the challenges facing the media environment that require more attention. In the

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>
> — **Talia Stroud**, Director

year ahead, be on the lookout for new strategies for newsrooms looking to connect with their audiences, new research on how scientists can work with the media and vice versa, new case studies on the latest ethical challenges facing the media, new insights into how to combat misinformation circulating on encrypted messaging apps, and new information on the effects of Facebook and Instagram.

All of this work could not be done without you. We are so grateful for everyone who supports the center in ways big and small. To those who engage with our work, thank you. To those who push us to think in new ways, thank you. To those who support us financially, thank you.

We are grateful for generous funding from organizations like the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Democracy Fund, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Omidyar Network, Open Society Foundations, and the Rita Allen Foundation. The Moody College of Communication and The University of Texas facilitate our work in innumerable ways, and we are deeply appreciative.

As we look to the year to come, please accept my best wishes and deepest thanks on behalf of everyone at the Center for Media Engagement,

Natalie Stroud

NATALIE (TALIA) JOMINI STROUD, PH.D.
Director, Center for Media Engagement

2021 HIGHLIGHTS

19 RESEARCH REPORTS

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

14 MEDIA ETHICS CASE STUDIES

published and released for free educational use

22 OP-EDS AND BLOGS

written for trade and media organizations

28 PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES

published in journals

28 NEWSROOMS

collaborated with us on research

4,333 CITATIONS

of our team's work

14 EVENTS AND WORKSHOPS

hosted by our center

60+ SPEAKING ENAGEMENTS

featuring our team members

250+ MEDIA MENTIONS

showcasing our expertise

10 NEW TEAM MEMBERS

welcomed to the center

NOTEWORTHY EVENTS

CME hosted the Cognitive Security Conference (COGSEC), an event focused on practical skills related to investigating and thwarting media manipulation and disinformation campaigns online. Workshop videos are available on the COGSEC site.
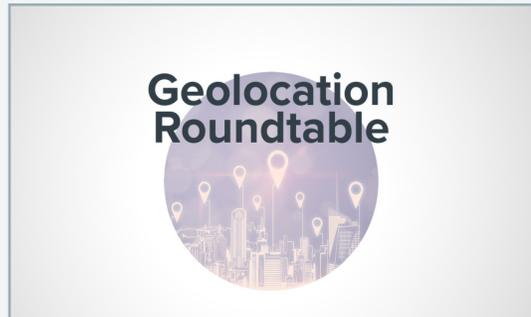
CME and the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (S.T.O.P.) hosted a roundtable on mass surveillance in the age of mass protest. Videos from our experts and a full report on the findings are available on our Understanding Geolocation page.


CME co-sponsored the New_ Public Festival, an event that envisioned the future of digital public space. During the festival, we released the results of a two-year study, the largest global survey of social media superusers to date. See the festival stream here.

CME hosted a roundtable to discuss the current state of the public interest standard and improvements that need to be made. Videos from our panel of experts, an interactive timeline, and a full report on the finding are available on our Public Interest Standard page.

CME presented two workshops covering [solidarity reporting in Afghanistan](#) and the connection between [journalism and advocacy](#). Additional Solidarity Journalism materials are available [here](#).
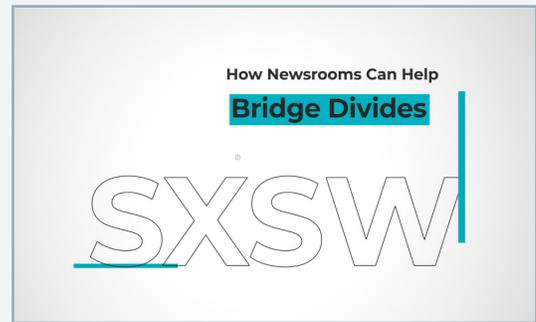
CME presented "How Newsrooms Can Help Bridge Divides" at SXSW. Panel videos are available on our [connective democracy page](#) and a write-up of the panel takeaways is available [here](#).

SXSW Panel, March 2021

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. The studies resulting from these collaborations provide insights into tools, practices, and strategies that benefit the media landscape.

In the year ahead, the team is working on projects about how newsrooms can cover marginalized communities and protests, how to engage people with different political views, and the effects of social media on the public. These projects are being done to inform newsrooms and platforms.

Research and Publications

- Published 15 journal articles, 12 white papers, 2 book chapters, and 1 book
- Published a series of papers examining how news organizations can bridge divides and better connect with underrepresented communities
- Published research on strategies that social media can use to combat misinformation
- Collaborated with 28 news organizations and platforms such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter

Presentations and Workshops

- Presented at conferences including the American Political Science Association, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the International Communication Association, the New England Newspaper & Press Association, and SXSW
- Held workshops for news organizations on topics such as building trust in news, how to approach comment sections, social media best practices, how to better connect with conservative and right-leaning audiences, and approaches to Solidarity Journalism
- Presented "How Newsrooms Can Help Bridge Divides" to an audience of more than 300 at SXSW

Signature Events

- Hosted two roundtables: one to discuss the state of the public interest standard and one to explore the latest thinking on comment sections

- Co-sponsored the New_ Public festival, an event focused on building better digital spaces, where we released the results of a two-year study

Public Reach

- Tools and practices utilized by more than 500 newsrooms in the U.S. and abroad

- Covered by prominent trade and media organizations including American Press Institute, Bloomberg, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Detroit Free Press*, International News Media Association, KVUE, *Los Angeles Times*, Nieman Lab, Poynter, Radio Television Digital News Association, *Seattle Times*, and *The Washington Post*

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. Media ethics focuses on the choices, values, and consequences inherent in our media and communicative practices.

Ongoing projects include expanding the line of media ethics case studies for use in journalism and communication courses and producing a free, online textbook on "Media, Ethics, and Democracy" that curates existing and new case studies, along with a framework focusing on the ethics of democratic citizenship.

Research and Publications

- Published 3 journal articles, 2 book chapters, and 14 media ethics case studies, released for free educational use

- Engaged 20 undergraduate and graduate research assistants to produce case studies and related resources

- Published "Comment Sections and the ethical demands of democracy" and "Online comment sections: Does taking them down enhance or hurt dialogue in a democracy?" in the *Journal of Media Ethics*

- Published "Connective democracy: The task before us" in *Media Ethics*

Presentations

- Presented "Bhimrao Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the Challenges of Social Democracy" as part of Tetso College's series "The Relevance and Significance of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: Today & Tomorrow"

- Presented "Ambedkar, Rhetoric, and Dalit Emancipation" as part of the International Webinar on Dalit Voices: Constitution, Literature and Society for the University of Mysore, India

- Delivered three keynote addresses at virtual celebrations for Indian civil rights leader Bhimrao Ambedkar

Signature Events

- Hosted Dr. Robert B. Talisse, the W. Alton Jones Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University, for a virtual discussion, "Overdoing Democracy: The Problem of Political Polarization"

- In collaboration with UT Moody's Department of Communication Studies, hosted Dr. Deen Freelon of UNC-Chapel Hill as part of a colloquium series on truth

Public Reach

- Ethics case studies utilized in courses at 112 universities and colleges, 41 school districts, and 23 learning platforms

- Program Director Scott Stroud was a co-signatory on an amicus curiae brief filed by the Ambedkar International Center in the State of California Fair Employment vs. Cisco Systems caste discrimination case

Case Studies »
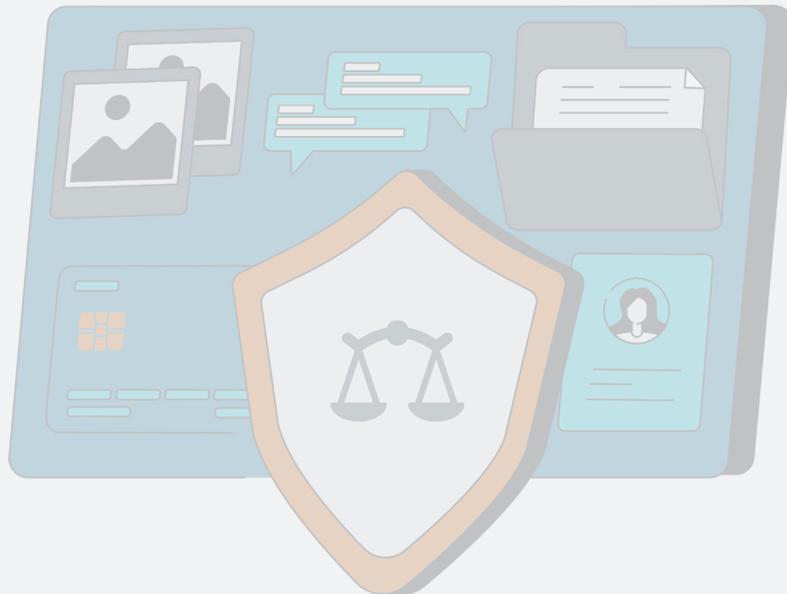
PROPAGANDA

The Propaganda Lab at the Center for Media Engagement focuses on how emergent technologies are used in and around global political communication. Current research is shaping international debate on the manipulative political use of encrypted chat applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal, and is central to ongoing analysis and reporting on the connection between digital surveillance using geolocation tools and resultant political micro-targeting and social media disinformation campaigns.

Going forward, the team is expanding its research on encrypted chat applications into new geographical areas such as the Middle East and North Africa Region. This approach is in line with the lab's strategic aim of positioning itself as the main research body on this topic delivering comparative analysis covering most areas of the globe.

Research and Publications

- Published 1 journal article, 2 book chapters, 5 white papers, and 11 commentary pieces

- Published "Disclosures of NYPD surveillance technologies raise more questions than answers" with *Tech Policy Press*, which was discussed by the New York City Council

- Published "Countering disinformation and protecting democratic communication on encrypted messaging applications" with the Brookings Institution

- Collaborated with organizations in the public and private sectors, including the ACLU, Open the Government, the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (S.T.O.P.), the Constitution Project, the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Aspen Institute, Facebook, Google, TikTok, and Twitter

Presentations

- Presented at conferences including the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the International Communication Association, and Stanford's Social Media and Democracy Conference

- Program Director Sam Woolley delivered the keynote speech at Politico's AI Summit

Signature Events

- Hosted the Cognitive Security Conference (COGSEC), attended by 750 people

- Hosted a roundtable to explore problems related to the rise of "geo-propaganda," geolocation-informed manipulation of public opinion

Public Reach

- Presented to policymakers, regulators, and intelligence/law enforcement services in the U.K., U.S., Australia, and the EU

- Covered by news organizations addressing national, international, and local audiences, including AFP, BBC 4, CNBC, *El Espectador*, *Financial Times*, FOX 7 Austin, *Newsweek*, KVUE, Texas Public Radio, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and Think (NPR)

- Worked with the production team at *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* for a segment on misinformation targeting diaspora communities over private messaging applications

Research »

Publications »

Press »

SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

The Science Communication Lab at the Center for Media Engagement focuses on building relationships between scientists and media organizations to improve public engagement with science. The lab's research continues to chart, assess, and guide the growing cadre of key science communication stakeholders in North America and beyond.

Two ongoing projects are examining the state of JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) within science communication fellowship programs and among U.S.-based STEM graduate students. Using the lenses of race-evasive-racism, critical race theory, and the ACCESS framework, the work is helping to reveal ways in which scientists-in-training, and those who support them, can create more inclusive, sustainable, and affirming spaces for science communication.

Research and Publications

- Published 9 journal articles, 2 white papers, and 2 book chapters
- Published "Communicating science across political divides," based on the responses of U.S. citizens and aimed at helping scientists communicate effectively across the political spectrum
- Published "Landscape of the U.K. science engagement training community," to examine the state of trainings being offered in the United Kingdom
- Published "Science communication training in North America: Preparing whom to do what with what effect?" and "American scientists' willingness to use different communication tactics" in *Science Communication*

Presentations and Workshops

- Reached leading scientists, educators, policymakers, journalists, and students through participation in events and trainings for organizations
- Led webinars for scientists at the Alda-Kavli Learning Center at the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science
- Presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Geophysical Union, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the Inclusive Science Communication Conference, and the International Communication Association

Public Reach

- Hosted a U.K. Fulbright Scholar and Rita Allen Civic Science Fellow who works for the British Science Association (BSA)

- Continues to shape and guide efforts to improve STEM experts' public engagement efforts through research projects that use theories and frameworks from strategic communication and social science

Publications »

NEW FACULTY

DR. JOSEPHINE LUKITO

Senior Faculty Research Associate

Josephine ("Jo") Lukito is a senior faculty reserach associate at the Center for Media Engagement and an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin's School of Journalism and Media. Lukito studies cross-platform media language in the global political communication context, focusing especially on interactions between news and social media platforms. She specializes in natural language processing and quantitative language analysis methods to study language over time.

Lukito's ongoing work studies political mis- and disinformation, including the impact of Russian disinformation on political communication ecologies more broadly. She has discussed her research in *Columbia Journalism Review* and on CNN; this research was also cited in Robert Mueller's 2018 report (p. 27). She publishes extensively in peer-reviewed journals such as *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *Political Communication*, and *Information, Communication & Society*.

Lukito received her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin Madison in 2020, where she also earned Ph.D. minors in English Linguistics and Political Science (International Relations and Quantitative Methods).

NEW FACULTY

DR. CRAIG R. SCOTT

Senior Faculty Research Associate

Dr. Craig R. Scott is a senior faculty research associate at the Center for Media Engagement as well as Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Previously, he spent 14 years at Rutgers University, where he served as department chair and Ph.D. program director.

Scott's research and teachings are primarily focused on organizational communication, where he examines issues of anonymity and identity/identification in various organizational settings. His current interests center around "hidden organizations," which are found when an organization and/or its members conceal key aspects of their identity from various audiences.

Scott's 2013 book titled *Anonymous Agencies, Backstreet Businesses, and Covert Collectives: Rethinking Organizations in the 21st Century* has won several awards. Scott was also a guest editor of a special issue of *Management Communication Quarterly* that focused on hidden organizations

(published in 2015). He is co-editor of the *International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication* and serves on editorial boards for multiple journals on communication.

In addition to a course on Dark Side Organizations, Scott teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on Organizational Communication, Communication Theory, and Work & Technology. He received his Ph.D. in Communication from Arizona State University in 1994.

NEW FACULTY

DR. ANITA VARMA

Senior Faculty Research Associate

Dr. Anita Varma is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Media at The University of Texas at Austin as well as a senior faculty research associate at the Center for Media Engagement, where she leads the Solidarity Journalism Initiative. Varma started the Solidarity Journalism Initiative at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (Santa Clara University), where she was the assistant director of Journalism and Media Ethics.

As a publicly engaged scholar, Varma's work focuses on the role of solidarity in journalism. Her research examines how media representations challenge marginalization in the United States. Varma's work began with a field study of how Bay Area journalists represent people experiencing homelessness in 2016. Since then, her research and public engagement have been featured on CNN, the Humanitarian News Research Network, and the Engaged Journalism Lab. The Solidarity Journalism Initiative is supported by a grant from Democracy Fund's Rights and Dignity Working Group.

Varma is on the board of the Society of Professional Journalists (Northern California Chapter), the advisory board of The Objective, and the vice-chair of the Media Ethics Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). Her scholarly work has been published in *Journalism Studies, Journalism Practice, Journalism, Routledge Companion to Media and Poverty,* and *A Handbook of Global Media Ethics* (SpringerLink). She completed her Ph.D. in Communication at Stanford University in 2018 and received the inaugural Penn State Davis Ethics dissertation award in 2019. Varma believes journalism can help change society for the better and dedicates herself to helping journalists do their best work.

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.

This year, our team reached **diverse audiences around the globe** at events hosted by organizations such as:

Alda-Kavli Learning Center at the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science

American Political Science Association

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication

Center for Informed Democracy & Social-cybersecurity (IDeaS)

Center for Social Media and Politics

Common Ground for Texas

Facebook

International Communication Association

IMPRI Impact and Policy Research Institute

Library of Congress

New England Newspaper and Press Association

Politico's AI Summit

Reuters Institute

Rita Allen Foundation

Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society

SXSW

Our expertise was featured by a variety of local, national, and international **trade publications and media outlets** including:

AFP	Poynter
American Press Institute	Radio Television Digital News Association
Associated Press	Slate
BBC 4	Teen Vogue
Bloomberg	Texas Public Radio
CNBC	The Atlantic
Fast Company	The Los Angeles Times
International News Media Association	The New York Times
Journalism.co.uk	The Seattle Times
KVUE	The Verge
Last Week Tonight with John Oliver	The Washington Post
Newsweek	Vice
Nieman Lab	Wired

SOCIAL MEDIA GROWTH

TWITTER FOLLOWERS

Date	Followers
12/2015	1434
12/2016	2113
12/2017	2075
12/2018	3176
12/2019	4106
12/2020	4882
12/2021	5706

FACEBOOK FOLLOWERS

Date	Followers
12/2015	273
12/2016	432
12/2017	581
12/2018	720
12/2019	866
12/2020	930
12/2021	990
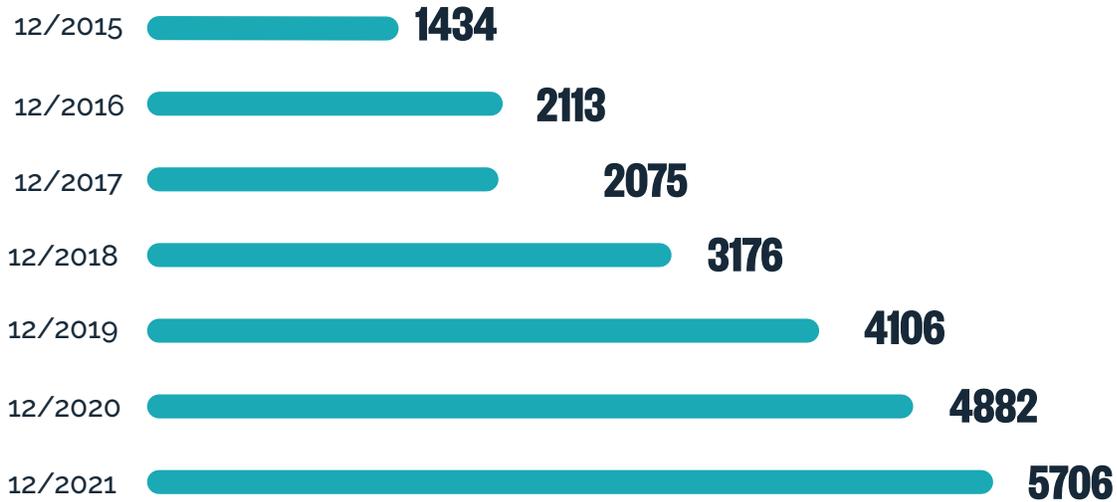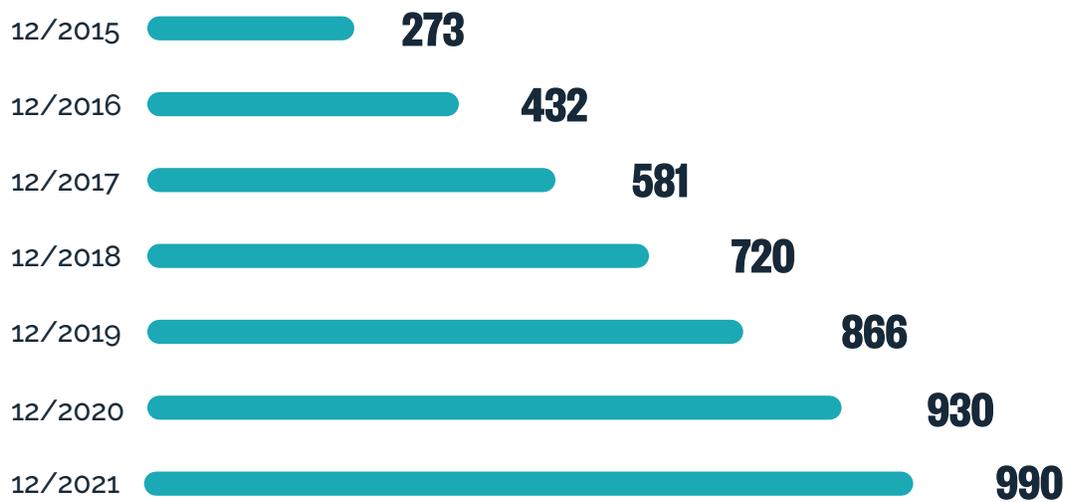
For more information and to support our future work, please contact us.

CENTER FOR MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

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