



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

# CENTER FOR MEDIA ENGAGEMENT ANNUAL REPORT

# 2022

## DEAR FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS,

The past year has been an exciting one: The Center for Media Engagement has worked to address critical issues facing journalism, media ethics, platforms, propaganda, and science communication. We collaborated with journalists, social media companies, scientists, and communities around the world. We sought to share our findings in ways accessible to the people who needed the information. Our team has grown, the easing pandemic has given us new opportunities for in-person partnerships, and our drive to make a difference has only increased.

The center's goal is to improve the media ecosystem by empowering the public to understand, appreciate, and participate in the democratic exchange of ideas. We do this by engaging with others to co-create solutions.

Our emphasis this past year has been on two goals:

**Tackling efforts to mislead and misinform the public.** Efforts to disrupt the informed exchange of ideas are

everywhere. Our work has tracked science and political misinformation circulating on social media and in encrypted messaging apps. We've honed in on problematic content targeting marginalized communities both in the U.S. and around the world. Even more, we are working on solutions with affected communities, journalists, and platforms.

**Building connections.** Examples abound of people looking at those with different beliefs and backgrounds with skepticism and, in some cases, outright hatred. Journalists, scientists, and others representing institutions that once enjoyed high levels of public trust now routinely encounter a polarized and cynical public. At the Center for Media Engagement, we are working to build connections. How can journalists show solidarity with communities that feel poorly represented and misunderstood? How can educators train students to recognize and charitably interpret diverse perspectives? How can platform content bring people together?



“The center's goal is to improve the media ecosystem by empowering the public to understand, appreciate, and participate in the democratic exchange of ideas.”

— **Talia Stroud**, Director

The year ahead feels urgent. Our media ecosystem is changing dramatically. There are some bright spots, such as earnest efforts to create public-friendly digital spaces. Yet there are also signs of concern. If our digital connections increasingly fragment and privatize, the problems we are trying to tackle become much more difficult. Misleading content could circulate in anonymous or inaccessible spaces, making efforts to find and counter it ever more difficult. Left to their own devices, people could choose digital spaces made up of like-minded others, yielding further polarization. The news media, faced with mounting closures and layoffs, seems ill-equipped to address the situation. National elections around the world, and rapidly approaching in the U.S., could be a turning point in a system that seems increasingly fragile.

At the Center for Media Engagement, we are focused on being part of the solution. There is a lot to be done. And we cannot do it without you. Your support, collaboration, and feedback fuel our efforts. Special thanks to those who have funded our work over the past year, particularly Democracy Fund, Exxon Mobile, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Lenfest Institute, Omidyar Network, Open Society Foundations, and the Rita Allen Foundation.



The great democratic experiment demands a contribution from all of us, and we look forward to working with you to do our part.

*Natalie Stroud*

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

Director, Center for Media Engagement

# 2022 HIGHLIGHTS

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## 15 RESEARCH REPORTS

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



## 22 MEDIA ETHICS CASE STUDIES

published and released for free educational use



## 36 PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES

published in journals



## 12 OP-EDS AND BLOGS

written for trade and media organizations



## 11 EVENTS AND WORKSHOPS

hosted by our center



## 4,500+ CITATIONS

of our team's work



## 600+ NEWSROOMS

utilizing our tools and practices



## 130+ MEDIA MENTIONS

showcasing our expertise



## 80+ SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

featuring our team members



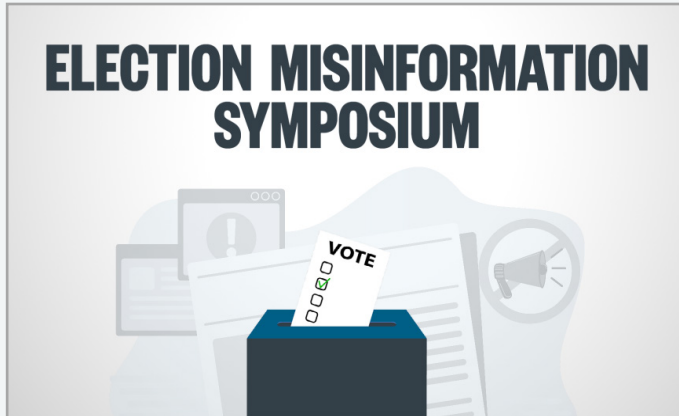
## 22 NEW TEAM MEMBERS

welcomed to the center

# NOTEWORTHY EVENTS

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## ELECTION MISINFORMATION SYMPOSIUM



The Center for Media Engagement hosted a symposium to help newsrooms learn how to detect and deal with false information. News leaders from battleground states learned from experts in mis- and disinformation detection and prevention and strategized on techniques to implement in their newsrooms.

## DIGITAL DATA CONFERENCE



The Center for Media Engagement and The Media and Democracy Data Cooperative convened researchers to discuss the practice and ethics of digital data research. The conference featured keynotes from Dr. David Lazer and Dr. Joan Donovan on the topics of the state of digital data research and data ethics.

## SOLIDARITY JOURNALISM WORKSHOPS



The Solidarity Journalism Initiative at the Center for Media Engagement held three workshops that provided guidance on reporting on trans issues, reporting on democracy in ways that put voters first, and reporting on the Mahsa Amini protests in Iran.

# UPDATES FROM OUR PROGRAMS

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## JOURNALISM

The journalism program at the Center for Media Engagement conducts research with newsrooms, social media platforms, and organizations looking to improve 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.

### Research and Publications

- Published 15 journal articles, six white papers, and one book chapter
- Published a report that provided tools, resources, and strategies to help newsrooms combat election misinformation
- Published a report that examined why people questioned the legitimacy of the 2020 election and provided guidance for future election coverage
- Collaborated with 29 news organizations

### Presentations and Workshops

- Presented at conferences including the American Political Science Association conference, International Communication Association conference, International Symposium on Online Journalism, Journalism & Women Symposium, Lenfest Institute's Reimagining Philadelphia Journalism Summit, Online News Association conference, SXSW, and TribFest
- Held workshops for newsrooms on topics such as social media best practices and approaches to Solidarity Journalism



## Signature Events

- Hosted an election misinformation symposium to help newsrooms learn how to detect and deal with false information. News leaders from battleground states attended the symposium, learned from experts in mis- and disinformation detection and prevention, and strategized on techniques to implement in their newsrooms.

## Public Reach

- Tools and practices utilized by more than 600 newsrooms in the U.S. and abroad
- Covered by prominent trade and media organizations including American Press Institute, The Hill, International News Media Association, NBC News, The New York Times, Nieman Lab, PolitFact, Poynter, Radio Television Digital News Association, and Salon

[View Research »](#)

[View Publications »](#)

[View 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.

### Research and Publications

- Published four scholarly articles, two book forewords, and 22 media ethics case studies which were released for free educational use
- Engaged 21 undergraduate and graduate research assistants to produce case studies and related resources
- Published “Excessively harsh critique and democratic rhetoric: The enigma of Bhimrao Ambedkar’s riddles in Hinduism” in the Journal for the History of Rhetoric
- Published “The humble cosmopolitan: Rights, diversity, and trans-state democracy” in Contemporary Political Theory

### Presentations

- Invited speaker for seminar “The Republic in India” at the House of Lords in London
- Presented a webinar on “Ambedkar, Dewey, and Buddhism” for the Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies at Savitribai Phule Pune University
- Delivered the talk “Ambedkar, Dewey, and the Challenges of Social Democracy” as part of Ashoka University’s Political Thought Colloquia Series



### **Signature Events**

- Hosted Eric Goldman, Associate Dean for Research at Santa Clara University School of Law, for a discussion on how the internet improves humanity

### **Public Reach**

- Case studies utilized in 178 universities and colleges, 249 secondary schools, and 29 learning platforms
- More than 400,000 web views of case studies in the past year

**[View 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 messaging applications (EMAs) 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.

### Research and Publications

- Published 11 scholarly and commentary pieces, seven white papers, five quick reads, and one book
- Published written testimony “A Growing Threat: The Impact of Disinformation Targeted at Communities of Color” for U.S. House subcommittee on elections
- Published reports that examined the reach of mis- and disinformation on EMAs in diaspora communities in the U.S. as well as abroad in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Libya

### Presentations

- Sam Woolley provided testimony for a U.S. House Administration panel on how communities of color are targets for disinformation campaigns
- Presented at conferences including the Computational Disinformation Symposium, the Freedom of Expression Scholars Conference, Stanford’s first Trust and Safety Conference, the International Communication Association Conference, and RightsCon

### Signature Events

- Hosted the Digital Data Conference, which brought together researchers to discuss the practice and ethics of digital data research
- In collaboration with other universities, held community workshops to study and design for potential digital literacy interventions

### Public Reach

- Collaborated with organizations in the public and private sectors, including DFRLab, Equis Lab, Moms Rising, Protect Democracy, and United We Dream
- Covered by prominent media organizations including Austin American-Statesman, The Associated Press, The Atlantic, Bloomberg, CBS News, CNN, Forbes, Foreign Policy, Houston Chronicle, The New York Times, NPR, PBS Newshour, Politico, Slate, Time Magazine, USA TODAY, The Washington Post, VOX, and WIRED

[View Research »](#)

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## 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.

### Research and Publications

- Published 12 scholarly articles, two white papers, two book chapters, and one book
- Published a report that examines the experiences and challenges of reporting on science in the current media environment
- Published a report that provides a foundation for future research focused on early-career scientists' perspectives and DEI efforts in these spaces
- Published the book "Strategic Science Communication: A Guide to Setting the Right Objectives for More Effective Public Engagement"

### Presentations and Workshops

- Reached leading scientists, educators, policymakers, journalists, and students through participation in events and workshops for science organizations and educational institutions
- Lucy Atkinson, Lee Ann Kahlor, and co-authors earned Top Abstract Award at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Mid-Winter Conference
- Presented at conferences including the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication conference, the Gulf Coast Carbon Center bi-annual Conference on Carbon Capture and Storage, the International Communication Association conference, the International Symposium on the Public Opinion of Nuclear Energy and Other Energy Sources, and the Science Talk conference

## Public Reach

- Lucy Atkinson named the Associate Director of the Global Sustainability Leadership Institute
- Anthony Dudo appointed to the board of COMPASS Science Communication, a top training program for science communication and policy
- Lee Ann Kahlor selected as a 2021 AAAS Fellow for the American Association for the Advancement of Science
- Program 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

[View Publications »](#)



# NEW FACULTY

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## **DR. ASHWIN RAJADESINGAN**

Senior Faculty Research Associate

Ashwin Rajadesingan is a computational social scientist and design researcher studying how people engage with politics online. He is interested in how online spaces can foster spirited, engaging political discussions and contribute to building a vibrant, deliberative democracy. In his research, he combines large-scale computational methods with qualitative interviews to (re)design online spaces that facilitate quality online cross-partisan interactions. His work has been published in the proceedings for AAAI and ACM conferences such as ICWSM, CSCW, WSDM, and SMSociety.



# OUTREACH

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As we continue to expand our reach, we look for innovative ways to connect with newsrooms, platforms, and policy leaders.

This year, our team reached **diverse audiences around the globe** at conferences and invited speaking engagements hosted by organizations such as:

- American Association for the Advancement of Science
- American Political Science Association
- Asian American Journalists Association
- Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
- Behavioral Science & Policy Association
- Center for Social Media and Politics
- Congressional Hispanic Caucus on Voting Rights, Voter Intimidation and Suppression
- EU DisinfoLab
- Journalism & Women Symposium
- International Communication Association
- Lenfest Institute
- New York State Association of County Health Officials
- Online News Association
- Pentagon
- RightsCon
- Science Philanthropy Alliance
- Science Public Engagement Partnership (SciPEP)
- Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy
- SXSW
- U.S. House of Representatives



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

American Press Institute

The Associated Press

The Atlantic

Austin American-Statesman

Bloomberg

CBS News

CNN

Columbia Journalism Review

Dallas Morning News

Forbes

Foreign Policy

The Hill

Houston Chronicle

International News Media Association

KVUE

KXAN

NBC News

The New York Times

Nieman Lab

NPR

PBS Newshour

Politico

PolitiFact

Poynter

Radio Television Digital News Association

Salon

Slate

Time Magazine

USA TODAY

Vox

The Washington Post

WIRED

The Center for Media Engagement is **expanding our social media reach**. With the future of Twitter uncertain, we're taking stock of where our existing followers are moving as well as finding new audiences on platforms like Mastadon and Instagram. We look forward to reaching more people as we establish a presence on these platforms.

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

**CENTER FOR MEDIA ENGAGEMENT**

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