

CENTER FOR MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

2023

**ANNUAL
REPORT**



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

Our media landscape is confronting escalating challenges – from the widespread increase in mis- and disinformation to collapsing journalism funding models to the unknown impacts of social media and AI.

The Center for Media Engagement is focused on envisioning a more vibrant future.

We are a first-of-its-kind center that works to understand and improve the information ecosystem for the benefit of democracy.

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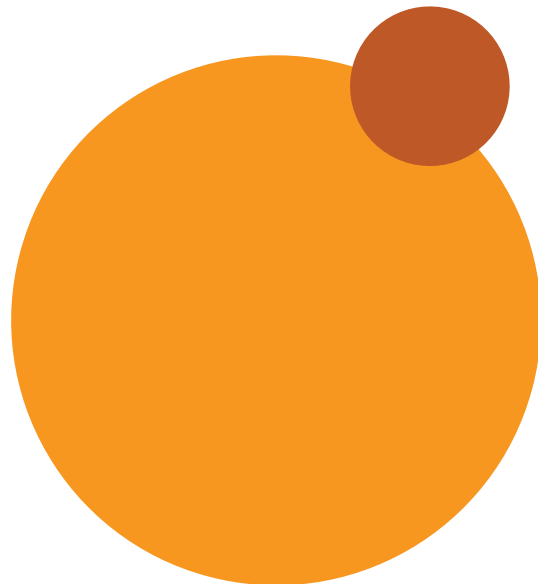
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DEAR FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS,

The past year has made us more steadfast in our mission to understand and improve the information ecosystem for the benefit of democracy. As you'll see in this report, we have worked to improve newsroom practices, help scientists with communication training, challenge students to think about ethical questions from multiple vantage points, and educate policymakers and the public about the effects of social media as well as the spread of propaganda and misinformation via encrypted messaging apps.

The significance of our contributions can be seen in the adoptions of our recommendations, media coverage of our findings, and invitations to share our expertise with influential and diverse organizations. I could not be prouder to work alongside the immensely talented faculty, students, and staff at the center and the many others at The University of Texas at Austin who make our work possible.



Although we are proud of our accomplishments, we are under no illusions about the task ahead. The local news ecosystem has eroded in some areas, making communities more vulnerable to misinformation. Newsrooms face the challenges of building trust and accurately covering their communities. Researchers' access to platform data is worse than it was in 2020, making it more challenging to study platforms' impact on democracy. The fracturing of the public across social platforms makes it more difficult for scientists and news organizations to share information. AI is raising complicated ethical questions, revolutionizing how campaigning and journalism are approached, and changing the information landscape. Add to this what is shaping up to be a highly polarizing presidential campaign and our work could not be more critical.

IN THIS CHALLENGING CONTEXT, THE CENTER IS POISED TO HELP FIND SOLUTIONS.

In this challenging context, the center is poised to help find solutions. We have projects underway on the news media's role in informing communities and combatting misinformation, the use of AI in political campaigns, social media's function in elections, scientists' preparation for public communication, and strategies to build connections across party lines. We hope that you will reach out if any of these topics resonate with your interests.

As we reflect on the year that has passed and prepare for the road ahead, let me take a moment to thank you. From reading this annual report, to collaborating with us, to funding our work, to providing feedback, we at the Center for Media Engagement appreciate your engagement. We could not do this without you.

With deep appreciation,

Natalie Stroud


NATALIE (TALIA) JOMINI STROUD, PH.D.

Director, Center for Media Engagement

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RESEARCH INITIATIVES |



The center's interdisciplinary expertise is focused on research initiatives including:

Trust in Media

Providing guidance on the reporting process from development to delivery, helping newsrooms connect with local communities, and providing insights into tools, practices, and strategies that benefit local communities and newsrooms' bottom lines.

Misinformation and Disinformation

Examining the use of social media and other digital tools to manipulate public opinion and spread misinformation and disinformation. Ongoing research examines the manipulative political use of end-to-end encrypted chat applications, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal, in the U.S. and abroad.

Bridging Divides

Developing a new approach to tackle the swiftly growing political and social divisions in our society. Ongoing research in the practice of connective democracy unites newsrooms, scholars, platforms, and public policy entities toward bridging gaps in our society.

2023

BY THE NUMBERS



230+ MEDIA MENTIONS

showcasing our expertise



85+ SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

featuring our team members



38 SCHOLARLY ARTICLES

published in journals



25 OP-ED & ANALYSIS PIECES

written for media, trade, & policy orgs



20 NEWSROOM PARTNERS

collaborated with us on research



14 EVENTS & WORKSHOPS

hosted or co-hosted by our center



11 PUBLIC-FACING REPORTS

published by our center



9 CASE STUDIES

released for free educational use

KEY OUTCOMES



Practicing Engaged Journalism Can Curb the Decline of Local News

Faced with declining revenue and loss of public trust, local newsrooms across the U.S. are struggling to stay afloat. In partnership with 20 newsrooms, we found that practicing engaged journalism, where newsrooms respond to community concerns, can help strengthen relationships with the communities they serve while also benefiting the bottom line.

A Guide to Understanding Encrypted Messaging Applications

Encrypted messaging applications (EMAs), such as WhatsApp and Signal, are utilized in the spread of political misinformation in the U.S. and around the world. This guide helps journalists, policymakers, activists, and the public understand how EMAs work and how they have been used for political manipulation.



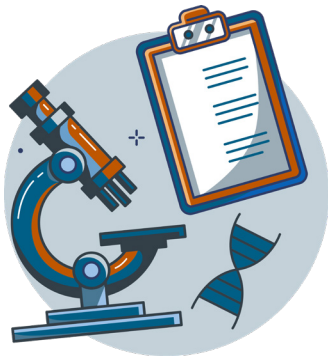
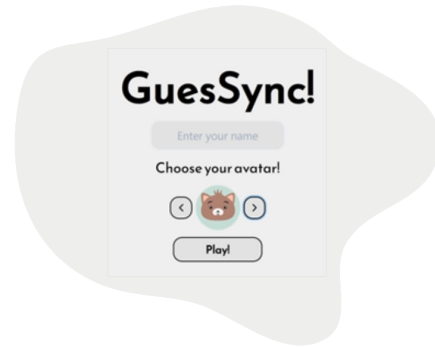
Two Fact-Checking Approaches Can Help Correct Misperceptions

As misinformation continues to spread rapidly, correcting people's misperceptions has become a central task for journalists. A test of two fact-checking approaches found that both work equally well to correct misperceptions, but political beliefs influence how people perceive the news, regardless of how fact-checking stories are approached.



An Online Game Can Help Bridge Political Divides

A new online guessing game explores whether questions about political issues can help address people's misperceptions about the other side. The results show that playing the game does make people more willing to talk to each other about political issues and presents an opportunity to help bridge divides.



Science Reporting is Facing Numerous Challenges in the Digital Media Landscape

Interviews with scientists explored their experiences with media and delved into the current state of science communication. Among the takeaways on the biggest problems facing science communicators were deep concerns about the spread of science mis- and disinformation and the lack of material support for science communication.

A Guide to Understanding the Ethical Challenges of AI Art

Generative AI, like countless other technologies emerging in the cyber-physical realm, presents numerous ethical challenges. This popular case study explores what AI art means for digital ethics and provides guiding questions that can help navigate the complicated discussion.



IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS

OUTREACH

We helped journalists, academics, and policymakers connect with our work and understand how to put our findings into practice through center workshops and discussions:

- Community engagement journalism event with PEN America and Votebeat
- RightsCon session with Meedan
- News trust documentary screening and Q&A with creators
- Research discussion for journalists and scholars on misinformation on WhatsApp
- Journalist workshops for covering contemporary topics
- Scholarly convening to discuss connective democracy

COLLABORATION

Our team partnered with 20 newsrooms and worked with organizations including the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), Meta, and Tech Policy Press.



PRESS

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

- ABC News
- American Press Institute
- BBC
- Bloomberg
- CNN
- Columbia Journalism Review
- Los Angeles Times
- NBC News
- Nieman Lab
- NPR
- POLITICO
- Poynter
- The Guardian
- The New York Times
- The Wall Street Journal
- The Washington Post
- USA TODAY

RESEARCH REACH

Our research content received more than 440,000 views on our website.

Our case studies were used by 125 universities and colleges, 162 secondary schools, and 41 learning platforms.

The Media and Democracy Data Cooperative, a collaboration among researchers and research centers, published an examination of the state of digital media data research.

Talia Stroud served as co-lead in a collaboration between academics and Meta researchers in the most comprehensive research project to date examining the role of social media in American democracy.



SHARED EXPERTISE

Our team reached audiences around the globe at conferences and invited speaking engagements hosted by organizations such as:

- American Political Science Association
- Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
- Brown University's Foreign Service Institute
- Federal Information Integrity R&D Interagency Working Group
- International Communication Association
- National Democratic Institute
- NYU's Center for Social Media and Politics
- Princeton University Center for Culture, Society and Religion
- Prosocial Design Network
- RightsCon
- Science and Public Engagement Partnership (SciPEP)
- Stanford Cyber Policy Center
- Texas Department of Information Resources
- The Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard

OUR TEAM



The Center for Media Engagement team is composed of dedicated faculty, staff, postdoctoral, graduate, and undergraduate researchers from The University of Texas and affiliates from universities across the country and around the world.

In 2023, the center welcomed 15 undergraduate researchers, two graduate researchers, one full-time researcher, and one predoctoral researcher to the team.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS



TALIA STROUD



GINA MASULLO



ANTHONY DUDO



SCOTT STROUD



SAMUEL WOOLLEY



LUCY ATKINSON



LEE ANN KAHLOR



MATT LEASE



JO LUKITO



ASHWIN RAJADESINGAN



CRAIG SCOTT



ANITA VARMA

Thank You

The Center for Media Engagement's work is made possible with support, collaboration, and feedback from our funders. If you're interested in investing in a more vibrant media ecosystem, you can help sustain our work by making a donation through our website at mediaengagement.org.

We give special thanks to the funders who have made our work possible this year:

American Association for the
Advancement of Science

Bernard & Audre Rapoport
Foundation

Community Foundation for Greater
Atlanta

Democracy Fund

Grey Matters Project

Independence Public Media
Foundation

John S. and James L. Knight
Foundation

John Templeton Foundation

Lasker Foundation

National Conference on Citizenship

National Science Foundation

New Venture Fund

Omidyar Network

Open Society Foundations

Rita Allen Foundation

The Lenfest Institute for
Journalism

Walder Foundation

William and Flora Hewlett
Foundation

Moody College of Communication

The University of Texas at Austin

The logo features a large central circle with a dark blue outer ring and an orange inner ring. The text is centered within the orange ring. The background is white with abstract curved shapes in dark blue and orange at the corners.

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