

## **ReOpen demands as public health threat: a sociotechnical framework for understanding the stickiness of problematic content.**

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Since COVID-19 arrived in the United States in early 2020, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has repeatedly declared that the disease represents a public health emergency for all Americans.<sup>i</sup> Federal public health agency the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has shared that people can protect themselves and others from contracting and spreading COVID by frequently washing their hands, maintaining six feet of distance between oneself and others, and wearing a mask that covers one's mouth *and* nose. In lieu of an official, coordinated, national response or mandate, many state and local officials had to work to create and enforce measures to protect their constituencies.

These measures included shuttering bars and restaurants, shifting more employees to remote working situations, closing public parks, and preventing large religious services from gathering. In addition to forced social distancing, thirty-three states and the District of Columbia now require face-covering in public.<sup>ii</sup> The coronavirus pandemic forced a near-total shutdown of school buildings in the Spring of 2020, and many closures remained into effect through summer and fall 2020 terms.<sup>iii</sup> Economic fallout was equally dire; unemployment rose higher in the months following COVID than it did during two years of the Great Recession, and upwards of 60% of closed restaurants will never reopen.<sup>iv</sup>

At the same time, the spread of *mis-dis-mal information*<sup>v</sup> about COVID posed even more health risks. Pandemic disinformation campaigns included, and continue to include, downplaying the severity of the disease, contradicting the advice of public health professionals, promoting unverified and often dangerous treatments, and protesting face-covering and social-distancing laws and/or policies. One of the most active groups demanding government ease COVID restrictions is called The Reopen the States Movement, or “ReOpen” for short. Group members believe that schools, businesses, and places of worship should no longer remain closed despite growing numbers of COVID diagnoses and deaths nationwide. These groups first began to form in response to the closure of churches on Easter Sunday.

Facebook is a central hub in which ReOpen members vent their frustrations about closures and restrictions, share “information”, and plan rallies, but it is not the only one. The disinformation activity that fuels the ReOpen movement is not specific to any other digital platform, neither is it exclusive to *online* media. Given the deep-seated nature of how ReOpen groups understand the dangers of COVID-19, this paper argues for a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the public health and political effects of media manipulation. My research demonstrates that one of the underlying mechanisms that enable the spread of false information is connected to trust and authenticity. By making connections with like-minded others on social media, residents of the United States are using problematic information to push local and state officials to reopen businesses, schools, and religious organizations.

While a *big data* approach to understanding mis-dis-mal information as it pertains to COVID is important, my study explains why researchers must combine data-driven analytics with a sociotechnical model of audience ethnography to better understanding why mis-dis-mal information is believed, shared, and potentially combatted.

## **Theoretical Background**

The ability to access and analyze large datasets has transformed social scientific research. Designs, simulations and findings were dramatically improved by the application of statistical models that could capture multifarious dependencies within new data sources.<sup>vi</sup> Using big data, researchers can track social movements and activism, studying the impact of hashtags worldwide.<sup>vii</sup> Researchers used these same tactics after the 2016 election to track the size, scope and spread of disinformation within and across online platforms.<sup>viii</sup>

Data science also helps researchers understand behavioristic actions within a networked public over a short period of time. By analyzing Tweets and other content shared over social media, researchers tracked the dispersion of hate speech from white nationalists’ social media accounts into Fox News’ broadcasting and found that right-leaning voters were far more likely to consume a dense network of *hyper-partisan* sources in the months leading up to the 2016 election.<sup>ix</sup> While studies found that left-wing or centrist groups read and shared disinformation, Trump supporters or people who belonged to groups that supported Trump were *more likely* to share what the researchers classified as “junk news.”<sup>x</sup>

Big data research fuses political meaning and social action into a new understanding of what media can do, but since it is so focused on traceable behavior, it misses out on the beliefs, opinions, and internal states of being involved in user engagement on these platforms.<sup>xi</sup>

Moreover, researchers ability to gain access to “raw data” is often incompatible with the privacy and intellectual property concerns of the platforms, which make reproducibility and replication difficult.<sup>xii</sup> When datasets are made publicly available, they are designed in the interest of the platforms. This computational turn affects how social scientists can analysis and effect media messages on political action because corporations like Facebook consider its users influenceable subjects, not knowledge agents.<sup>xiii</sup>

Understanding the role problematic information plays online is also difficult because what constitutes information that platforms should remove is tied to the context of how it is being shared. Consider information as it relates to the threat of COVID-19. At the beginning of the pandemic, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and the US Surgeon General Jerome Adams, did not advise the public to wear masks. When these top officials shared this *misinformation*, their intent was not to harm the public. Nonetheless, this error coast countless lives. Since then, *disinformation* about masks continues to spread. Some claim that wearing a mask *causes disease* and increases the chances of suffocation. Moreover, the original video of Dr. Fauci not advising mask use is still available online.<sup>xiv</sup> When users in ReOpen groups continue to share this video as “proof” that masks are ineffective or other producers cut from that video to make new content, it would be an example of *malinformation*. Flagging or removing malinformation such as this would be difficult without context. Were people sharing to express anger over Fauci’s initial recommendations or is it being used in ReOpen groups as evidence that masks are unnecessary?

While a big data approach to thwarting mis-dis-mal information online is useful for identifying bots and mapping how and where false information spreads, tools that focus exclusively on *producers* of problematic content cannot address *how* or *why* these narratives resonate. The context behind why false stories are shared in conjunction with the unbelievability of truth is an essential element behind understanding the perpetual nature of problematic information.<sup>xv</sup> Media manipulation is more than simply a bug in the code, it is a *sociotechnical vulnerability*. Users use platforms in ways unanticipated or unintended by programmers. Users

use platforms in ways programmers never anticipated or intended. By observing public ReOpen groups on Facebook, this study demonstrates how misinformation drives political action by connecting with the “deep stories” of American conservatism.<sup>xvi</sup>

## **Methods**

When ReOpen groups first emerged on the platform in response to the closing of church services on Easter Sunday, affiliations were broad, but after rallies were organized in states, groups specific to those states form. An example of one such group not affiliated with this study is ReOpenVA. This paper uses Marwick’s (2019) sociotechnical model of media effects to analyze how ReOpen actors make meaning and organize political rallies based on news and information shared in ReOpen Facebook Groups. It draws from participant observation of four *public* ReOpen groups on Facebook based out of four different locations within United States (i.e., North, South, East, and West). Observations on Facebook were conducted from April to November 2020 which consisted of visiting each group on a daily basis, tracking themes as they were discussed, taking screenshots of content and events shared, and noting information being used to support group members’ arguments.

In addition to ethnographic observations, I conducted a content analysis of the screenshots across each group. Content immersion also included reading, watching, or listening to the news stories posted on the site. Sometimes original content was removed, so this also included finding the source on other platforms (e.g. *Breitbart News* or *One American News Network*). By combining ethnographic observations with content analysis of news stories and comments posted by group members, I was able to identify the most salient themes focused on within the groups.

I then drew on these initial themes to help structure the content analysis of screenshots taken from across the groups. This multimethodological approach allowed me to triangulate my study to strengthen the validity of my findings.

## **(Preliminary) Findings**

Conservative pundits and politicians in digital-first and traditional media forms have focused in the “Five Fs” of conservatism, what Tripodi (*forthcoming*) describes as *faith, family, firearms, the armed forces, and a free market* to claim that public health measures violate individual freedoms and purposefully stifle what should otherwise function as a free-market economy.<sup>xvii</sup>

“Reopen” rallies, typically held outside of state capital buildings in which groups demand schools, churches, and the economy return to business as usual also have violent connections to militia groups. It was found that the plot to kidnap Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer was tied to attendees at a ReOpen rally.<sup>xviii</sup>

Members of these groups are also involved in the effort to “Stop the Steal.” Not only is this catchphrase a clever iteration of the “Stop the Spread” and the organization behind the “call to action” took place in a close reopen group Stand Up Michigan.<sup>xix</sup>

Given the contentious nature of the 2020 election, participation observations and content analysis will continue past November 6, 2020. However, preliminary findings indicate that ReOpen members collaboratively construct a collective resistance to government interventions design to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the United States. My analysis clarifies how the content in these Facebook groups blurs the boundaries between fact (i.e., epidemiological updates) and fiction (i.e., conspiracy theories), what they’ve directly observed (i.e., their own experiences) vs. other’s accounts (i.e., shares from users outside the network), and the difference between news and opinion.<sup>xx</sup> Based on my analysis, the most salient themes in these spaces centered around conservative values more broadly; assert that the threat of COVID-19 was overblown; and routinely signaled to more extremist conspiracy theories involving child abuse and trafficking.

Moreover, my findings indicate that attempts to flag or remove mis-dis-mal information only served to strengthen the groups resolve that the Big Tech was trying to silence the truth. Such a backlash to platforms efforts to combat problematic content suggest alternative solutions are needed as the likelihood of lockdowns and the continued use of masks in public spaces remains a necessary part of slowing the spread of COVID-19.

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<sup>i</sup> The Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Public Health Emergency Declaration <https://www.phe.gov/emergency/news/healthactions/phe/Pages/default.aspx> (last accessed November 5, 2020)

<sup>ii</sup> Markowitz, Andy. 2020. State-by-State Guide to Face Mask Requirements *AARP Magazine* <https://www.aarp.org/health/healthy-living/info-2020/states-mask-mandates-coronavirus.html> (Last updated and last accessed November 3, 2020).

<sup>iii</sup> Map: Coronavirus and School Closures in 2019-2020. *Education Week* <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html> (last accessed November 4, 2020)

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<sup>iv</sup> Kochhar, Rakesh. June 11, 2020. Unemployment rose higher in three months of COVID-19 than it did in two years of the Great Recession. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/11/unemployment-rose-higher-in-three-months-of-covid-19-than-it-did-in-two-years-of-the-great-recession/> (last accessed November 5, 2020); Sundaram, Anjali. September 16, 2020. Yelp data shows 60% of business closures due to the coronavirus pandemic are now permanent. *CNBC* <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/16/yelp-data-shows-60percent-of-business-closures-due-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic-are-now-permanent.html> (last accessed November 3, 2020).

<sup>v</sup>In the field, researchers differentiate between misinformation – information that is incorrect but spread without malicious intent; disinformation – information that is incorrect but knowingly shared; and malinformation – information based on truth but used out of context to undermine individuals, organizations, or institutions. Jack, Caroline. 2017. Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information. *Data & Society Research Institute*; Wardle, Claire. 2017 Fake News. It's complicated. *First Draft News* < <https://medium.com/1st-draft/fake-news-its-complicated-d0f773766c79> > (last accessed November 5, 2020)

<sup>vi</sup> Lazer, David M., Alex Pentland, Duncan J. Watts, Sinan Aral, Susan Athey, Noshir Contractor, Deen Freelon, Sandra Gonzalez-Bailon, Gary King, Helen Margetts, Alondra Nelson, Matthew J. Salganik, Markus Strohmaier, Alessandro Vespignani, Claudia Wagner. 2020. Computational social science: Obstacles and opportunities. *Science* 369 (6507): 1060 – 1062.

<sup>vii</sup> Freelon, Deen, C. McIlwain, M. D. Clark, “Beyond the hashtags: #Blacklivesmatter, #Ferguson, and the online struggle for offline justice” (Center for Media and Social Impact, American University, 2016); <https://cmsimpact.org/blmreport>; Freelon, Deen, Alice Marwick and Daniel Kreiss. 2020. False equivalencies: Online activism from left to right. *Science* 369 (6508): 1197-1201; Jackson, Sarah J., Moya Bailey and Brook Foucault Welles. 2020. *#HashtagActivism*. MIT Press.

<sup>viii</sup> Bradshaw S., & Howard, P. 2018. Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Social

<sup>ix</sup> ROB FARIS ET AL., BERKMAN KLEIN CENTER, PARTISANSHIP, PROPAGANDA, AND DISINFORMATION: ONLINE MEDIA AND THE 2016 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION (2017).

<sup>x</sup> Vidya Narayanan et al., *Polarization, Partisanship and Junk News Consumption Over Social Media in the US: COMPROP Data Memo 2018.1*, COMPUTATIONAL PROPAGANDA PROJECT (Feb. 6, 2018), <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wpcontent/>; Daniel Preotiuc-Pietro et al., *Beyond Binary Labels: Political Ideology Prediction of Twitter Users*, PROCEEDINGS OF THE 55TH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR COMPUTATIONAL LINGUISTICS, VOL. 1: LONG PAPERS 729 (2017); Jesse Shore et al., *Network Structure and Patterns of Information Diversity on Twitter* (2017); Magdalena Wojcieszak, ‘Don’t Talk to Me’: Effects of Ideologically Homogeneous Online Groups and Politically Dissimilar Offline Ties on Extremism, 12 NEW MEDIA & SOC’Y 637 (2010).

<sup>xi</sup> Anderson, CW. 2020. Fake News is Not a Virus: On Platforms and Their Effects. *Communication Theory*.

<sup>xii</sup> Lazer et. al. *ibid*.

<sup>xiii</sup> Anderson *ibid*; Marres, M. (2018) Why we can’t have our facts back. *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*, 4, 423–443. doi: 10.17351/ests2018.188; boyd, danah and Crawford, Kate, *Six Provocations for Big Data* (September 21, 2011). A Decade in Internet Time: Symposium on the Dynamics of the Internet and Society, September 2011, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1926431> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1926431>

<sup>xiv</sup> Networked publics are searchable, scalable, replicable, and persistent, so content shared online never really goes away. Marwick AE, boyd danah. I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*. 2011;13(1):114-133.

<sup>xv</sup> Shudson & Zeilzer YEAR)

<sup>xvi</sup> Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2018. *Strangers in Their Own Land Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. The New Press.

<sup>xvii</sup> Tripodi, Francesca. Forthcoming. *Mainstreaming the Extreme*. Yale University Press.

<sup>xviii</sup> Kapetaneas, John, Neil Giardino, Stephanie Fasano, Mack Muldofsky, and Allie Yang. October 20, 2020. How FBI says Michigan gov kidnapping plot when from texts, small gatherings to raid. *ABC News*. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/fbi-michigan-gov-kidnapping-plot-texts-small-gatherings/story?id=73698990> (last accessed November 1, 2020)

<sup>xix</sup> Zadrozny, Brandy and Ben Collins. November 4, 2020. Facebook anti-lockdown group mobilizes to drive people to vote-counting location in Detroit. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/live-blog/2020-11-04-trump-biden-election-results-n1246346/ncrd1246485#liveBlogHeader> (last accessed November 4, 2020)

<sup>xx</sup> These findings mirror the work of Papacharassi 2015 Toward New Journalism(s): Affective News, Hybridity, and Liminal Spaces, 16 JOURNALISM STUDIES and Hermida (2010), *Twittering the News: The Emergence of Ambient*

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