ISD

Disinformation Briefing

Narratives around Black Lives Matter and voter fraud

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About This Briefing

This short briefing details the methodology and key findings of a study conducted jointly by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) team and Politico. Leveraging data from across social media platforms, this investigation sought to understand online discussions around the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the issue of voter fraud ahead of the US Presidential election in November 2020.

The research was designed to shed light on the volume and nature of disinformation related to these two issues online and how this disinformation may be weaponised to attempt to influence attitudes ahead of the election.

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Executive Summary

In collaboration with Politico, ISD undertook research to understand online discussions around the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the issue of voter fraud ahead of the US Presidential election in November 2020. The research was designed to shed light on the volume and nature of disinformation related to these two issues online and how this disinformation may be weaponised to attempt to influence attitudes ahead of the election.

In order to gain as broad an understanding as possible of online discussions around these themes, ISD gathered publicly accessible data from five prominent social media platforms and forums: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit and 4chan.

Key findings

- **Black Lives Matter**

  - The dominant disinformation narrative regarding BLM seeks to portray the ongoing demonstrations around racial injustice in the US as a predominantly violent protest movement.

  - A common characteristic in this disinformation conflates the movement with antifa, the left-wing anti-fascist movement, using the terms interchangeably to describe recent protests and protesters. Further to this, language describing protesters as "rioters," "terrorists" and "thugs" is common.

  - The leading voice in pushing this narrative is Andy Ngô, Editor-at-large with the right-wing news site Post Millennial. Of the 50 most-widespread posts containing BLM disinformation, Ngô's tweets feature 21 times.

  - Frequent attempts were also made by leading right-wing voices to use the merging of BLM and antifa to target Joe Biden by claiming he has failed to denounce violence at racial injustice protests.

  - Disinformation targeting BLM spiked after 23 September, the day the grand jury announced its decision to bring no charges against Louisville police over Breonna Taylor's death.

- **Voter fraud**

  - A small but influential cluster of accounts belonging to right-wing activists and media figures are responsible for promoting narratives claiming voter fraud is widespread in the US.

  - The favoured tactic in promoting this disinformation narrative involves highlighting local reports of alleged voter fraud and framing them as indicative of large-scale corruption in the national voting process, despite FBI Director Christopher Wray's comments that the agency has not seen "any kind of coordinated national voter fraud effort... by mail or otherwise." [1]

1 https://www.axios.com/mail-in-voting-2020-election-christopher-wray-8ba5f3dc-1e5d-4c48-a0c1-4a5fd2ece3aa.html

- Claims alleging that the Trump administration and the GOP deliberately tried to sabotage the US Postal Service's efforts to process mail-in ballots were shared by left-wing voices.

- Other influential voices in the discussion around voter fraud are accounts associated with news organisations whose reports on Wray's comments were widely shared. Reports highlighting President Trump's comments encouraging voters to submit a mail-in ballot in addition to voting in person were numerous as well.

The methodology used by ISD researchers for this investigation and further details about the key findings of the research are summarised below. Politico's reporting on the data and findings can be found here. For more information on our ongoing research, including how you can get involved or support our work, please sign up to our mailing list or get in touch at info@isdglobal.org.

Methodology

Research questions

On each issue analysed, the primary research questions this investigation set out to answer were:

- What is the volume of these discussions across social media?

- What are the key themes within these online discussions?

- What disinformation narratives are present in these discussions (if any)?

- Who are the key influencers or most prolific accounts within these discussions?

- What third-party sites (news sites, organisational sites, other platforms/fora, etc.) are most frequently linked within these discussions?

- What potential impacts may these discussions have on election outcomes?

Data collection

Data was collected from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit and 4chan. The timeline of collection was 28 August 2020 to 25 September 2020.

For all platforms, data was collected on the basis of a keyword-based query. Keyword selection will be discussed in the following section.

In the case of Twitter, data was live streamed via Twitter's public API. Data from Facebook and Instagram was pulled retrospectively from the CrowdTangle API and Reddit data was similarly pulled from that platform's public API. Posts from 4chan were scraped from the platforms live and archived threads.

Keyword selection

A bespoke keyword list for each theme (Black Lives Matter and voter fraud) was developed by ISD analysts, based upon our previous research into online discussions in these areas. Keywords selected were intentionally general in order to capture the broadest sample of online discussions without collecting too much noise (i.e. irrelevant posts).

Following development of the initial keyword lists, a spot-check was conducted to ensure accuracy and precision of the queries. A random sample of posts from each dataset was selected and manually reviewed by an ISD analyst. Keywords that appeared to be returning significant noise were removed or amended, and additional keywords that were discovered in this qualitative review were added. The final list of keywords can be found in Appendix A.

The size of each dataset, once all sources were combined, is displayed below.

Table 1 *Number of unique posts and accounts within each dataset*

Theme	Unique posts	Unique accounts
Black Lives Matter	1,350,680	373,364
Voter Fraud	714,313	158,595

To facilitate analysis, a 25% random sample was drawn from the Black Lives Matter dataset. Figures displayed below are drawn from this sample, unless otherwise noted.

Analysis

Both datasets were processed in bespoke analytical pipelines for the analysis of social media data. ISD developed these with our partners to analyse data related to issues of extremism, hate and disinformation online.

Within each dataset, five key elements were identified:

- Widely repeated messages or text that occurred multiple times in unique posts within the data set;
- Widely shared messages or posts that were most shared via the respective platform functionalities (Facebook shares, retweets etc.);
- Most frequently shared external URLs;
- Post volume over time; and
- Most prolific accounts or those accounts that most frequently posted using one or more keywords.

Each of these five elements were manually assessed to identify prominent themes in discussion (widely repeated and shared text and URLs), peaks in activity (volume over time) and key influencers (prolific accounts).

After identification of prominent themes and peaks in activity, samples of data were pulled for deeper analysis. In order to pull these subsets:

- Secondary keyword lists were developed to isolate specific discussions and
- Posts from particular dates were extracted.

Posts from these subsets were subsequently analysed using the same analytical pipelines as detailed above. The same five elements from each subset were manually assessed to better understand these particular discussions or peaks in activity.

Qualitative assessment

As a final stage, ISD's analysis used qualitative methods to examine the nature of some content captured in social media posts in our data. For example, in our voter fraud dataset, ISD identified a common trend of right-wing voices highlighting incidents of alleged voter fraud in various states, typically by linking to local media

reports or citing figures that first appeared in similar reports. To better understand the material used to support such claims of voter fraud, we examined some of the cases mentioned. One example is included below.

On 3 September, Charlie Kirk, founder of the conservative student activism organisation Turning Points USA, tweeted: "Voter fraud is real: Michigan clerks rejected 10,694 mailed ballots during the August 4 primary. Almost 900 were rejected because the voter was dead." [2]

Kirk did not link to any supporting material, but these figures were first released in an August report about rejected absentee ballots from Michigan's Secretary of State, Jocelyn Benson.[3] Of the approximately 10,600 rejected ballots in Michigan's August primary, 80% were due to signature verification issues, the report stated, something Benson has recommended the state legislature seek to address. Almost 900 votes were rejected for people who had subsequently died after casting their absentee ballot but before Election Day.

The Associated Press (AP) also examined the claim and ruled it as "false,"[4] stating, "Michigan election authorities have not found evidence votes were cast on behalf of dead people." A spokesperson for Benson told AP the fact that her office caught and rejected ballots of deceased people during the verification process "validates that the system works."

2 https://twitter.com/charliekirk11/status/1301582796528336896
3 https://www.michigan.gov/sos/0,4670,7-127--536848--rss,00.html
4 https://apnews.com/article/fact-checking-9245320034
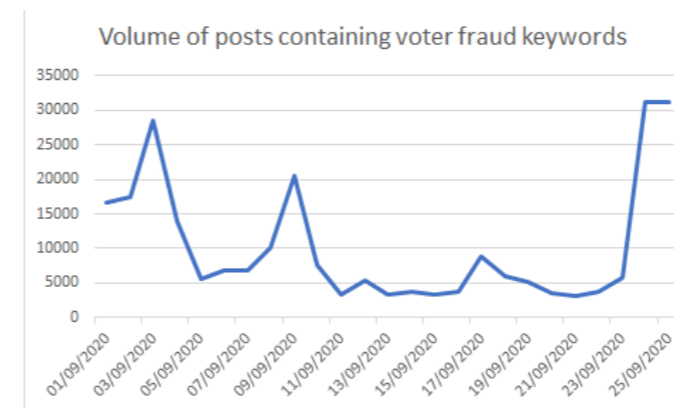
Key findings

Voter fraud

Figure 1 *Volume of social media posts containing voter fraud keywords (1/9/20 - 25/9/20)*

From this research, it is evident that the main actors pushing mis- and disinformation around the issue of voter fraud are a small but influential cluster of right-wing activists online. This activity mirrors that of President Trump who, throughout 2020, has repeatedly proclaimed that voter fraud is widespread in the US.[5,6,7] Some of the high-profile right-wing figures pushing these narratives include Charlie Kirk, James O'Keeffe, Tomi Lahren and Dan Bongino, as well as anonymous accounts with large followings online.

Qualitative analysis determined that these accounts repeatedly highlighted local cases of alleged voter fraud, presenting these incidents as indicative of large scale corruption in the voting process. These posts contain claims that thousands of people have voted multiple times, that votes were cast on behalf of deceased people, and that money was used to buy votes or that 'illegal aliens' are trying to vote in large numbers. While voter fraud issues have been uncovered in various states, these are typically isolated incidents or procedural mistakes involving low numbers, as reported

by news orgs like Reuters[8], ABC[9] and the BBC[10], and reflect Director Wray's comments that the agency has not seen "any kind of coordinated national voter fraud effort... by mail or otherwise."[11] Ellen Weintraub, commissioner of the Federal Election Commission, also said: "There's simply no basis for the conspiracy theory that voting by mail causes fraud."[12]

Table 2 *Top 10 most shared links within the voter fraud dataset*

Most shared links	Unique shares
Axios: Christopher Wray interview	11,094
CNN: Voting Fraud No Evidence	2,330
NY Post: Voter Fraud Confessions	2,232
NY Post: Joe Biden Voter Fraud Warnings #1	1,696
Facebook video: COVID 911	1,580
NY Post: Joe Biden Voter Fraud Warnings #2	868
Gateway Pundit: Voter Fraud Ring	833
Facebook video: #TheGreatAwakening	762
YouTube video: Voter Fraud Confirmed	654
US News: Biden-Linked Firm	636

Over the same period, a number of other disinformation narratives concerning voter fraud were identified, though they received less engagement and interaction online. These include:

- A recurring trend from right-wing voices calling for the implementation of voter ID laws, claiming the lack of such legislation aids Democrats' efforts to "steal the election."
- The claim that the Democratic Party and Joe Biden are endorsing vote-by-mail although they supposedly know that it is "rife" with fraud as it is "the only way" to win the election.

5 https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-02-16/trump-is-already-making-stuff-up-about-voter-fraud
6 https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/23/politics/donald-trump-mail-voter-fraud-most-corrupt-election/index.html
7 https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/11/trumps-fusillade-falsehoods-mail-voting/
8 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-voter-fraud-facts-explai-idUSKBN2601HG
9 https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trumps-ballot-fraud-allegations-embellished-widespread-experts/story?id=73701060
10 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53353404
11 https://www.axios.com/mail-in-voting-2020-election-christopher-wray-8ba5f3dc-1e5d-4c48-a0c1-4a5fd2ece3aa.html
12 https://twitter.com/EllenLWeintraub/status/1265841901569216517

- A claim that there is a double standard at play in the media's coverage of the issue when compared with claims of fraud, corruption or systemic bias made by left-wing voices. For example, one widely-shared post from conservative radio host Larry Elder stated: "When Republicans complain about mail in ballot voter fraud, media asks, 'Where's the proof?' When Democrats complain about police [sic] 'systemic racism' against blacks, media never asks, 'Where's the proof?'" [13]

- Left-wing voices have promoted the claim that the Trump administration and the GOP are actively cheating to win the election, by sabotaging the US Postal Service's efforts to process mail-in ballots and with "Russian assistance," as propagated by actor and Biden supporter Billy Baldwin.[14]
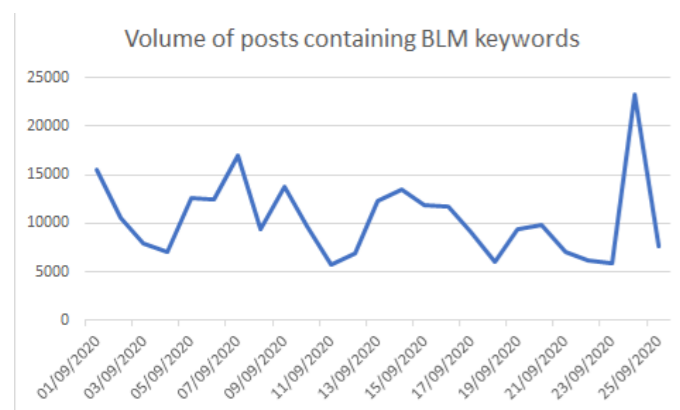
Black Lives Matter

Figure 2 *Volume of social media posts containing BLM keywords (1/9/20 - 25/9/20)*

The dominant disinformation narrative regarding BLM seeks to portray the ongoing demonstrations around racial injustice in the US as primarily a violent protest movement. This is typically done by users who conflate the movement with antifa, the left-wing anti-fascist movement, which President Trump has repeatedly said he wants to designate as a "terrorist organisation." The move proved controversial as legal experts questioned whether the president has the authority to designate domestic groups as terrorist organisations.[15]

Disinformation in this category uses the terms 'Black Lives Matter' and 'antifa' interchangeably, and also uses negative terms like "rioters," "terrorists" and "thugs"

to describe protesters at large. The leading voice in this disinformation ecosystem is Andy Ngô, a right-wing journalist and activist, whose Twitter account typically shares content of clashes and unrest in the streets and attributes blame to BLM and antifa. Of the 50 most-widespread posts containing BLM disinformation, Ngô's tweets feature 21 times.

This conflation has also been used to target Joe Biden criticizing him for not denouncing violence at BLM protests throughout the summer. This extended to Biden's running mate, Sen. Kamala Harris, whose online posts to raise money for the Minnesota Freedom Fund in the wake of George Floyd's death were described as supportive of "Antifa and BLM terrorists" by conservative activist Melissa Tate.[16]

Our analysis shows that Black Lives Matter disinformation narratives spiked after 23 September, the day the grand jury announced its decision to bring no charges against in the death of Breonna Taylor at the hands of Louisville police officers. Two police were shot and wounded following protests in Louisville that night. Online posts describing the demonstration as "pre-planned chaos" and claiming that a U-Haul van operated by antifa activists had distributed "weapons" to protesters and was linked to George Soros were widely shared. Politifact rated these claims "mostly false" and posts sharing these claims were flagged as part of Facebook's fact-checking initiatives.[17]

Table 3 *Top 10 most shared links within the BLM dataset*

Most shared links	Unique shares
YouTube video: Ricky Rebel (since removed)	1,833
Video thumbnail of protest violence	1,156
Video thumbnail of protest violence	741
Getty image of Ricky Rebel	649
Getty image of Ricky Rebel	649
Video thumbnail of Joe Biden appearing on CNN	567
Team Candace Owens: Full list of BLM companies	532
Image of protests	502
Image of cleared streets and flames	486
Image of protests	484

13 https://twitter.com/larryelder/status/1308475714799202305
14 https://twitter.com/BillyBaldwin/status/1308832944925147146
15 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52868295
16 https://twitter.com/TheRightMelissa/status/1300226986523217925
17 https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/sep/24/facebook-posts/fact-checking-disinformation-about-louisville-u-ha/

Over the same period, a number of other disinformation narratives concerning Black Lives Matter were identified, though they received less engagement and interaction online. These include:

- A link shared 532 times in our dataset featured a list of companies who purportedly support antifa. However, the list is made up of statements from companies who publicly proclaimed their support for BLM over the summer and none of the statements featured any mention of antifa.

- The claim that a "known BLM activist" was responsible for starting fires in Oregon and California was amplified by Glenn Beck and shared over 22,000 times. The person in question is Jeffrey Acord, who was actually arrested for arson in Washington state on 9 September. However, fact-checking site Lead Stories states that Acord was arrested during BLM protests in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, and has posted his support for BLM online in the past.[18]

- Videos showing BLM protesters disrupting diners outside restaurants were frequently shared to support the claim that the entire movement is violent and actively seeks to intimidate the public. Footage from one such incident in Rochester, New York,[19] which did show BLM protesters ordering diners to leave a restaurant, was shared by Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Republican congressional candidate who described BLM as a "violent 'movement'" made up of "terrorists" and "communists.[20]

18 https://leadstories.com/hoax-alert/2020/09/fact-check-blm-antifa-instigators-not-charged-arrested-for-california-oregon-wildfires-arson.html
19 https://eu.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2020/09/05/daniel-prude-death-what-we-know-saturday-rochester-ny/5728478002/
20 https://www.facebook.com/MarjorieTaylorGreene/videos/325212322251559/?v=325212322251559

Appendix A - Keyword list

Black Lives Matter

BLM antifa	BLM vandals
BLM George Floyd	BLM terror
BLM Kenosha	BLM soros
BLM paid	BLM rioters
georgefloyd	BLM vandalism
icantbreathe	BLM violence
justiceforgeorgefloyd	BLM violent
alllivesmatter	BLM scum
whitelivesmatter	BLM funder
BLM MAGA	BLM starting wildfire
BLM gang	BLM arrested wildfire
BLM commie	BLM started wildfire
BLM communist	BLM arsonist
BLM marxist	BLM firestarter
BLM terrorist	BLM eco terrorism
BLM supporters	BLM eco terrorist
BLM Gateway Pundit	BLM arson
BLM mob	BLM setting fire
BLM riot	BLM starting fire
BLM hoodlums	

Voter fraud

mailboxes fraud	voter fraud Biden
mailboxes fake	voter fraud Democrats
mailboxes removal	voter fraud Democratic
mailboxes removed	mail fraud proof
stole mailboxes	mail fraud evidence
mailboxes 2020	mail fraud stolen
mailboxes steal	mail fraud absentee
Mail Drop Boxes	voter fraud confirmed
DeJoy fraud	mail fraud confirmed
USPS fraud	
United States Postal Service fraud	
FBI vote mail	
2020 voter fraud	
throw out mail ballot	
discard mail ballot	
steal mail ballot	
falsify mail ballot	
mail ballot fraud	
voter fraud evidence	

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