

## Guest Column

# Ongoing challenges: false, political speech

*The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts. Contributing to this column are Anjana Susarla, Dam Hee Kim and Ethan Zuckerman.*

At the end of 2020, it seemed hard to imagine a worse year for misinformation on social media, given the intensity of the presidential election and the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. But 2021 proved up to the task, starting with the Jan. 6 insurrection and continuing with copious amounts of falsehoods and distortions about COVID-19 vaccines.

To get a sense of what 2022 could hold, we asked three researchers about the evolution of misinformation on social media.

## Absent regulation, misinformation will get worse

BY ANJANA SUSARLA

Professor of Information Systems, Michigan State University

While misinformation has always existed in media — think of the Great Moon Hoax of 1835 that claimed life was discovered on the moon — the advent of social media has significantly increased the scope, spread and reach of misinformation. Social media platforms have morphed into public information utilities that control how most people view the world, which makes misinformation they facilitate a fundamental problem for society.

There are two primary challenges in addressing misinformation. The first is the dearth of regulatory mechanisms that address it. Mandating transparency and giving users greater access to and control over their data might go a long way in addressing the challenges of misinformation. But there's also a need for independent audits, including tools that assess social media algorithms. These can establish how the social media platforms' choices in curating news feeds and presenting content affect how people see information.

The second challenge is that racial and gender biases in algorithms used by social media platforms exacerbate the misinformation problem. While social media companies have introduced mechanisms to highlight authoritative sources of information, solutions such as labeling posts as misinformation don't solve racial and gender biases in accessing information. Highlighting relevant sources of, for example, health information may only help users with greater health literacy and not people with low health literacy, who tend to be disproportionately minorities.

Another problem is the need to look systematically at where users are finding misinformation. TikTok, for example, has largely escaped government scrutiny. What's more, misinformation targeting minorities, particularly Spanish-language content, may be far worse than misinformation targeting majority communities.

I believe the lack of independent audits, lack of transparency in fact checking and the racial and gender biases underlying algorithms used by social media platforms suggest that the need for regulatory action in 2022 is urgent and immediate.

## Growing divisions and cynicism

BY DAM HEE KIM

Assistant Professor of Communication, University of Arizona

"Fake news" is hardly a new phenomenon, yet its costs have reached another level in recent years. Misinformation concerning COVID-19 has cost countless lives all over the world. False and misleading information about elections can shake the foundation of democracy, for instance, by making citizens lose confidence in the political system. Research I conducted with S Mo Jones-Jang and Kate Kenski on misinformation during elections, some published and some in progress, has turned up three key findings.

The first is that the use of social media, originally designed to connect people, can facilitate social disconnection. Social media has become rife with misinformation. This leads citizens who consume news on social media to become cynical not only toward established institutions such as politicians and the media, but also toward fellow voters.

Second, politicians, the media and voters have become scapegoats for the harms of "fake news." Few of them actually produce misinformation. Most misinformation is produced by foreign entities and political fringe groups who create "fake news" for financial or ideological purposes. Yet citizens who consume misinformation on social media tend to blame politicians, the media and other voters.

The third finding is that people who care about being properly informed are not immune to misinformation. People who prefer to process, structure and understand information in a coherent and meaningful way become more politically cynical after being exposed to perceived "fake news" than people who are less politically sophisticated. These critical thinkers become frustrated by having to process so much false and misleading information. This is troubling because democracy depends on the participation of engaged and thoughtful citizens.

Looking ahead to 2022, it's important to address this cynicism. There has been much talk about media literacy interventions, primarily to help the less politically sophisticated. In addition, it's important to find ways to explain the status of "fake news" on social media, specifically who produces "fake news," why some entities and groups produce it, and which Americans fall for it. This could help keep people from growing more politically cynical.

Rather than blaming each other for the harms of "fake news" produced by foreign entities and fringe groups, people need to find a way to restore confidence in each other. Blunting the effects of misinformation will help with the larger goal of overcoming societal divisions.

## Propaganda by another name

BY ETHAN ZUCKERMAN

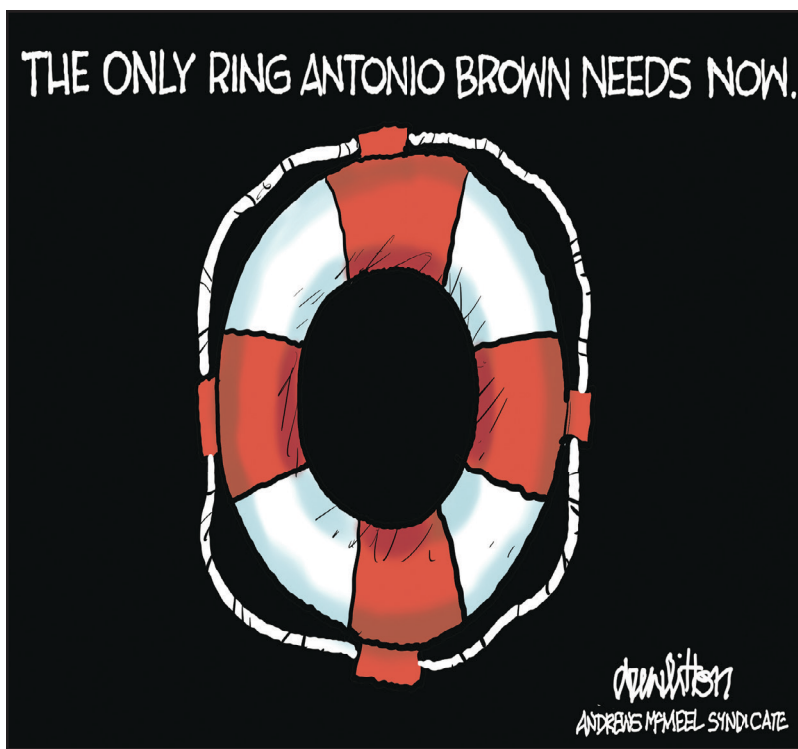
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I expect the idea of misinformation will shift into an idea of propaganda in 2022, as suggested by sociologist and media scholar Francesca Tripodi in her forthcoming book, "The Propagandist's Playbook." Most misinformation is not the result of innocent misunderstanding. It's the product of specific campaigns to advance a political or ideological agenda.

Once you understand that Facebook and other platforms are the battlegrounds on which contemporary political campaigns are fought, you can let go of the idea that all you need are facts to correct people's misapprehensions. What's going on is a more complex mix of persuasion, tribal affiliation and signaling, which plays out in venues from social media to search results.

As the 2022 elections heat up, I expect platforms like Facebook will reach a breaking point on misinformation because certain lies have become political speech central to party affiliation.

How do social media platforms manage when false speech is also political speech?



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## Letter to the Editor

### Trump called for peaceful, patriotic protesting

To the editor:

I have serious concerns surrounding the Jan. 6 Capitol incident.

Leftist media used "insurrection" to describe the incident. "Insurrection" is a loaded word, connoting a coup attempt.

What's the truth? A significant percentage of conservative Americans didn't trust the election results. They traveled to the Capitol to exercise their right to protest.

A minority of gullible, fringe MAGA protesters, incited by agent-provocateurs, rioted and breached the Capitol building.

The vast majority of MAGA protesters were not involved in rioting. Many realized agent-provocateurs were inciting the riot and warned others. Some attempted to stop rioters by wresting away their tools.

Actual rioters should be punished appropriately.

The incident didn't compare to BLM/Antifa rioting in Democrat-led cities. Billions in damages, thousands of injured police officers, and dozens of deaths resulted. Many rioters and looters were not even prosecuted.

Yet, the leftist media dubbed these BLM/Antifa riots "mostly peaceful protests" while vilifying the Jan. 6 incident as an "insurrection."

Neo-Marxist organizations, allied with Biden's administration, have a mandate to tear down American institutions and culture. Conservatives want to preserve American institutions and culture. Who deserves the label "insurrectionist"?

Leftist media dubbed this incident the worst act of violence against the Capitol since 1814. But, what about the Senate bombing by leftist organization, Weather Underground, in 1983?

Linda Evans and Susan Rosenburg executed this bombing, as well as other bombings and robberies causing three deaths.

In 2001, Clinton commuted their sentences, along with 16 other terrorists. Rosenburg works for an organization, Thousand Currents, that manages fundraising for BLM.

In 2020, BLM/Antifa rioting was encouraged by Democrats like Kamala Harris, Ayanna Pressley, Maxine Waters and Nancy Pelosi. Harris encouraged donations for bailing out rioters. Mayors Ted Wheeler and Jenny Durkan encouraged continuous rioting in Portland and Seattle.

There's clearly a symbiotic relationship between Democrat leadership and leftist terrorist groups.

Leftist media accused Trump of inciting the riot. Trump called for peaceful, patriotic protesting. Media accentuated portions of his speech, and omitted others, to frame their narrative. The rioting began before his audience returned to the Capitol. It is unlikely his speech incited it.

Leftist media reported five deaths from the rioting. The reality: one individual died as a direct result of the riot, Ashli Babbitt, and the rest died of other causes like heart attacks and strokes.

Babbitt was small in stature, unarmed and surrounded by police riflemen, but they didn't attempt to take her into custody. Instead, Capitol police officer Michael Byrd shot her.

Media mentions little about agent-provocateurs inciting the riot.

John Sullivan, a well-known leftist activist, was among them. He incriminates himself multiple times in the video referenced below.

Ray Epps, a suspected federal operative, incited protesters to breach the building, too.

The FBI is suspected of infiltrating right wing groups and encouraging political crimes, like the Gretchen Whitmer kidnapping plot. Additionally, they perpetuated the Russiagate hoax.

Sullivan and Epps were not alone. Others not fitting the MAGA profile were observed engaging in unusual behavior and conversations.

If Sullivan and Epps are not prosecuted with comparable sentences to other participants, this should arouse our suspicions.

Capitol police were not prepared with additional manpower, even though leadership knew protesting was planned. And, some Capitol police were seen allowing protesters into the Capitol, even posing for selfies with them.

Nancy Pelosi prevented honest, bipartisan investigation into this incident. She broke congressional precedence and refused minority leader appointments (Banks, Jordan). Instead, she chose two nominal Republicans well-known for their anti-Trumpism (Cheney, Kinzinger).

Subsequent arrests of MAGA protesters involved undue force and inhumane treatment. Some arrestees never entered the Capitol and didn't participate in rioting. Several were treated like political prisoners in the D.C. jail.

My conviction is Democrat leadership used agent-provocateurs, possibly from government agencies, to incite the riot for the purpose of interrupting the election fraud discussions and vilifying Trump and Republicans in general.

I suggest viewing Sullivan's video titled "The Insurrection of the United States Capitol and Shooting of Ashli Babbitt" on the JaydenX Youtube channel, and the documentary titled "Capitol Punishment" available on the Western Journal website.

Feel free to email me at [sparkmanr1@mediacommb.net](mailto:sparkmanr1@mediacommb.net) if you want more references.

**Robert Sparkman**  
Rome City

# A challenge for the new year

BY KATHRYN JEAN LOPEZ

"Be my Mommy!" the banner in the CVS window read, part of a display of surplus Baby Emma dolls. It was the fifth day of Christmas, and I noticed during Mass — shortly before I went to the drugstore to pick up prescriptions — that one of the petitions during the service was for those struggling to have a happy, peaceful Christmas. We prayed for the sick, the grieving, the lonely. We didn't pray for the orphans, though, I thought during Mass. I did, in my heart, but seeing the Baby Emma display reminded me to do so again.

Over a number of Christmas days, as it happened, I was in semi-quarantine (having been exposed to COVID, but testing negative) and then on account of food poisoning. It was not what I had planned, and I wasn't entirely happy about it (particularly the second). But I'm grateful, because it got me thinking in a deeper way about people who are in a graver and more long-term isolation — in particular the anguish of a child in foster care who doesn't have warm memories of love, security and joy, bereft of the comforts of family.

Children wind up in foster care for many reasons, but it's often these days on account of parental opioid abuse. When you can't care for yourself, you can't care for another.

My friend Darcy Olsen, who runs Gen Justice, a foster-care and adoption advocacy group in Phoenix — and is an adoptive mother from foster care herself — believes that a mother's meth addiction should be an automatic reason for termination of parental rights. This belief comes from her

experience with a baby who had been in her care, but was taken away and given back to a mother who struggled with meth. The child died in his biological mother's care. That mother couldn't care for herself, never mind that precious child.

If you even quickly scan recent foster-care headlines, you read about children being put in hotels in Texas and Oregon, and for long periods of time. These children tend to have mental disabilities or severe trauma in their backgrounds. One Texas report found that children placed in hotels "may be exposed to sexual abuse, given incorrect or improper medications, engage in self harm, physically fight with other children and staff, or run away." Many are teens who have spent time in psychiatric care. None of this needs to happen.

Alison Blanchet is a foster and adoptive mother, with her husband, Jim, in Panama City, Florida. While she and Jim were dating, they went on a mission trip to Nicaragua and saw how an orphanage there provided needed services and care to children. So, they wanted to help build something similar, if on a more personal scale, at home. I know that makes them sound extraordinary — and they are — but we can all be so. Again, the message of Christmas is about our poverty and God's grace. That's how the Blanchets do it.

There are more than 400,000 children in foster care in the United States today. Yes, caring for often troubled children is emotional work. Yes, you will get attached and may have to say goodbye. Yes, it's messy. But all of that is true of biological

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... for children in foster care ... everyone has a role — supporting families who ... step up to the plate, for one.”

parenthood as well. "Love is love" is not an ideology or a bumper sticker, but a selfless sacrifice.

Every life changes the world — simply by touching the lives of others. Rewatch "It's a Wonderful Life" if you need some inspiration on that front. And pick up a copy of Naomi Schaefer Riley's recent book "No Way to Treat a Child" for a challenge and inspiration.

What more are you and I going to do for children in foster care this coming year? Everyone has a role — supporting families who do step up to the plate, for one. "Too many children are alone, because we don't think we have what it takes," Blanchet says.

They don't have to be alone. We do have what it takes.

**KATHRYN JEAN LOPEZ** is senior fellow at the National Review Institute, editor-at-large of National Review magazine and author of the new book "A Year With the Mystics: Visionary Wisdom for Daily Living." She is also chair of Cardinal Dolan's pro-life commission in New York. She can be contacted at [klopez@nationalreview.com](mailto:klopez@nationalreview.com).