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Jan 6
OPINION: Disinformation is Ruining the United States

Opinion (/articles/category/Opinion)

Words by Brahmjot Kaur

Graphics by Aspasia Celia Tsampas

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In the words of many faculty members and administration, 2020 has been an unprecedented and tumultuous year. From the coronavirus pandemic, which began to ravage the world at the beginning of 2020, to the United States presidential election concluding the year, 2020 had no shortage of stress or hopelessness for the world and the U.S. population. The events of 2020 have been exacerbated by rising prevalence of disinformation in all aspects of American life, from the media to the white house, where President Donald Trump is a key player in the fragility of democracy and mistrust in experts.

So, what is disinformation and how is it different than misinformation? Professor Richard Bernstein, the political science department advisor and well-respected professor at The City College of New York (CCNY), explained that "Misinformation is a large category, which would include **both** accidental or inadvertent spreading of wrong or false information. Disinformation is the **deliberate** spreading of wrong or false information." The Trump Administration has disinformed the public so frequently that news sources like *CNN* (https://www.cnn.com/specials/politics/fact-check-politics) and *AP News* (https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-ap-fact-check-joe-biden-donald-trump-pandemics-c922b24065310f8e0494572a8676692c) have fact-checking articles which are regularly updated to debunk Trump's new false claims.

During his four years in office, President Trump spent copious amounts of time and energy discrediting trusted news sources and world-renowned scientists. Most recently, as cases and deaths soared in the United States due to COVID-19, President Trump repeatedly trivialized the virus. He repeatedly criticized Dr. Anthony Fauci, who has been the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since the Reagan Administration, for advising the public to social distance and to wear masks. Fauci also predicted the fatality rate for the coronavirus would be 10 times greater than the seasonal flu. As Fauci emphasized the dire need to contain the virus, President Trump regularly disregarded or denounced Fauci's statements.

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According to CNN
(https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/02/politics/donald-trump-
anthony-fauci-job-post-election/index.html), Trump was
speaking at a rally in Opa-Locka, FL last month where the
crowd started chanting "Fire Fauci" as Trump complained
about the COVID coverage from media sources. President
Trump has consistently fueled the flames of disinformation to
rile up his audience and push his false and harmful rhetoric.
Kate Scherer, a political science student at City College,
explained the difference between misinformation and
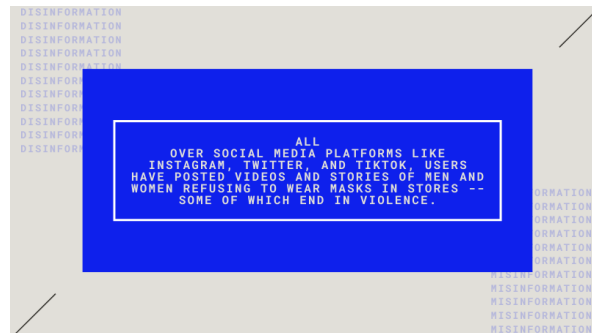disinformation well when she said:

> For me, an easy to understand example of
> disinformation is the Trump Administration's
> handling of the pandemic. The administration has
> repeatedly told Americans that the virus is just the
> flu and balked at the most basic health and safety
> precautions, like wearing a mask. This narrative was
> intentional on the Trump administration's part and
> has dire consequences on our health and safety.
> Misinformation, on the other hand, is rooted more
> in personal ignorance. It looks like your cousin
> reposting anti-vaxxer content because they don't
> know better and they saw it on Fox News.

As of January 6, 2021, *The New York Times*
(https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-
cases.html?name=styln-
coronavirus&region=TOP_BANNER&block=storyline_menu_r
ecirc&action=click&pgtype=LegacyCollection&impression_id=
2264db41-2fa0-11eb-aafd-edb06074786a&variant=1_Show)
reports that at least 357,000 patients in the United States have
died and at least 21.1 M have tested positive for COVID-19.
New York City was one of the hardest-hit regions in the United
States with over 350,000 cases and over 24,000 deaths in the
boroughs alone. In the past month or so, the United States has
hit an all-time high record-number of daily coronavirus cases.
In many large cities like Miami, Los Angeles, and New York
City, cases have shot up after holiday parties were attended
without social distancing. Cases are continuing to rise but little
emphasis has been placed on the new surge. President Trump
even tested positive for the virus at the beginning of October
and since the beginning of the pandemic, at least 45 people
with close connections to the White House have tested positive,
according to the *Times*
(https://www.nytimes.com/live/2020/11/25/world/covid-19-
coronavirus?
action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage#ano
ther-trump-campaign-lawyer-tests-positive-along-with-other-

officials), including close advisor Rudy Giuliani. Even as cases rise, the lack of urgency from the White House has prompted many U.S. citizens to disregard important safety measures and protocols during this holiday season. While health experts have warned against traveling this Christmas and New Year season, it is uncertain whether those warnings were followed.

All over social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, users have posted videos and stories of men and women refusing to wear masks in stores -- some of which end in violence. Most stores and restaurants have mandated mask-wearing inside their establishments and reduced occupancy. Several cases have been reported where security guards have been physically harmed or even killed for telling customers to wear a mask, such as one security guard in Flint, MI who was shot and killed for refusing entry to a woman without a mask and one Disney security guard who was hit in the head and threatened for asking a visitor to wear a mask. These are only two of far too many cases in the United States. Instead of emphasizing the need for masks and social distancing, the rhetoric President Trump has expressed becomes ammo for those who refuse to acknowledge the severity of the virus.

The 2020 United States presidential election concluded with Joe Biden winning the majority vote in both the electoral college and the general population. Donald Trump is the first president to lose re-election in almost 30 years and the 11th president to lose re-election in American history. Similar to his global pandemic strategy, Trump hyper-focused on baseless claims in hopes of overturning the election results. After a bitter loss, the Trump Administration has filed frivolous lawsuit after frivolous lawsuit to block President-elect Joe Biden's transition into office. Most lawsuits have been thrown out due to lack of evidence. The Trump administration has claimed voter fraud took place and thus, cost Trump his re-election. However, every claim made was quickly and easily debunked. Yet as more and more facts prove the legitimacy of President-elect Biden's win, Trump has doubled down on his false claims. Trump claimed votes were being entered for deceased individuals in Detroit

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and Philadelphia and cost him those states, which was proven false by both the Pennsylvania and Michigan state government. Trump also claimed he won Michigan and that there were more votes than the population of Detroit, without any evidence of such. *The Detroit Free Press* (https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/11/25/donald-trump-false-claims-detroit-voters/6426412002/) stated, "As of last year's Census estimate, Detroit, Michigan's largest city, had a voting-age population of 503,934. According to the city clerk's website, 250,138 Detroit residents voted in the election." Trump's team also refuses to acknowledge their losses in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and other swing states. To further the agenda, the Trump administration fired chief of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Chris Krebs, because Krebs rejected Trump's conspiracies about voter fraud. CISA, an agency established and signed into law by Donald Trump, stated that this election was "the most secure election in American history."

Accurate and reliable information can easily be lost in the pool of disinformation created by the current presidential administration and its allies. Before accepting a fact or statement you read online, make sure to cross-reference with other articles or sources. Look at the credibility of the website you found the information on. Cross-referencing with reliable news sources and local media outlets is always a great method to verify the information. As internet users and people whose actions affect those around us, it is incredibly important to be informed in such scary times.

Even as the future remains uncertain, students and faculty alike are trying to look to the future with hope. Fatoumata Sow, a biology major at City College, voted for the first time in the 2020 United States election since she recently gained citizenship. She said, "I definitely worry about the state our country is in right now. This is the reason I was happy that I was able to vote this election because every vote matters, as we witnessed with this election. I do believe there will soon be change and hopefully, things get better." Reflecting on the state of the United States democracy, Professor Bernstein expressed, "I hope that our democracy will not be too unbalanced by 2020 and will recover its balance, sooner rather than later," and ended by admitting, "Even so, I fear that our democracy will still be beset by the effects of American political pathology for years to come."

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