Information Disorder and Its Threat to Democracy

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GDI

January 2022

We are at a Watershed Moment in the History of Information.

The internet is one of the greatest agents of free speech and democracy the world has ever seen. It gives individuals and communities access to unprecedented tools for self-expression, new platforms to build communities, and new capabilities to speak truth to power.

But the power of those tools threaten established democracies, and social media is being corrupted, exploited, and weaponized by those with the power to control the flow of information and distort reality.



IDEAS

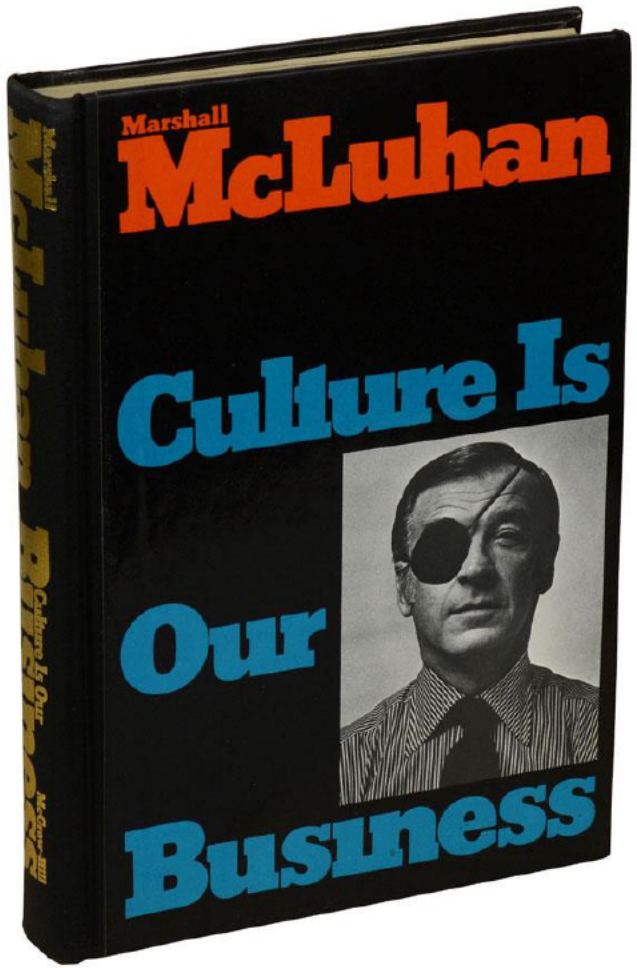
THE BAD GUYS ARE WINNING

If the 20th century was the story of slow, uneven progress toward the victory of liberal democracy over other ideologies—communism, fascism, virulent nationalism—the 21st century is, so far, a story of the reverse.

By Anne Applebaum
Illustrations by Michael Houtz

This is 5th Generation Warfare.

“World War III is a guerrilla information war with no division between military and civilian participation.” - Marshall McLuhan, 1970



Disinformation, or **adversarial narrative conflict**, is an example of the kind of networked conflict that comprises what Col. Richard Szapranski and David Axe have called Fifth Generation Warfare.

Adversarial narratives are rooted in conflict or opposition between actors and their interests, and especially between a social in-group and an out-group. When adversarial narratives are deployed, they create a series of smaller conflicts played out across the networked information environment that inflame social tensions and amplify perceived grievances of individuals, groups and institutions.

Social Media Provides the Perfect Storm.

Information consumers tend to believe four things:

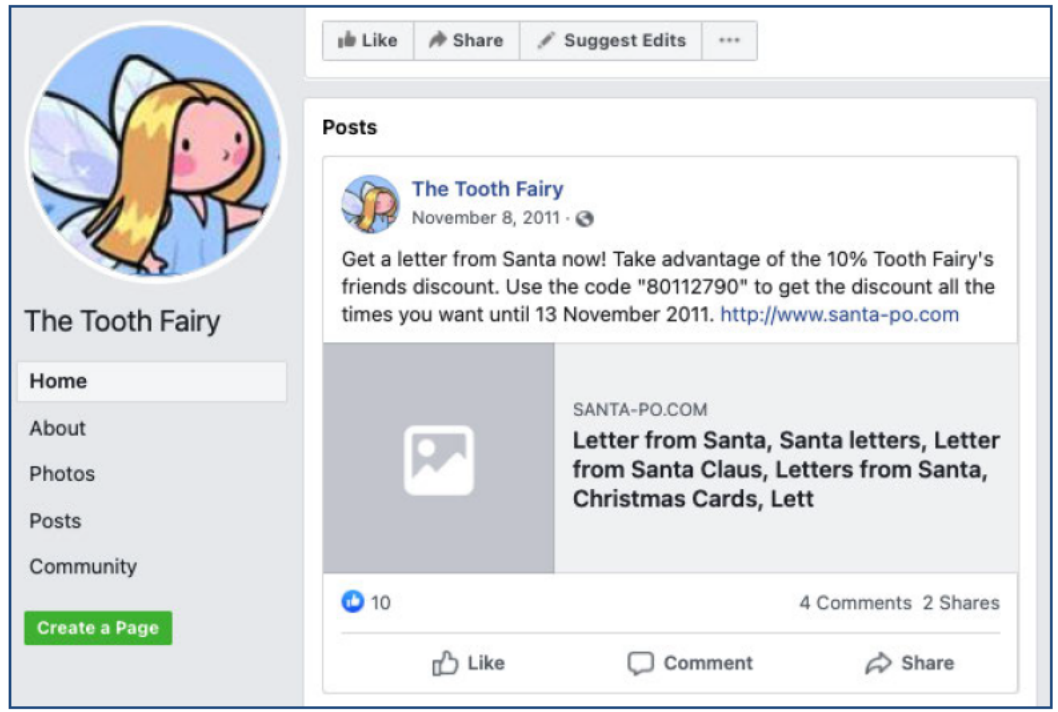
1) That which they see first
2) That which they see the most
3) That which comes from a source they trust
4) That which is not challenged by a rebuttal

Social media platforms, whose algorithms reward **engagement above all else**, provide a perfect storm for disinformation peddlers to achieve these four aims. Fact-checking and other true/false determinations will always fail to keep pace with the most aggressive manipulators exploiting social media for gain. Winning in narrative conflict requires a new approach that rapidly identifies and persistently outs the sources of disinformation.



The Problem with the True / False Test

- Most definitions of disinformation rely on overly simplistic binaries like true vs. false, good vs. bad, or left vs. right.
- This doesn't work. C.f., The Tooth Fairy, or Santa Claus.
- Often the *goal* of disinformation is to mire the conversation in an argument over what's true and what's false.

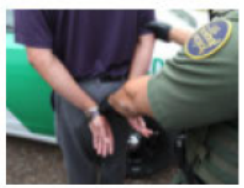


Adversarial Narratives

BREITBART

TRENDING: YOUNGKIN WIN | COVID-1984 | DEM SPENDING BONANZA | BIDENFLATION | BORDER CRISIS | MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

CRIMES BY ILLEGAL ALIENS



Honduran Child Sex Offender Arrested in Michigan 6 Months After Deportation

Border Patrol agents in Detroit, Michigan, arrested a Honduran man after learning he re-entered the United States less than six months after being deported. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers removed the man in June.

by BOB PRICE | 2 Nov 2021, 7:16 AM PST | 183



Border Patrol Agents Catch Previously Deported Killer Sneaking Back into Texas

Rio Grande Valley Sector Border Patrol agents arrested a migrant who had been convicted by a Florida court for homicide. The convicted killer illegally re-entered the U.S. with a group of five other migrants.

by BOB PRICE | 29 Sep 2021, 5:38 AM PST | 176



Smuggled Homicide Suspect Arrested in California near Border

El Centro Sector Border Patrol agents interdicted a human smuggling attempt and discovered a fugitive homicide suspect embedded within the group. The agents arrested the man and turned him over to local police for extradition to Orange County, California.

B SOCIAL BREITBART STORE > >

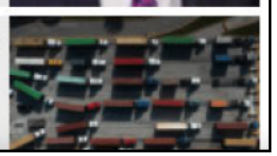
MOST POPULAR

Terry Bradshaw Rips Packer's QB Aaron Rodgers as a Liar Over Vaccine

3,935 comments



Truckers Warn Biden Vaccine Mandate May Terminate 37% of Drivers



How We Define Disinformation

- The definition of Disinformation must transcend these **overly simple false dichotomies**.

- GDI views disinformation through the lens of **adversarial narrative conflict.** Adversarial narratives:
  - Can be implicit or explicit;
  - Are intentionally misleading;
  - Are adversarial against an at-risk individual or group, or an institution like science, medicine, or democratically-elected government;
  - Most importantly, create a risk of harm

- This definition transcends the morass of false binaries and identifies disinformation explicitly by adversarial narrative topic, such as anti-immigrant, misogyny, anti-vax, etc., which is useful and compelling for brands.



Examples of Pernicious Adversarial Narratives

BREITBART

TRENDING: COVID-1984 DEM SPENDING BONANZA BIDENFLATION CLIMATE CRAZIES RITTENHOUSE TRIAL

GIULIANI ON PA PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION TALLY: 'THEY'D BE COMMITTING PERJURY IF THEY CERTIFIED IT'

126 EMAIL PARLER TWEET

ACTIVIST POST

HOME ECONOMY LIBERTY WAR ACTIVISM HEALTH TECHNOLOGY ENVIRONMENT VIDEO

HOT TOPICS NOVEMBER 8, 2021 | SHOCKING SOCIAL EXPERIMENTS DEMONSTRATE WHY CONFORMITY AND BLIND OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY HAVE GONE VIRAL

HOME HEALTH

Courageous LA County Sheriff Tells The Truth About Covid Vax Mandates

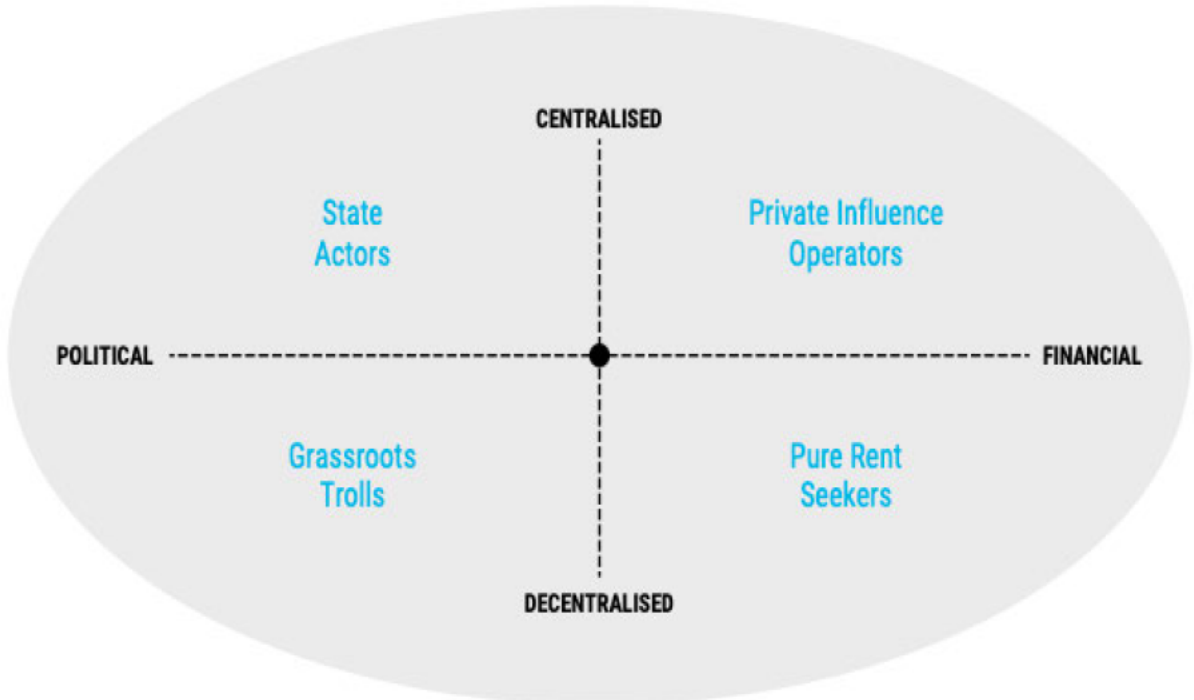
TOPICS: Brandon Smith Constitution Employment Mandatory Vaccines

NOVEMBER 8, 2021



The Threat Actors are Varied.

- **State actors**, e.g. Russia Today and Sputnik, push government propaganda using TV, radio, and online mediums.
- **Private influence operators**, e.g. Cambridge Analytica, usually backed by wealthy individuals or corporations, can be hired to push specific political or commercial agendas. They create professionally produced media that mimics traditional journalism.
- **Grassroots trolls**, e.g. people behind #gamergate, often organize around specific issues or events on forums like 4chan, either to push a specific agenda or simply "for the lulz."
- **Financially-motivated rent seekers:** i.e., spammers/affiliate marketers, garner ad revenue by driving visitors to their sites and are purely financially motivated.

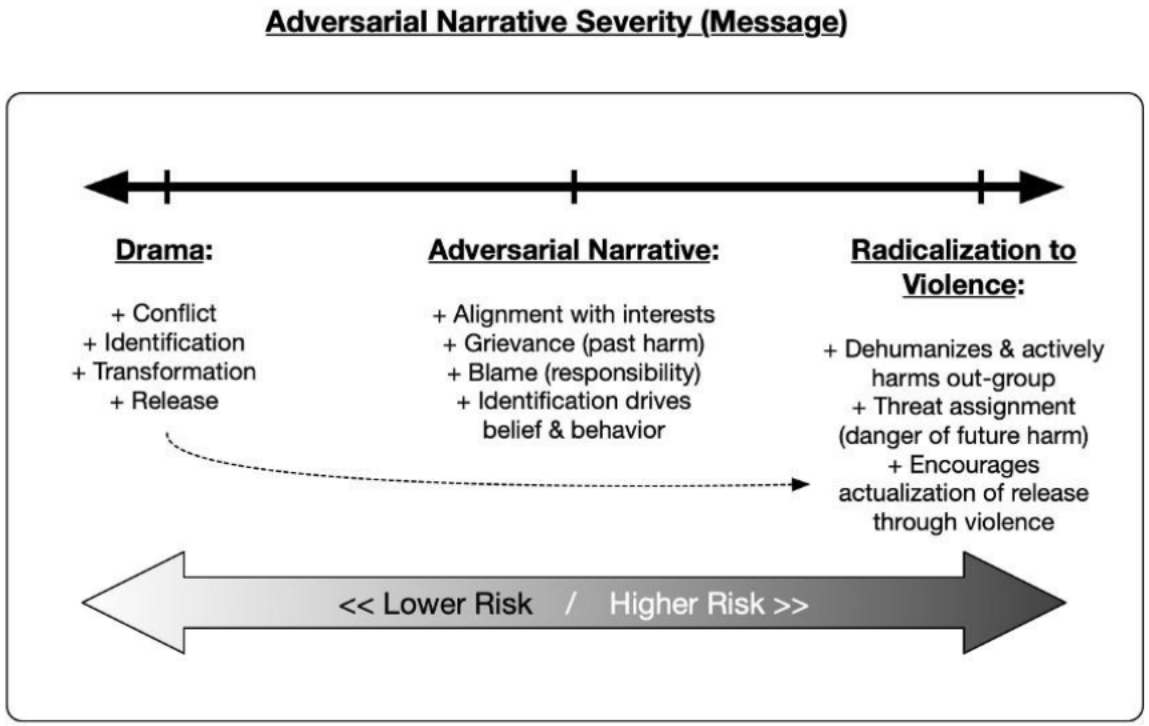


The Harm is Real.

Harm is the defining characteristic of disinformation—the difference between an anti-vaccine conspiracy and the tooth fairy myth.

Weaponized information can lead to:

- Reputational harm or defamation
- Harassment and threats to personal safety
- Psychological distress
- Administrative burdens to persons affected
- Fraudulent and faulty bases for decision-making
- Violence and death



Current Efforts to Combat Disinformation Face Challenges.

- **Fact checking is not enough,** and can even exacerbate the problem by calling attention to and inadvertently amplifying the adversarial narrative.
- There is a **chasm of mistrust** between public entities like governments and for-profit private entities like platform tech companies, and no one is clearly responsible.
- **Commercially driven** efforts face conflicts when profit and principle collide, and tech platforms face **strong business model backlash** in the face of intervention.
- Many solutions **don’t scale** due to lack of expertise or lack of technological sophistication.

What is the GDI?

INDEPENDENT

We are not for profit and diversely funded, with no funder contributing greater than 33%.

NEUTRAL

We are apolitical, global, and evidence-based. We are governed by a robust and diverse structure including an independent board and an expert technical advisory group.

TRANSPARENT

Our data and methodologies will be public, auditable, and disputable.

Select philanthropic funders:

GDI

National Endowment for Democracy
Supporting freedom around the world

GEC

Luminate

OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

CHARLES KOCH INSTITUTE

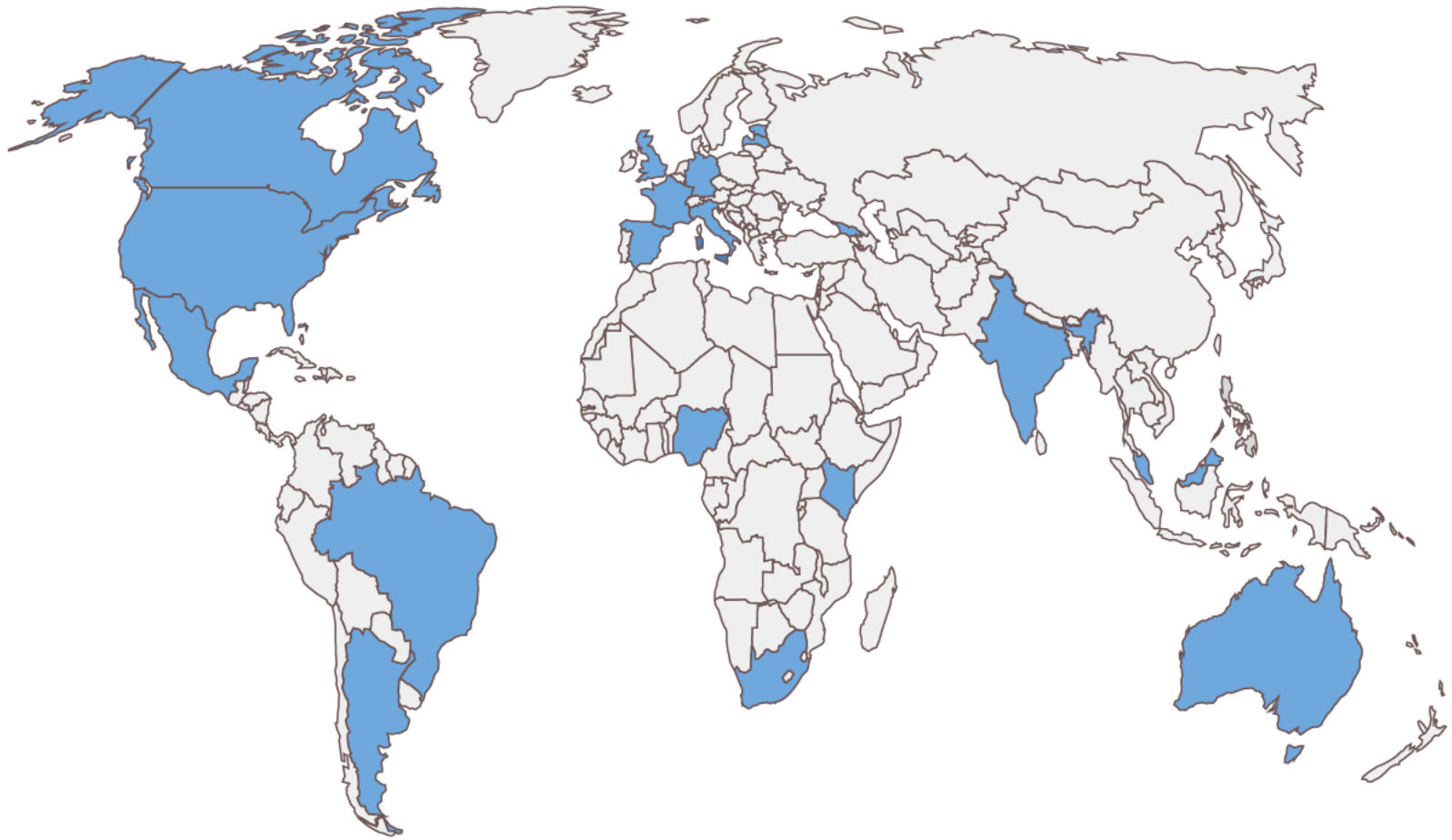
KNIGHT FOUNDATION

Craig Newmark Philanthropies

Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

GDI's Global Coverage

Markets	Languages
UK	English
South Africa	French
France	German
Germany	Spanish
Estonia	Portuguese
Georgia	Italian
Latvia	Japanese*
Argentina	Korean*
USA	Vietnamese*
India	
Mexico	
Malaysia	
Nigeria	
Australia	
Brazil	
Canada	
Italy	
Spain	
Kenya	



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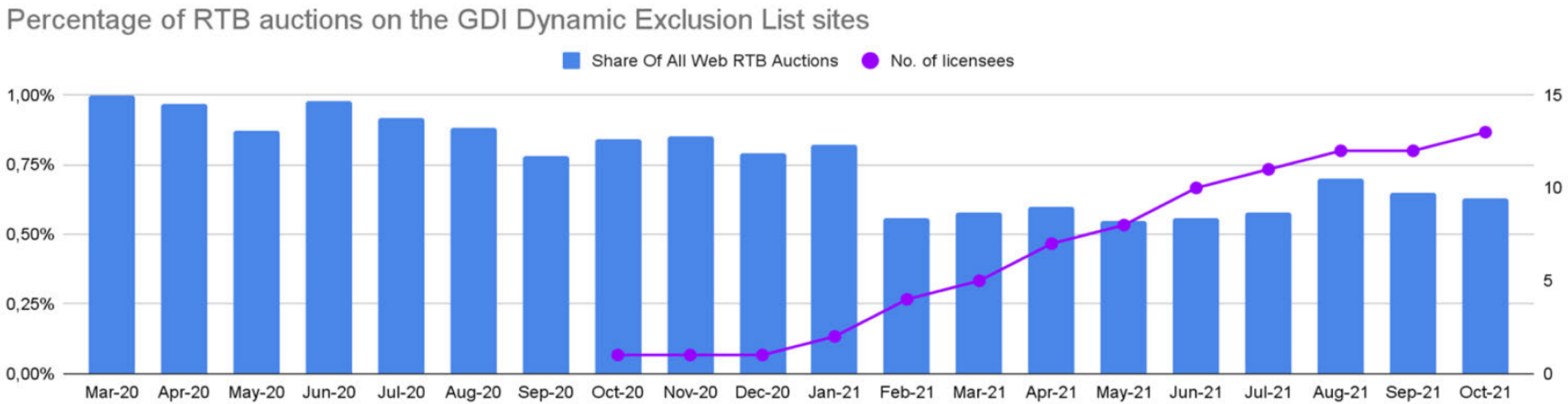
*To be released in 2022

Our Impact So Far

Along with our partners, we've redirected nearly $100M worth of ad revenue away from disinformation and toward quality journalism.



Select Partners

ORACLE DATA CLOUD · MediaMath · OMG OmnicomMediaGroup · Microsoft · IAS Integral Ad Science · twitch · cafe media

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Disinformation Intervention Points

There are three broad categories of interventions when it comes to combatting disinformation.

Media Literacy

FIRST DRAFT

AARP Real Possibilities

THE DISINFORMATION PROJECT

Platform-level Intervention

Center for Countering DIGITAL HATE

Counter-messaging

Reality Team

WE CAN DO THIS

CDC

Policy Interventions to Counter Disinformation

For more on this, see my 2021 Op-Ed: https://time.com/5944432/how-to-fight-disinformation-online/

Antitrust Enforcement

Right now, the digital ad tech market is dominated by two companies, Facebook and Google. Advertisers from around the world pay on average two thirds of their budget to just these two companies.

Yet advertisers have little to no say over where their ads are appearing. When the advertisers complain—as many did last summer as part of the #StopHateForProfit campaign—these companies simply defy them. They have little incentive to better serve their customers by blocking ads—and funding—to sites peddling disinformation and hate.

Privacy Regulation

Personal data is the fuel that powers the algorithmic distortion engine that is modern social media, which at this point is creating a personalized, warped reality for each individual among over half the world's population.

But targeted advertising has also robbed traditional media outlets of their primary asset: Their audience. This effect has devastated publisher revenues and destroyed the business models that previously supported quality journalism, leaving a news vacuum that is being filled by disinformation.

Platform Liability Reform

Section 230 essentially makes internet platforms immune to legal liability for both the content that users post and the decisions they make to remove that content. Social media recommender algorithms shape the reality of over half the world's population.

And yet, because of a specific legal carveout created a quarter century ago, these platforms are immune from nearly all legal liability. Their algorithms can recommend users join white supremacist groups, amplify conspiracy theories, promote eating disorders to teen girls, and even inspire genocide, yet they remain legally immune.

For More Information



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