

ANNUAL REVIEW 2019 | 2020



Technology platforms have changed how we gather information, organize communities, and discuss politics. In 2019, we launched the Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life (CITAP) to understand how our civic and digital lives intersect. Our work is shaped by three core values: relevance, accessibility, and an integrative approach. CITAP researches questions with real-world implications and works to establish a baseline understanding of emerging issues. We bring together experts in sociology, communications, media, law, and other fields to collaborate and approach these questions from many perspectives, seeking to empower platform developers, policy makers, journalists, and others in their own work on these topics. And we're just getting started.

IMPACT

ADVOCATING FOR PUBLIC HEALTH TRANSPARENCY

As COVID-19 spread, Zeynep Tufekci focused on public health messaging. She authored one of the earliest media articles explaining the need for “flattening the curve,” as well as a highly influential op-ed in the New York Times evaluating early advice on public mask wearing, which anticipated revised mask recommendations at both the CDC and the WHO. Dr. Tufekci’s later work focused on access to public outdoor spaces and how the popular use of beach images in articles about outbreaks and irresponsible behavior constitute a form of health disinformation.

“The success of Dr. Tufekci and others like her at seeing clearly in our murky time represents a kind of revenge of the nerds, as outsiders from American politics and from Silicon Valley’s pressure to align money and ideology sometimes see what insiders don’t.”

- *The New York Times*

REVEALING HOW PLATFORMS HANDLE MISINFORMATION

For the average social media user, it’s not inherently obvious what steps platforms are taking (or not taking) to protect them from misinformation. This has serious implications for how people make decisions using information they encounter online. In their whitepaper “Enforcers of Truth: Social Media Platforms and Misinformation,” Daniel Kreiss and CITAP graduate research affiliates Bridget Barrett and Madhavi Reddi present a comparison of misinformation policies across six popular social media platforms, and when those policies are applied. This insight into selective fact-checking has tremendous value for practitioners wishing to establish a system of digital political ethics, and for social media users in general.

52

publications
released

25

new research
affiliates,
from seven
institutions

75+

media mentions

\$7

MILLION
committed
in funding

DEMYSTIFYING CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND NETWORKED HARASSMENT

How do people come to adopt extremist belief systems that they encounter on social media? Through her research on the far-right conspiracy theory QAnon, Alice Marwick determined that interactions in the QAnon community are a form of participatory culture. Anyone can contribute, and members work together to evaluate media and create consistent alternative narratives, suggesting that social support plays a role in why people get involved. Dr. Marwick found that when highly visible members of a social network identify a person or organization as violating their community norms, it can trigger outrage among other members and result in “morally-motivated” networked harassment, intended to regulate speech and enforce social order.

LINKING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION, ACTIVISM, AND RACIAL JUSTICE

We can't understand the relationships between media platforms, partisanship, misinformation, and political activism without considering larger structures of power. This year, Deen Freelon built on his pioneering work on #Blacklivesmatter from 2016, which documented its evolution from an obscure hashtag to a global movement. He has continued to spotlight race and identity through his work on differing misinformation practices between the left and right, state-sponsored disinformation, and the use of black identities by Russian interference during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

WHAT'S NEXT?

In 2020, we welcome three new senior faculty researchers to CITAP:

- Tressie McMillan Cottom
- Shannon McGregor
- Francesca Tripodi

This coming year will bring many new questions about technology and democracy, particularly within the context of the pandemic, protests for racial justice, and the 2020 election.

CITAP's work will include investigating voter suppression and electoral misinformation, and what can be done to prevent them, creating programming to provide actionable resources to policymakers and journalists, and expanding our community into an inclusive environment for learning and sharing.

Keep in touch!



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SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

“Why Telling People They Don't Need Masks Backfired,” by Zeynep Tufekci. *The New York Times*.

“Enforcers of Truth: Social Media Platforms and Misinformation,” by Bridget Barrett, Daniel Kreiss, and Madhavi Reddi. CITAP.

“False Equivalencies: Online Activism from Left to Right,” by Deen Freelon, Alice Marwick, and Daniel Kreiss. *Television & New Media*.

“Black Trolls Matter: Racial and Ideological Asymmetries in Social Media Disinformation,” by Deen Freelon et al. *Social Science Computer Review*.

Want to learn more? Visit our [website](https://citap.unc.edu) to browse the current library of CITAP publications.



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of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL