

# 2020-2021 YEAR IN REVIEW



The Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life (CITAP) at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill is dedicated to understanding the growing impact of the internet, social media, and other forms of digital information sharing in the context of the people who design, use, and govern them. CITAP conducts original research that illuminates how people, technology, and power intersect.

2020-21 was a year of growth and vision-setting at CITAP, with three senior research faculty, one postdoctoral researcher, and three staff joining the founding PIs. Despite the distance and demands of working through a pandemic, this group joined together to offer a Southern, public-centered, race-and-gender-conscious lens of analysis across diverse disciplines, methods, and platforms.

## ESTABLISHING A VISION

A shared vision for CITAP's research, released this spring, sets out our shared priorities across disciplines and topic areas.

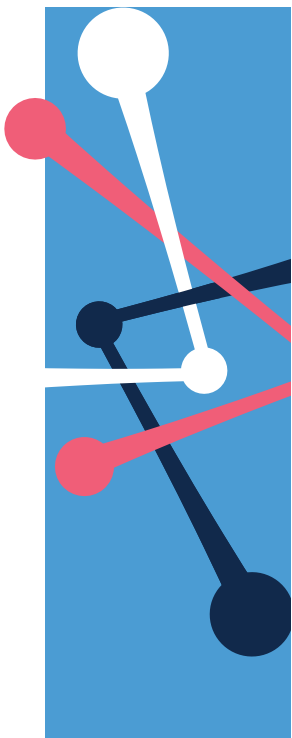
We recognize that effective analysis of technology platforms and information systems requires:

- ◇ Taking a holistic approach grounded in history, society, culture, and politics
- ◇ Analyzing how social differences—including race and ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual identity—shape unequal information ecosystem dynamics
- ◇ Prioritizing questions of power, institutions, and economic, social, cultural, and technological structures
- ◇ Making clear foundational commitments to equality and justice

## UPHOLDING DEMOCRACY

From preparations for the 2020 Presidential election through the January 6 Capitol attack to the inauguration of a new administration, CITAP researchers worked to ensure fair and trustworthy election, a peaceful transition of power, and renewed democratic health.

- ◇ Hosted a roundtable on the January 6 attack on the Capitol
- ◇ Convened the [Election Coverage and Democracy Network](#) to inform media coverage of a challenged election outcome
- ◇ Conducted a [community survey](#) of AAPI political activity online
- ◇ Advocated putting President Trump's [tweets on a time delay](#)
- ◇ Recommended [measures to secure future elections](#)
- ◇ Proposed steps [platforms can take to protect the vote](#)
- ◇ [Interpreted election results for The Daily Show's](#) viewers
- ◇ Pushed back on [Facebook's political ad ban](#)
- ◇ Explained the "[tech censors conservatives](#)" narrative
- ◇ Informed [Senator Mark Warner's platform outreach](#)
- ◇ [Recommended that the Facebook Oversight Board](#) uphold the company's ban on President Trump.



## CONTEXTUALIZING DISINFORMATION

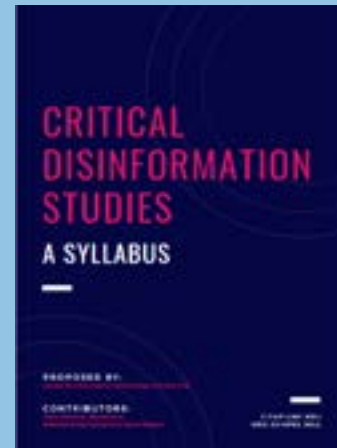
Many of the stories we tell about disinformation begin with the 2016 US presidential election and focus on the role of social media platforms in spreading and generating false content. At their worst, these narratives imply that in the past, everyone shared the same sense of what was true or false; that this collective understanding was reinforced by legacy media like newspapers and TV news; and that “fake news,” disinformation, and inauthentic online behavior are responsible for a global far-right shift to populism exemplified by Brexit and the Trump presidency. None of these assumptions hold up to scrutiny.

This year, CITAP released disinformation research and teaching materials:

A [CRITICAL DISINFORMATION SYLLABUS WITH CASE STUDIES ON CRIME AND ANTI-BLACKNESS, JAPANESE INCARCERATION, BLACK LIBERATION, THE AIDS CRISIS, AND THE TROPE OF THE WELFARE QUEEN TO EXPAND OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT “COUNTS” AS DISINFORMATION.](#)



[DOES NOT COMPUTE](#), A PODCAST SERIES EXPLORING DISINFORMATION AND IDENTITY: WHO CREATES THESE CAMPAIGNS, HOW FAMILY INFORMATION NETWORKS DISTRIBUTE TRUE AND FALSE INFORMATION, AND WHAT PLATFORMS AND POLICY MAKERS CAN DO TO SUPPORT ROBUST PUBLIC LIFE ONLINE.



In Slate, Alice Marwick and Daniel Kreiss wrote a case study about the [conservative disinformation campaign against Nikole Hannah-Jones](#) as it played out on campus.

## MAPPING PLATFORM GOVERNANCE

In addition to work on platforms' role in American democracy, CITAP research made sense of the legislation and corporate policies that govern how technology platforms operate. This work underscores where platform governance is working, proposes new alternatives to existing rules, and illuminates the effects of existing rules on public discourse online.

- ◇ [“Democratic Tradeoffs: Platforms and Digital Political Advertising.”](#) Daniel Kreiss and Bridget Barrett review the uneven state of technology platforms' policies for political advertising and recommend new practices.
- ◇ [“Regulating the Political Wild West: State Efforts to Disclose Sources of Online Political Advertising.”](#) Tori Ekstrand and Ashley Fox summarize state's legislative attempts to regulate political advertising.
- ◇ [“Questionably legal: Digital politics and foreign propaganda.”](#) Shannon McGregor, Bridget Barrett, and Daniel Kreiss recommend changes to how digital platforms comply with the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).

## MEASURING BIAS

New technologies frequently recreate and re-entrench historical inequalities in new ways.

**AS THE ECONOMY SHIFTS TO MORE AND MORE NON-JOB LABOR, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES WILL CONTINUE TO RESHAPE WORK BY FINDING NEW WAYS TO FACILITATE EFFICIENT, RACIALIZED EXTRACTION... THE PROCESSES MAY LOOK INCLUSIVE, BUT THE TERMS WILL BE PREDATORY.**

Tressie McMillan Cottom argued for using racial capitalism as a framework to understand how race and racism play out in digital society. She wrote on the topic in [Sociology of Race and Ethnicity](#) as well as in a [popular article for Dissent magazine](#), where she described racial capitalism as the “Hustle Economy.”

Francesca Tripodi gathered data on Wikipedia articles that were flagged for removal under the site's notability requirements but were ultimately found to be notable and not deleted. She documented how women are disproportionately subject to erroneous nominations for deletion from the site—over several months' of data in the study, women's biographies were twice as likely as men's biographies to be miscategorized as non-notable.

**“EVEN THOUGH WOMEN STILL MAKE UP LESS THAN 19% OF ALL AVAILABLE BIOGRAPHIES ON ENGLISH-LANGUAGE WIKIPEDIA, WOMEN ROUTINELY MAKE UP A QUARTER OF THE BIOGRAPHIES NOMINATED FOR DELETION EACH MONTH.”**

## NAVIGATING COVID

Zeynep Tufekci continued to communicate COVID-19 research for public audiences, from advocating for [speedier vaccine distribution](#) and [sharing excess U.S. doses with other countries](#) to helping [understand the delta variant](#) and assessing the [role of social dysfunction](#) in sustaining the pandemic.

In addition to these popular pieces, she co-authored [an evidence review of face masks against COVID-19](#) for *PNAS*. The piece saw record distribution as a pre-print even prior to its publication and has since been covered in 213 news outlets.

Dr. Tufekci also conducted public scholarship through a Substack newsletter, *Insight*, where she posted her own work in progress and highlighted guest pieces from other researchers, including her critics.



“SHAPING DISCOURSE ON HIGHLY TOPICAL ISSUES AT THE CONFLUENCE OF RACE, GENDER, EDUCATION, AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY FOR BROAD AUDIENCES.”

- MACARTHUR FOUNDATION ANNOUNCEMENT OF TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM AS A 2020 FELLOW

## MAKING SENSE OF PUBLIC LIFE ONLINE

In both popular and scholarly work, CITAP researchers explained the unique dynamics of online communities and social phenomena. Public appearances included the *Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *PBS NewsHour*, North Carolina Public Radio, and CNN, among many others.



CITAP’s research into digital publics included a collaboration by Deen Freelon, Alice Marwick, and Daniel Kreiss in *Science* magazine reviewing the [differences in how the left and right use social media](#) to achieve their respective political goals.

Shannon McGregor co-authored a piece on [how journalists use Twitter in news stories](#) and the differences in how tweets are presented compared to interview sources.

Alice Marwick explained how [moral motivations underpin networked harassment](#) campaigns, as communities enforce their moral norms against outsiders with coordinated abuse.

**KEEP IN TOUCH:**



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