Formation and Spread of Election Misinformation
**8-Week Pre Election Period**

Decentralized, one-off incidents and examples fomenting general distrust. No clear overarching narrative that ‘stuck’

**Election Week**

Content centralizes on contentious states. One-off incidents are swept into larger conspiracies or salient tactics with sticking power.

**Post Election Period**

Storylines and methods that have stuck converge and diverge.
Narrative Formation in the 2020 Election

**TOP DOWN**

- **Mainstream Media**
  - Run story based on tip, or investigation, often from a government or institution

- **Influencers**
  - Spread content on social

- **Hyper-partisan media**
  - Frame narratives with a partisan lens

- **General Public**
  - Pick up, share, and discuss content within and across communities

**BOTTOM UP**

- **Mainstream Media**
  - Identify popular or trending topics and prominent incidents, feature on broadcast channels such as nightly news or print media

- **Influencers**
  - Amplify posts, contextualize incidents into narratives

- **Hyper-partisan media**
  - Inflect stories and claims

- **General Public**
  - Initiate narratives through collective sensemaking, often in groups
#SHARPIEGATE

#Vote2020 I voted in Arizona and they gave us sharpies to use on our ballots and it was kind of bleeding through to the other side and we were all complaining about it but they said we had to use those and now I’m thinking shit did they throw all those ballots out

8:00 PM · Nov 3, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

4 Retweets 3 Quote Tweets 1 Like
#SHARPIEGATE

#Vote2020 I voted in Arizona and they gave us sharpies to use on our ballots and it was a pain in the ass to the other side and we were all like did they throw all those ballots?

8:00 PM · Nov 3, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone
4 Retweets 3 Quote Tweets 1 Like

Maricopa County Elections Department @MaricopaVote

Did you know we use Sharpies in the Vote Centers so the ink doesn’t smudge as ballots are counted onsite? New offset columns on the ballots means bleed through won’t impact your vote! Find a location before the polls close at 7 p.m. today at Locations.Maricopa.Vote.
Concerns that Sharpie pens were invalidating votes

#SHARPIEGATE

#Vote2020 I voted in Arizona and they gave us sharpies to use on our ballots and it was hard for us to write on them, they said we had to use those and did they throw all those ballots away.

8:00 PM · Nov 3, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

4 Retweets 3 Quote Tweets 1 Like

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@MaricopaVote

Did you know we use Sharpies in the Vote Centers so the ink doesn’t smudge as ballots are counted onsite? New offset columns on the ballots means bleed through won’t impact your vote! Find a location before the polls close at 7 p.m. today at Locations.Maricopa.Vote.

Cumulative Graph - Tweets w/ 'sharpie'

Time in UTC
#SHARPIEGATE

Concern

If you are voting at LAKEVIEW HS bring your own black pen! Ballots are double sided and the sharpies they provide are bleeding through. Polling Marshal says there's nothing she can do. @MorningAnswer

Suspicion

Electioneering? Our ballot place (Maricopa Co/Tempe AZ) had sharpies to Mark our ballots, all bled through (didn't affect the other side, BUT...left plenty of stray marks). Many of us complained, the Poll Captain and staff shrugged their shoulders. 😞
There is voter fraud in Maricopa AZ. They were giving voters sharpies that were not working. They were ripping pins out of peoples hands and telling them to use the sharpies.

AZ update: apparently the use of sharpie pens in gop precincts is causing ballots to be invalidated. Could be huge numbers of mostly Trump supporters. More to come
My vote says cancelled. I voted in person last night. I don’t have early voting or mail in. They made me use a Sharpie and it bled completely through. I’m in AZ. This is voter FRAUD. AZ needs a recount!! @POTUS @PressSec @TuckerCarlson @w_terrence @DavidJHarrisJr @TomiLahren
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Disinformation is Participatory

Disinformers didn’t just prime their audience to be receptive to false narratives, they inspired them to produce those narratives and then echoed those false claims back to them.
Repeat Spenders

1. Repeat spreaders were verified accounts from politicians, media outlets, and influencers.

2. These spreaders shared content on multiple platforms, from September to December.

3. Some news outlets were repeat fact-checkers, intervening in many incidents.
### RU NAEBBC & PeaceData
- Operated faux “independent” news outlets which succeeded in hiring unwitting freelance journalists to produce content.
- Targeted both sides of the political debate with divisive and inflammatory messaging. Targeted US far right with calls to “defend [their] country against the government” as patriots.
- Detected and removed from mainstream platforms following tips from U.S. law enforcement but persisted on alternative social networks including Gab and Parler.

### IR Proud Boys Emails & Enemies of the People
- U.S. voters received threatening emails purportedly from far-right group the Proud Boys instructing them to vote for Donald Trump. Some emails including a video which claimed to show a hacker submitting fraudulent ballots.
- Twitter also suspended a small network of around 100 fake and compromised accounts it said were operated from Iran and used to target conversations about race and social justice in the U.S.
- Multiple long-running Iranian disinformation sites were seized by the DOJ in October and attributed to the IRGC. Iranian actors also used an “Enemies of the people” website to expose personal information of U.S. government officials who debunked claims of voter fraud.

### CN Spamouflage
- The Spamouflage network avoided directly mentioning the election but routinely shared negative content about the United States. Notably, it has used the events of Jan. 6 to continue portraying the US in a negative light since the election.
- The network is prolific and high-volume, however it uses low-quality fake personas across platforms that have struggled to gain meaningful traction.
- A China-based operation detected by Facebook also included a handful of US-focused pages that supported both Republican and Democratic candidates.
Fact Checks

Ahead of and following the 2020 general election, Michiganders were inundated with more information about the administration of the election than ever before. Much of this information was inaccurate. Whether spread intentionally or unintentionally, false information about election results led to confusion and doubt among our citizenry, and a reduction of faith in Michigan’s electoral process. This is dangerous for our democracy. The Michigan Department of State provides the factual information below to provide all Michiganders certainty of what truly occurred in 2020.

Wisconsin Election Officials Say Vote Counting Will Take Longer This Year. Here’s What To Expect.

Large Portion Of Milwaukee Results Expected Early Wednesday Morning

‘This has to stop’: Georgia official calls out Trump, U.S. senators over threats to election workers