A Moment of Change: Challenges and Opportunities When Covering Hate Speech and Mis/Disinformation

Aashka Dave, Claudia Chen, and Ethan Zuckerman

Executive Summary

Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, news coverage of hate speech and mis/disinformation has skyrocketed. What was once a sleepy beat led by freelancers and activists has become a central topic of coverage for almost every news organization. As the news cycle is transformed by coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and coverage of the 2020 presidential election ramps up, this beat is again at a critical juncture.

To better understand the challenges and changes associated with this inflection point, we conducted 10 in-depth interviews with prominent journalists covering this beat. These interviews underscore critical debates in the field about platform accountability, the news agenda and news organizations' infrastructure and support systems.

Key Takeaways

PLATFORM ACCOUNTABILITY AND AGENDA SETTING

Takeaway #1: The resource journalists most need is access to the data associated with social media and search platforms. Journalists need better data about what's visible on platforms and who it is accessible to, as well as stronger tools for data management.

Stronger, more in-depth work on platform accountability is only possible with additional platform visibility and data management infrastructure to support journalistic work and research.

Takeaway #2: Since the bulk of news coverage has shifted to public health concerns, and because news organizations themselves are affected by COVID-19, the pandemic will be as significant a turning point for this beat as the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Further, our understanding of platform accountability will change as COVID-19 takes a stronger grip on the news cycle.

As the pandemic dominates the global news cycle, news organizations will choose to cover the pandemic at the risk of not covering other important beat-related subjects. Within the context of such a change, platform accountability reporting will shift from a techno-criticism framing to a public health framing as the pandemic persists across the world. There is also a greater likelihood that reporters on other beats will stumble onto pandemic-related hate speech and mis/disinformation as more reporters become COVID-19 reporters; this is one example of how the working practices of news organizations are being impacted as the pandemic affects workplace procedures and coverage strategies.

Takeaway #3: Because both the 2020 U.S. presidential election and COVID-19 require careful coverage of mis/disinformation, this beat is likely to become a permanent one.

Coverage of the 2020 U.S. presidential election will become as much a public health beat as it is a political one. This change to the news agenda will increase the need for coverage on this beat, inflame current political tensions, and possibly generate fatigue on the part of newsrooms and journalists. The prevalence and visibility of mis/disinformation in the 2020 election might also cause a shift in the current support and recognition of this beat.

Takeaway #4: As growth on this beat has skyrocketed, concerns about oversaturation are beginning to rival awareness of strategic silence and the risks of amplification.

Journalists clearly recognize the risks of amplification and the need for strategic silence, and have established reporting practices that account for these considerations. However, they also express concerns about unchecked growth in this beat. In an environment where most stories focus on the 2020 election and COVID-19, concerns of oversaturation (related especially to increased news coverage, changes in audience attention and the prevalence of mis/disinformation) have come forward as a possible challenge to work on this beat.

NEWS ORGANIZATION INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Takeaway #5: Constant exposure to bad actors while covering this beat can lead to negative mental health consequences and safety concerns for reporters and their families.

Taking care of mental health and safety is essential for reporters to be able to perform this work. Oftentimes, safety concerns revolve around those close to journalists, e.g. their family and friends. Aspects of a journalist's personal identity can affect how comfortable and safe they feel while doing their reporting.

Takeaway #6: There is a deep disparity in resources available between freelance and staff journalists, which can be seen as a reflection of larger problems within the journalistic field.

Freelance journalists have a much harder time consistently accessing resources such as editors, data tools, and security infrastructure- resources that are critical to being able to report on this beat efficiently. Some freelance journalists in this area also feel that their work is being absorbed by staff reporters in larger newsrooms, causing tension and feelings of job insecurity.

Takeaway #7: Although reporters specialize in hate speech and mis/disinformation online, they are still heavily dependent on traditional reporting methods.

While being online and on social media is a key element of the job, traditional reporting methods like attending events, collecting sources, and picking up the phone to talk to others are just as important on this beat. Training on this particular beat is oftentimes informal since the beat changes very quickly and tools are ever-evolving. The most technically adept journalists may not be the best mis/disinformation reporters if they do not also have a strong background in traditional methods.

Takeaway #8: Evaluating success based on broad impact measures rather than a single measurement is critical to doing productive work in this space.

Across the board, thinking about audience and impact were the most important considerations for journalists when deciding what to publish. Focusing on any one metric like SEO performance or clicks/shares is not adequate to measure impact. Reporting on those affected by the bad actors instead of amplifying the bad actors themselves, as well as choosing when to be strategically silent, are critical editorial decisions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from our interviews, we've prepared a set of suggested actions for stakeholders in this space, including technology platforms, non-profits, academics, editors and journalists, as we collectively navigate this critical moment for news coverage and society as a whole. These actions are based on key needs and challenges such as navigating relationships with technology platforms, mitigating potential risks of this beat and furthering support systems for those working in this space. These recommendations are discussed in more detail in the report (see page 19).

Introduction

In 2016, two surprising political events—the successful Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States—helped turn the topic of online mis/disinformation into a mainstream media beat. While scholars like Renee DiResta, Joan Donovan, danah boyd and others had been tracking the relationship between disinformation and hate speech well before 2016, the political surprises of 2016 suggested mis/disinformation as a possible explanation for these tumultuous political events. Pioneering work like Craig Silverman's investigation of "fake news" farms in North Macedonia[1] cemented the idea that the "information quality" beat was politically relevant and potentially revelatory.

We are now well into the U.S. 2020 election cycle, and "information quality" is a key news framing for understanding U.S. politics. The ability of President Trump to make unfounded assertions on social media is being challenged by Twitter, which has taken to fact-checking his most inflammatory tweets, and mis/disinformation about COVID-19—specifically the deeply problematic "documentary" *Plandemic*—is being removed from YouTube and Facebook and deprioritized in Google's search engine. What we can and can't see online, who benefits from sharing or suppressing information, and what agendas are promoted by any given piece of content has become a central part of understanding the contemporary political environment.

It is no surprise then that many journalists have found themselves covering the information quality beat for the first time. Given the emergence of this new reporting focus, and the complexities of doing this reporting well, we thought it was important to look closely at the reporters on this beat. How did they come to report on hate speech and mis/disinformation? How did they learn the techniques they use? What's hardest about doing this work? And how does working with inflammatory and toxic content change the experience of being a reporter?

Our work cemented some suspicions that the journalism community has had about the mis/disinformation space. It's widely understood that obtaining believable data from social media platforms is a major challenge to reporting in this space. But other aspects of our work were more surprising—we found that the information quality beat is, in many ways, just another beat. Technical knowledge and access to data matters, but not as much as good sourcing and the ongoing work of questioning experts until we understand the nuances of a complex story.

Our goal in this report is to share insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with reporting on information quality at a moment where this understanding of the political and media environment is only increasing in importance. It is likely that questions of who makes media and towards what ends will be central to understanding our politics for years to come. Understanding how to cover this complex, technical, and all-too-human set of topics will be a challenge for reporters going forward, and everyone who works to support a free and independent press will benefit from considering these challenges in depth.

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1 Silverman, Craig. "How Teens In The Balkans Are Duping Trump Supporters With Fake News." https://www. buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo.

Methods

In this study, we carried out ten semi-structured key informant interviews with reporters whose beats focus on hate speech and mis/disinformation. Two of the interviewees were freelance journalists, seven were reporters at national news organizations, and one was a reporter for a non-profit organization.

Reporters were contacted via email, and interviews were conducted through video conferencing software. Consent was obtained to record all interviews, and all journalists were told that their identities would be kept confidential in any results reporting. All direct quotes were anonymized and reviewed in aggregate.

Interview questions were written in consultation with leading scholars in the field, and focused on four different categories: 1) work methods, 2) editorial and newsroom support, 3) work challenges, and 4) perceptions and changes of work. In addition to open-ended questions, interviewees were asked four questions on a Likert scale from 1-7 to evaluate perceptions of stress and work satisfaction. Interview subjects were given the opportunity to add any further thoughts or reflections at the end of the interview.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were transcribed and quotes were consolidated across questions to identify common themes and dissenting opinions. Findings from this process are described below.

Takeaway #1

The resource journalists most need is access to the data associated with social media and search platforms. Journalists need better data about what's visible on platforms and who it is accessible to, as well as stronger tools for data management.

When asked what tools and resources were needed to better support their work, every journalist interviewed mentioned some version of improved data management and increased visibility into happenings on various platforms. Journalists observed that platforms limit information access in a variety of ways, and supported a push for increased data access in order to improve their work on platform accountability, particularly as it relates to understanding how coordinated campaigns evolve over time.

"Misinformation takes advantage of what Joan Donovan from the Shorenstein Center calls political opportunities, the idea that there is an event that's happening, a news event that's happening where inflammation starts, information is still coming up and so people are taking advantage of the fact that there's a vacuum of good established information and are seeding misinformation within that vacuum. And to be able to cover those stories in a way that's helpful to users, you need to work on various different timeframes. Number one is being part of a conversation as it happens...The other thing is just to be able to have archival data to understand method... One is immediate, the other is taking a step back and being like, what are the methods and what are the features of misinformation campaigns that keep repeating?"

Specific archival and data management needs mentioned by journalists included: better access to the Facebook ad library; improved archiving and organization of unstable websites; increased visibility into content that is removed from platforms and the historical background of accounts; heightened and faster access to open and complete datasets from platforms; a more effective way to curate Instagram; and a more secure alternative to the Google Drive environment.

"The Facebook ad library is such a joke. It's so hard to search by nature... Sometimes ads just don't show up- I just find the ad library to be complete bullshit, I can never get anything of use out of it. I can't imagine that's a bug. I think it's a feature."

Journalists emphasized that increased data access and analysis abilities were crucial to furthering work in the field, especially in order to ensure that work is properly contextualized and accurate. The limited visibility into platform happenings, along with current limited ways to analyze and evaluate platform data, is a challenge that needs to be addressed in order to improve collective understanding of hate speech and mis/disinformation online.

"The single most important thing that would be helpful would be more accessible and complete data sets from the platforms.... If the platforms opened up in a way that allowed us to see everything in real time and collect it and analyze it, it would make this much easier and make our reporting more precise and complete."

Platform visibility and data access also affects the timescale upon which reporting work can be done. One reporter referenced their experience with the 2016 presidential election; it was only possible to access valuable information about manipulation after the election, thereby impacting when voters were able to learn information that could have impacted their decisions at the ballot box.

"If we look out a little more longer term, my experience from 2016 was that almost everything important that came out about the manipulation of the truth came out months and years later. I fear that we don't have the tools to cut through the manipulation in real time and give voters what they would ideally know before they actually cast their ballots which is a shame... we've gotten more sophisticated to catch trends in real time, but it's gotten hard to track these things real time."

Takeaway #2

Since the bulk of news coverage has shifted to public health concerns, and because news organizations themselves are affected by COVID-19, the pandemic will be as significant a turning point for this beat as the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Further, our understanding of platform accountability will change as COVID-19 takes a stronger grip on the news cycle.

Journalists noted that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, coordination between academics, reporters and others had grown stronger and was having a proven impact on the monitoring and moderation practices of platforms. This pre-laid foundation has proven helpful during the pandemic and underscores the need for collaboration across related industries to push for further platform accountability.

"The positive thing that has come out of this field growth is that it has really had an impact on how social media networks go about monitoring and taking down this work and it has also created coalitions in the industry between academics, reporters and tool providers who have really formed so many coalitions and really tried to make sure that the work is as effective as possible and that has really been supercharged in the times of COVID."

Journalists also observed a difference in the ways in which platforms react to coronavirus content as opposed to more politically oriented content, noting that platforms have been acting more decisively than usual. A few journalists also wondered if these new measures might embolden platforms to be more emphatic about moderation in the future.

"The coronavirus has been something that the platforms have felt they can be very aggressive on. Taking down content, flagging content, diverting searchers for certain keywords. As a public health emergency, they haven't hesitated to be very aggressive in a lot of ways and doing things that they absolutely do not do around political disinformation or that kind of thing. I do wonder if once the coronavirus urgency starts to [decrease] a little bit, particularly in the U.S., whether this might actually [signal a] more interventionist approach for the platforms."

In addition to their observations of platform actions and potential changes to moderation practices, journalists remarked upon the ways in which the pandemic has affected their own work structures and practices. These changes range from day-to-day concerns to larger thoughts about the beat in the year to come.

One journalist noted that the pandemic affects work on a personal level, saying the energy of a newsroom helps motivate their work as well.

"Being trapped at home is hard. There's a kinetic and creative quality about being in a newsroom that's hard to replicate. In terms of the structure of our work and the animating energy of it,

it's a lot harder during this period of lockdown than it has been."

Another journalist observed that the pandemic has most affected the in-person and community-based work that comprises a significant amount of this beat (see takeaway 7 for more information on this). Depending on how social distancing practices persist through the summer and fall, we could see a shift in the ways in which journalists on this beat engage in day-to-day reporting and sourcing.

"Just up until COVID, we were doing focus groups with parents, teachers, school technologists, youth, mental health professionals and others who are in the community who have the opportunity to observe and do community-based interventions where they're seeing risks."

Journalists also commented on how the pandemic might affect editorial relationships and how reporters on other beats incorporate online investigations into their work. Several journalists we spoke with acknowledged clear, communicative pipelines with editors as a necessity (see takeaways 6 and 7) in order to do their work. These communication pipelines were regarded as especially important on this beat given the uncertainty that comes hand-in-hand with reporting on the ever-changing nature of hate speech and mis/disinformation. One journalist posited that, in the same way that uncertainty is a thing to be acknowledged with editors when covering this ever-changing beat, uncertainty and questions will have to be acknowledged up front as journalists and editors switch over to covering very technical COVID-19 information in the months to come:

"Sometimes I will find myself outlining in my story or in notes for my story to say, 'Okay, so I've made this connection between this troll account and this website. Here's how I am 99% certain, but here's where we could be wrong'.…So I think the onus is on reporters to be extremely upfront with editors and fact checkers that they're working on it. That obviously introduced to some risks, but that is why you should have trustworthy reporters I guess. But it's not a thing that's particularly unique to this field in that, right now we see some very technical coronavirus medical reports."

Another journalist further reflected on the concept of uncertainty by positing that, as online discourse on COVID-19 and the election persists, more newsrooms will incorporate online investigations into their workflows.

"There's a lot of uncertainty right now. Even without COVID-19, the field changes constantly, very, very quickly. Lots of that change is led by legislators and social media companies because the field has to adapt to those larger trends. I would say the one trend that I definitely see continuing is newsrooms adapting more and more into online investigations as a skillset. That seems to have been very very fruitful, so over the next year I definitely see reporters and editors doubling down and increasing capacity."

Takeaway #3

Because both the 2020 U.S. presidential election and COVID-19 require careful coverage of hate speech and mis/disinformation, this beat is likely to become a permanent one.

Journalists were in agreement that, given the growth of this beat in relation to both the pandemic and the upcoming presidential election, more reporters will be exposed to elements of this beat in their work. Though the election itself is in November, journalists also discussed how work on this beat will continue afterwards, since establishing a general understanding of the events surrounding the election — likely including issues of political manipulation and mis/disinformation — will continue for some time after the election:

"I think the next year is going to be dominated by trying to untangle some of the lies that will be told around the election in November, and into the aftermath. And I guess, if we're talking a whole year, that either the continuation of the Trump administration, or the arrival of the new President, that the political context is so important. And it's so hard fought, that it's hard to believe that there won't be a lot of work to do in trying to understand who's trying to manipulate whom, and how and why."

Some journalists also suggested that the beat would move towards a greater focus on how platforms manage mis/disinformation when they are wielded as political messaging, especially as we get closer to November and public concerns shift from the pandemic to the election.

"In the next year it's going to be all about the election. I think as political ads start ricocheting through this, it seems to be something that a lot of people in this beat are already moving towards, which is trying to get accountability on political ads and digital spaces that are inaccurate, whether they're from candidates or whether they're from special interest groups or advocacy groups. If somebody's paying to purport a political message that's misleading, does that fall under the same rules as general misinformation on the platform?"

Journalists also expressed concerns that heightened awareness of the need for this beat will eventually be met with an attendant level of fatigue among audiences (see takeaway 4), newsrooms, and funders who may start to question continued support for the beat. Such a contraction would be a challenge for the field, since it could potentially open more avenues for bad actors down the road.

"The thing that I worry about over the next five years is that there might be a fatigue level that sets in within newsrooms and within funders in particular to say, 'We've spent four years, five years funding this area. We're going to reduce how much we put into this'… So, my worry in this area [is] we will see a contraction of funding and a contraction of the newsroom focus on this, which then starts to cede ground to bad actors."

Takeaway #4

As growth on this beat has skyrocketed, concerns about oversaturation are beginning to rival awareness of strategic silence and the risks of amplification.

Every journalist interviewed for this project spoke about intentionally and thoughtfully weighing their role in covering stories on this beat. Each journalist recognized the value of strategic silence as a reporting strategy that can be used to avoid amplifying bad actors and instances of hate speech and mis/disinformation with little traction. That said, journalists expressed concerns that the beat's unchecked growth could pose an alternative challenge: oversaturation.

Currently, journalists say, the beat is at a point where audiences understand the risks of hate speech and mis/disinformation, which presents an opportunity to provide crucial coverage to receptive audiences. However, it is possible that, as they consume increasing amounts of content on this beat, audiences become oversaturated by this coverage; in this case oversaturation is presented as a combination of fatigue, apathy, and being overwhelmed.

"I also think with coronavirus people are starting to understand the importance of misinformation and [the] type of impact that [it] can have and what can happen. So I think that we're finally at a point where people get it, but the window we have between people get it why this is important and oversaturation and the whole loss of it... you have such a tiny window."

Oversaturation can also be seen as a risk to ongoing strategic silence efforts. If more and more reporters are on this beat, covering an ever-increasing number of stories, then it's possible that the sheer volume of coverage could counteract existing efforts to evaluate the merits of publishing a story based on the potential impact that story could have (see takeaway 8). Such oversaturation could also mean that important stories off of this beat get less media attention than they might have otherwise.

"Overall, it's a great thing that so many more newsrooms and so many more reporters are on this feed. One of the downsides of it is that everybody is looking for stories and when everyone is out looking for stories, stuff that maybe doesn't actually warrant coverage might get coverage just because it's something for somebody to do."

Lastly, an overwhelming increase in the volume of stories on this beat also raised concerns from one journalist that this type of reporting could be weaponized in the future as a tool of political influence.

"I see this type of reporting being weaponized. In that we already saw the Democratic campaign presidential primary this year when basically candidates were using evidence that Russian trolls were targeting them as a badge of honor. And they were using reports that Bernie Sanders was getting online support from Russian trolls as a way to attack him. And that I think is incredibly destructive to society because that there is American lawmakers' candidate allowing Russia to really set the narrative."

Takeaway #5

Constant exposure to bad actors while covering this beat can lead to negative mental health consequences and safety concerns for reporters and their families.

All journalists interviewed were aware of the potential negative mental health effects that doing this reporting could have on their well-being. Journalists spoke about how constant exposure to bad actors online or harmful and disturbing content, as well as anxiety over personal and family safety, were aspects of the job that could heavily impact their mental health.

"Depending on the specific types of stories you're doing, you may suffer from vicarious trauma doing this work. If you are constantly looking in the worst corners of the internet when it comes to Nazis and terrorism and troll communities, there's a lot wearing you down and [it] will have an effect on your mental health."

Because of this risk, taking care of mental health is essential for reporters to be able to perform this work. This applies not only to journalists reporting on hate speech and mis/disinformation, but also to any journalist that might be subject to stressful situations or traumatic and disturbing scenes. Two of the most commonly identified methods for dealing with mental health concerns in this area were going to see a therapist regularly and leaning on colleagues who have been in similar situations.

"It's not always easy to overcome the mental health challenges but, as many other reporters, I think we understand that it's part of our job. And likewise, it's part of our job to address those mental health issues in a good way. It's something that at the beginning I wasn't sure how to tackle, how to deal with, but because there's so many people [who] could do this work who have gotten through that experience, I find that people in this sphere are very open with the struggles that they have had themselves and what their coping strategies are, or coping strategies that haven't worked in the past."

In addition to openly speaking to others about mental health challenges in this space, some reporters found it helpful to compartmentalize their work, separate themselves from what they are reporting on, and find ways to put their work away when they are not actively working. This allows for the limitation of time actively or passively thinking about bad actors in the hate speech and mis/disinformation space.

"I actually try and keep like an arm's-length to a lot of what I'm reporting on.... I try and not get as involved emotionally as I think some reporters in this space do. I think some folks are very passionate, which is great, but my approach always is to try it and come at it as objectively as possible. And yeah, I think that actually sort of helps...If people ask me on a weekend, 'Oh, tell me about this guy, tell me about this conspiracy theory,' I'll be like, 'I don't really want to talk about it.'"

Besides mental health concerns, personal safety and safety of family members, friends, and community members were also points of concern for journalists on this beat. All journalists were aware of the importance in maintaining personal safety, but one journalist noted how his individual identity heavily affected his comfort levels and feelings of safety when doing this work.

"My reality is very much shaped by privilege and identity. I can get away with more because I am a white, cis man interacting with, going into these spaces whether physical or digital, and I have less to worry about in some sense. I am not getting targeted, and this is for harassment, in quite the same way or same frequency or the same level of intensity that my colleagues who are women or who are people of color have been."

Reporters said that oftentimes, their safety concerns involved their friends or family more frequently than themselves. A few said they felt they had taken the necessary precautions for themselves, but they were still concerned if they had taken the necessary precautions to protect their friends or family.

"My safety concerns are for my family and for my friends who are less tech savvy. I'm really worried about the work that I do infiltrating their lives... I do worry about my mom and dad who regularly, every once in a while, come on social media and like my stuff, who might or might not use password managers that protect all of their other accounts. My aunties and uncles, my cousins, my friends who are maybe in the lower socioeconomic spectrum and aren't the most tech savvy people, those are the kinds of folks that I want to protect."

In addition to open-ended questions about mental health and safety, journalists were also asked four questions on a Likert scale from 1-7, with 1 being the lowest and 7 being the highest:

- On average, journalists rated their stress levels in this job a 5.4/7, with responses ranging from 5 to 7.
- On average, journalists rated their level of support from their workplace a 4.9/7, with responses ranging from 0 to 7.
- Journalists rated the average level of change in their day-to-day work a 5.1/7, within a range of 4 to 7.
- The question about how fulfilled journalists felt by their job scored the highest, with an average of 6.5/7 within a range of 5 to 7.

Takeaway #6

There is a deep disparity in resources available between freelance and staff journalists, which can be seen as a reflection of larger problems within the journalistic field.

Access to various resources can be more limited for freelance journalists due to financial and structural constraints. For example, many staff journalists in newsrooms expressed that they relied heavily on building relationships and trust with their editors to help them navigate difficult editorial decisions. However, for a freelance journalist, those relationships can be less consistent or more difficult to build.

"I think that there's a lot of stories that I could do that maybe get axed before someone even looks at it. So, again, that's one of the reasons why I would like a more sort of regular relationship with an editor, so that I could more casually pitch stories and say, 'Hey, I've got a tip on this. Can I spend some time working on it?' And they'll stay updated so that I don't spend a month and a half really aggressively researching just for somebody to [say] 'Nah, no, thanks.'"

Besides access to consistent editors, freelance journalists may also lack access to research tools or security tools that are important to be able to effectively report on this beat. While there are dozens of free tools online to use, freelance journalists said they wished they had the access to the institutional resources that larger national newsrooms can afford to provide for staff reporters.

"As a freelance journalist, lack of access to institutional resources and tools and stuff is definitely a frustration. I don't have access to LexisNexis which any decent newsroom will. And I can ask friends to load stuff up for me, but I don't want to overburden anyone. So I guess a way of saying that is also just money because it costs money to get access to institutional resources."

Along with disparity in resource access, one freelance journalist expressed a sense of tension between large newsrooms and freelancers as this beat became more popular. She said she has witnessed this beat become absorbed by staff reporters in larger newsrooms, causing feelings of job insecurity.

"I've been a freelancer working on this beat, but the minute my beat gets successful, either I get hired, which hasn't happened yet, or a staff writer gets assigned to cover it. So, that's also a bit like a big challenge, is, I've just seen this beat get swallowed up by staff reporters."

Takeaway #7

Although reporters specialize in hate speech and mis/disinformation online, they are still dependent on traditional reporting methods.

While hate speech and mis/disinformation reporters use social media and online tools heavily to help inform their work, a strong emphasis is still placed on traditional shoe-leather reporting. Because of the desire to put people at the heart of the story, staying solely online as an observer is not adequate to effectively report on topics of hate speech and mis/disinformation. All journalists expressed to some degree that, while reading online posts and engaging in social media are useful ways to observe and understand the ecosystem, calling or talking to people directly is essential to crafting a productive narrative.

"Being a reporter covering misinformation [is] sort of unique to how other reporters use social media because I am actually covering that phenomenon that's happening on the medium...There's a lot of reporting saying, 'Oh, here is a network of bots, network of trolls.' I spend a lot more time once I identify this, then trying to figure out either who's behind it or who's a victim of this. So a lot of it then is just the more traditional methods of reporting."

Off the internet, journalistic work on this beat uses techniques similar to those journalists on other beats practice regularly. This includes forming relationships with sources, working closely with editors, and being in contact with academics.

"A lot of it is still just regular reporting, like forming relationships. I have a lot of incredibly close relationships with researchers in this space and advocates in this space that when something happens that's important, they will point it out to me."

For reporters on this beat, there is no singular path or specific set of trainings to prepare them for their work. Some journalists in larger news organizations shared that their workplace provided specialized training on social media and personal security, while others felt that they had to teach themselves everything and learn by trial and error. One journalist mentioned that they seek out online trainings regularly, to keep up with a quickly evolving landscape. Conferences and discussion opportunities made available by academics were also identified as key resources in learning about and preparing for this work. None of the journalists mentioned formal training received in a university setting.

"I've been to some confabs and round table discussions with other people who work in the space, and we've talked about how to cover it or bounce ideas back and forth. But there's never been a formal training that I've been to. A lot of it's just been trial by fire of doing this for the past four-ish years and seeing what works, seeing what doesn't, seeing what stories looking back on them I wish I hadn't published, and which ones I'm really proud of."

One common misconception discussed was that journalists on this beat have some sort of expert technical skill or "top secret" training. In reality, most (if any) training is done informally and knowledge is gained through experience reporting in this space. Two journalists also expressed that as they have gained more experience reporting on this beat, they have found themselves on the teaching side of training sessions and discussions.

"I've actually done training for journalists based on some of our experiences, although I would by no means qualify myself or frankly almost anyone now, at this point, as an expert just because it's been such an evolving landscape."

Takeaway #8

Evaluating success based on broad impact measures rather than a single measurement is critical to doing productive work in this space.

Several journalists said they valued high audience impact much more than high performance on singular metrics such as SEO performance or clicks and shares. A few said their newsroom did not evaluate them at all on singular metrics, which helped them produce quality reporting with less pressure. However, other journalists said that metrics such as page views, clicks, and shares were still important measurements used by their newsroom to evaluate success. One journalist noted that instead of high page views, her newsroom was more concerned with high read times, as this indicated she was writing more engaging stories. None of the journalists interviewed spoke of specific quotas required for digital reach or shares.

"Traffic and views is something that comes up, but we're not given track recorders. We're not judged based on the traffic of the stories we get. I mean, obviously you want as many people as possible to read your stuff, but we're not driven by the views on it. We're driven more by the real world impact. Everything that is the most fundamental piece of it is are we revealing information that people should know that wasn't previously known?"

Thinking about the audience first was a critical way identified to generate real-world impact. For example, one commonly noted impact measure was if the reporting led to consequences or accountability for bad actors in the real world. Another commonly noted impact measure used was whether audiences were more informed or better equipped against bad actors due to new information revealed in the reporting.

"We think about our audience and who they are. And when it comes to deciding what kinds of disinformation we may want to debunk, one of the things that we do think about is, is that the kind of information that our audience is likely to have interacted with or been exposed to? So, we do think about who our audience is and how we serve them and how help guide them towards all the information. So, those are some of the things that are really big and top of mind for us."

Recommendations

The takeaways in this report suggest further actions on the part of a variety of stakeholders, including technology platforms, non-profits, academics, editors and journalists. This list of recommendations has been prepared as a way to generate further thinking in this field. Each recommendation corresponds to specific takeaway(s) within this report.

Recommendation	Stakeholder(s)	Corresponding takeaway
Push for increased transparency and data access from major platforms	Non-profits, academics, editors, journalists, technology platforms	1
Establish deliberate decision-making and clear guidelines on deciding what to cover as the news cycle becomes dominated by two main stories.	Non-profits, academics, editors, journalists.	2, 3, 4
Further education and research on the risks of over-focusing on two primary news stories.	Non-profits, academics	2, 3, 4
Deliberately design funding schemes to address COVID-oriented challenges to news business models.	Non-profits	2
Prepare to contend with an increase in hate speech and mis/disinformation as we get closer to November.	Editors, journalists	3
Translate the "if it's wrong take it down" policy platforms have further adopted for the COVID-19 outbreak to additional content.	Technology platforms	3, 4
Create more awareness for editors and journalists on other beats about the mental health and safety concerns in reporting.	Editors, journalists	5
Recognize, support, and amplify the voices of freelance journalists that are contributing quality work to this field.	Editors, journalists	6
Provide freelancers and those without institutional access to research support and wider access to research platforms.	Academics, Non-profits	6
Increased collaboration between academics, journalists, and nonprofits.	Academics, journalists, non-profits	7
Don't undervalue the use of traditional reporting methods to produce strong work in this space.	Editors, journalists	7
Don't rely on SEO performance or clicks/shares to evaluate work.	Editors	8
Focus on those affected by bad actors, not the bad actors themselves.	Editors, journalists	8

Conclusion

This report was produced during a time of great change and stress for society and our news ecosystem. Our journalist interviews highlight the varied challenges and opportunities that journalists covering hate speech and mis/disinformation face on a daily basis. Across the board, journalists feel great passion for their work on this beat and find high levels of fulfillment in their positions. However, the challenges they face as they work to preserve information quality are not insignificant.

As the takeaways in this report demonstrate, journalistic work on hate speech and mis/disinformation is closely tied to concerns of platform accountability and the news agenda. Journalists are also working within an environment where their support systems and editorial processes are critical for success. It is important to understand the challenges and opportunities facing any and all reporters who come across this beat going forward, and we hope that the takeaways and recommendations provided in this report can further a conversation across stakeholders in this field.

Acknowledgments