

## Misinformation and the Impending US Election

Jevin D. West and Carl T. Bergstrom

August 14, 2021

The 2016 US election awoke a malignant beast: misinformation on an unprecedented scale. [Inaccurate papal endorsements](#), Russian interference, [Pizzagate conspiracies](#)—social media platforms amplified false claims across an ecosystem designed to maximize engagement, not accuracy. On the eve of the 2020 US election there is more of the same, as well as [synthetic media](#), more savvy state actors intending to disrupt, and an especially polarized and anxious society trying to make sense of a world with ubiquitous masks, rising death counts and the looming specter of bored kids at home with no school.

We can't make good, collective decisions if we don't trust one another or our institutions. [Big tech](#) has recently committed to securing the elections, and yes, there has been some progress: more fact checkers, removal of especially egregious posts, and blocking of mythomaniacs. But in the search for a solution, we are placing our bets on the information consumer.

We recently [wrote a book](#)—a deep dive into the pitfalls of deceptive data visualization, extrapolation from biased samples, correlation misrepresented as causation—to empower readers to spot and refute misleading claims, especially those that come cloaked in the ostensible authority of numbers. As we approach the election on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, don't read or watch anything without the following principles in mind:

- 1) *If a story provokes an emotional reaction, pause before sharing.* Propagandists, opportunists, and algorithms designed to keep you glued to your computer—they all hijack human emotion. Be on the lookout.**
- 2) *If it sounds too good or too bad to be true, it probably is.* There will be fantastical claims from both sides, in headlines and possibly as deepfakes. Corroborate and triangulate.**
- 3) *Question the source. Who is sharing a claim? What makes them a reliable expert? And what do they or their narrative have to gain from sharing? Utilize fact-checking organizations and even Wikipedia.***

At the University of Washington, we recently [launched a new Center](#) devoted to combating strategic misinformation, promoting an informed public, and improving democratic discourse. Let's turn the 2020 election into an opportunity to improve on all three.