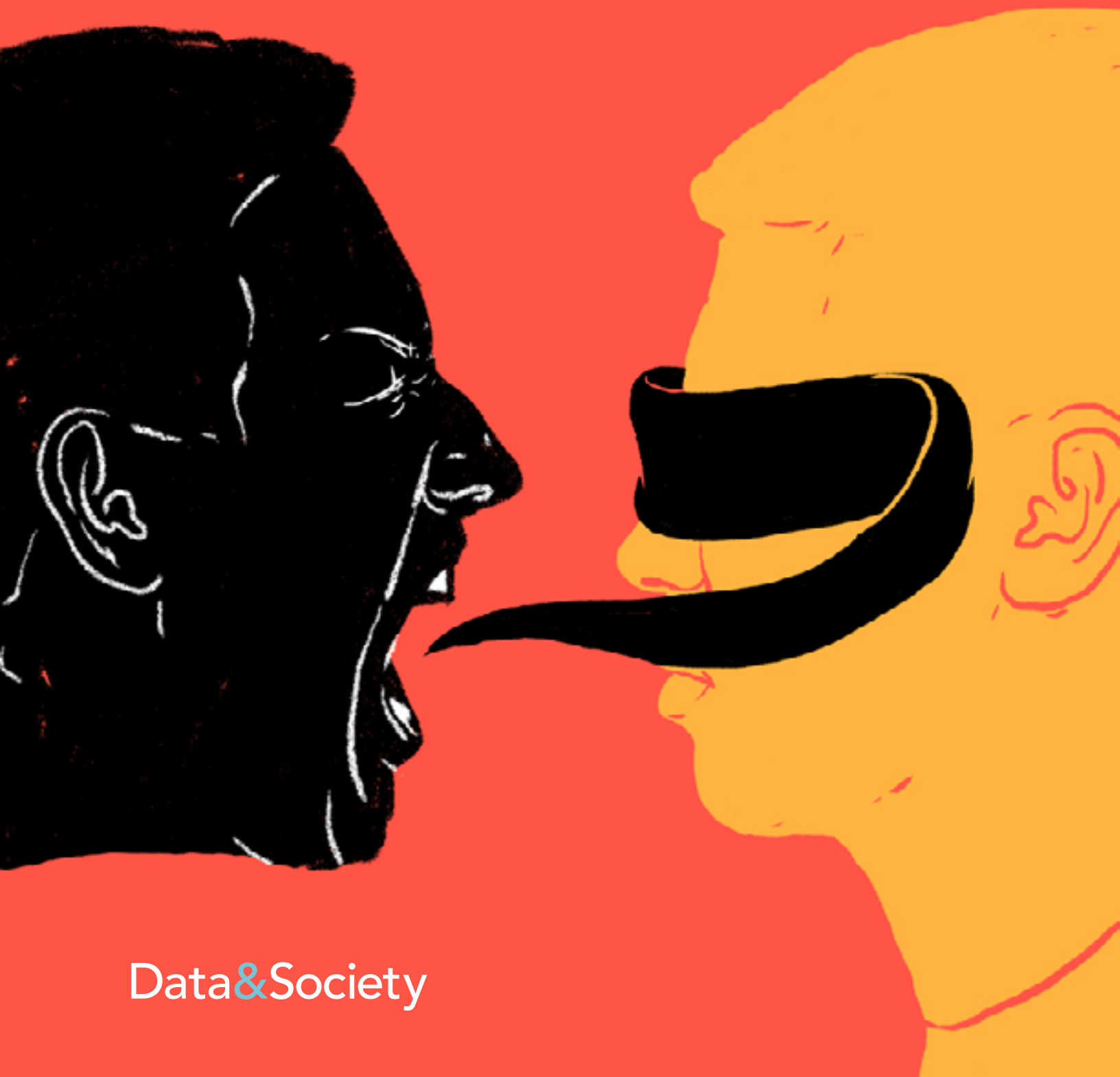


Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online

Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis

CASE STUDIES



The following is a series of case studies taken from the full report “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” which offers insight into why the media was vulnerable to manipulation from radicalized groups emerging from a variety of internet subcultures in 2016.

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You can read the full report at

<https://datasociety.net/output/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online>

CASE STUDIES

THE WHITE STUDENT UNION

Andrew Anglin is best known as the founder and editor of *The Daily Stormer*, an openly Neo-Nazi news outlet that claims to be “The World’s Most Visited Alt-Right Web Site.”²²⁵ Modeled after 4chan and 8chan, the site heavily utilizes racist memes and imagery and encourages active comment threads below each piece. 4chan greatly influenced Anglin’s own fascist beliefs, and he claims that he is “at heart a troll.”

Anglin is acutely aware of the influence he wields among his site’s readers, known as the “Stormer Troll Army” or just the “Stormers.” According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, he explicitly stated that “using the daily news is a means to propagandize people.” He also often mobilizes his followers by directing them to harass specific targets or manipulate the media on his behalf.

This was the case in November 2015, when he directed his followers to set up fake White Student Union pages on Facebook for universities throughout the United States—and then contact local media outlets about the groups.²²⁶ He stated openly that he hoped real groups would indeed crop up on college campuses, so perhaps he thought this stunt would be the first step towards that goal.²²⁷ Alternatively, he may simply have been hoping to prove he could trick the media into moral outrage and simultaneously spread some racial tension throughout college campuses.

In the latter sense, he was highly successful. Local media outlets promptly reported the story and amplified his message (although some did note it was unclear whether the groups existed outside of Facebook).²²⁸ *USA Today* picked up the story and covered it without a hint of skepticism.²²⁹ Soon, an anonymous user on Medium revealed the pages as a hoax engineered by Anglin.²³⁰ By this point, however, the entire incident was considered a newsworthy controversy, and was thus covered by *Gawker*, *the Daily Beast*, and even the *Washington Post*.²³¹

Anglin responded to the controversy by denying his direct involvement in the Facebook pages. He did, however, claim the groups were real and stated he was in contact with some of their leaders on college campuses.²³² When reporters contacted the page owners, they maintained their anonymity but claimed to be real students.²³³ Alt-light websites like *Breitbart* then defended this version of the narrative in their coverage, claiming there were indeed real White Student Unions forming on campuses.²³⁴

This incident illustrates the way that racism, trolling culture, and collaborative

CASE STUDIES

group tactics can create a potent force capable of manipulating a vulnerable media environment. Anglin used his site to direct a group of collaborating, networked readers to carry out a hoax he suspected the media would cover. The media, hungry for stories about racial tension on college campuses, took the bait and amplified what was essentially a non-story. Their coverage ironically made the incident newsworthy, justifying additional coverage from a range of national news sites.

Even though the incident did not lead to legitimate White Student Unions on these campuses, it was still a success for Anglin. It led to a great deal of free publicity for *The Daily Stormer* and proved he could induce moral outrage from the media on demand. He also successfully created an alternative narrative that circulated throughout right-wing media. And by revealing faults in mainstream coverage, he could reinforce his followers' loyalty to his own site—and perhaps even attract some new readers.

TRUMP AND THE STAR OF DAVID IMAGE

On July 2, 2016, Donald Trump tweeted an image of Hillary Clinton next to a Star of David graphic labeling her the “Most Corrupt Candidate Ever!” (Figure 3).²³⁵ The image's background consisted of piles of U.S. currency. The combination of

the Star of David, the money, and the suggestion of corruption evoked stereotypical ideas about Jewish people and referenced conspiracy theories about Jewish control of monetary systems.²³⁶ National media outlets immediately noticed the image's anti-Semitic references and published critical responses or stories highlighting the social media backlash.²³⁷

Less than two hours after the original image was posted, Trump's account deleted it and reposted a new version of the image, in which the star label is replaced by a circle, thus removing the most blatant anti-Semitic symbolism.²³⁸ Simultaneously, his team and supporters began claiming the star had not actually been a Star of David. Trump himself tweeted, “Dishonest media is trying their absolute best to depict a star in a tweet as the Star of David

rather than a Sheriff's Star, or plain star!”²³⁹ His campaign released an official statement claiming the criticisms were “false attacks by Hillary Clinton.”²⁴⁰ However, in the following days, the image was sourced to a June 15 tweet from an openly racist and anti-Semitic account called @FishBoneHead1.²⁴¹



Figure 3: Hillary Clinton Meme Tweeted by Donald Trump

CASE STUDIES

The incident illustrates the way that coverage of the Trump campaign by mainstream media amplified the alt-right's message—and then allowed Trump's team to reframe Trump as a victim of the media's response. Within a few weeks, the image spread from alt-right users on Twitter and 4chan to Trump's 9.5 million Twitter followers to the widespread viewership of national news outlets.²⁴² The media was put in the position of either ignoring the image, and thus failing to criticize it, or covering it and thus amplifying its message. By posting an image open to multiple interpretations, the campaign maintained plausible deniability and even reframed Trump as the victim of unfounded media attacks. This also allowed the campaign to maintain Trump's more mainstream base who may have been offended by direct anti-Semitism. Seen in this light, the incident was not an embarrassing failure by the Trump campaign but rather a successful example of media manipulation.

HILLARY'S HEALTH

In mid-August 2016, after watching an out-of-context video, far-right bloggers began circulating conspiracy theories suggesting Hillary Clinton was covering up massive health problems.²⁴³ They suggested she was both physically weak and cognitively impaired, suffering from a range of issues including Parkinson's disease,



Figure 4: Hillary's Health Photo Collage

dementia, and seizure attacks. Paul Joseph Watson, an influential conspiracy theorist and an editor for *Infowars*, promoted the theories in a video titled “The Truth About Hillary’s Bizarre Behavior.”²⁴⁴ Around this time, Trump began alluding to her health issues during his campaign rallies.²⁴⁵

Before long, more mainstream conservative news outlets, such as the *Drudge Report*, began to question the state of her health, discussing Clinton's former blood clot, as well as instances in the past when she had fallen.²⁴⁶ Sean Hannity devoted multiple nights of coverage to these issues on his Fox News show, in which he brought on various medical experts to speculate on the state of her health.²⁴⁷ Most of these sources did not fully endorse the conspiracy theories,

but they profited off them all the same, reframing facts and posing open-ended questions in ways that seeded doubts among readers and viewers.

By the beginning of September, the concerns about her health had moved beyond conspiracy theorizing into more general paranoia and skepticism. The hashtag

CASE STUDIES

#HackingHillary spread through Twitter, amplified by influential accounts and personalities like Mike Cernovich; users mocked her past coughing fits by making photo collages and video clips (Figure 4).²⁴⁸ The health rumors were so widespread that Clinton addressed them herself in a humorous segment on Jimmy Kimmel Live, in which she opened a jar of pickles to prove her strength.²⁴⁹

In September, Hillary Clinton abruptly left a 9/11 memorial event, and her campaign provided the vague explanation that she was overheated.²⁵⁰ Many social media users did not trust this official statement and instead speculated on other explanations.²⁵¹ When Clinton's doctor later disclosed that she was recovering from pneumonia, many felt this justified their distrust, and conspiracy theorists felt it was proof of a larger cover-up about her health.²⁵² Despite a doctor's report that showcased her overall good health standing and her recovery from the illness, doubt had seeped extensively into mainstream coverage. In the following days, outlets such as NBC News published stories listing "unanswered questions" about Clinton's health and asking why she would hide the diagnosis if not suffering from other illnesses.²⁵³

This case demonstrates how, through online networks, amplification, and strategic framing, various actors moved conspiracy theories into the mainstream news discourse during the election. In this case, networked individuals spread Clinton's health conspiracy theories within their communities, thus illustrating the narrative's resonance. Influential conspiracy theorists and far-right media outlets then endorsed the theories, which spread the message to a wider audience and to more mainstream conservative outlets. By framing the theories as questions worth exploring, these outlets were able to pursue their own ideological agenda without fully endorsing the claims. This led to more generalized paranoia and rumors spreading across social media. The combined effect was a mainstream narrative about Clinton's health that was easily reinforced when an isolated event took place that neatly fit into it.

PIZZAGATE

During the election, conspiracy theories spread throughout 4chan and extremist circles of Twitter and Facebook, claiming that Hillary Clinton was deeply involved in a child sex ring and satanic rituals. These claims were then taken up by a series of sites designed to look like mainstream news outlets, which published sensationalist false content to gain advertising revenue.²⁵⁴ Throughout late October and early November, more and more such sites published versions of the same story on Facebook, and their links gained hundreds of thousands of shares, reactions, and comments. (The conspiracy theory was also spread by amplification from Trump's team when his pick for National Security Advisor tweeted about it.)²⁵⁵

CASE STUDIES

Soon after, WikiLeaks published hacked emails from Hillary Clinton's campaign, and chan users communally combed through emails from her campaign chair John Podesta. They honed in on an email conversation in which Podesta and the owner of a Washington, DC pizza restaurant called Comet Ping Pong, discussed the details of a Clinton fundraiser set to take place there. Now thoroughly "convinced" of the conspiracy theory about Clinton, chan users identified a series of "clues" that they believed pointed to the fact that Comet Ping Pong was the headquarters of the purported child sex ring.²⁵⁶ The theory became known as Pizzagate.

The restaurant owner and his employees soon became the victims of continual harassment, receiving death threats and other threats of violence.²⁵⁷ On December 4, a man entered Comet Ping Pong carrying an assault rifle, claiming to be there to investigate the claims himself (he fired shots, but no one was harmed).²⁵⁸ The man was not himself an active member of the alt-right; he has even claimed he is not political and did not vote for Donald Trump.²⁵⁹ He did, however, state that he read a number of articles on the subject and listened to Alex Jones, who actively promoted the theory.

As in previous cases, mainstream outlets considered the gunman incident newsworthy, and in covering it, they increased exposure to the conspiracy theories. Additionally, even though the gunman did not find any evidence to support his beliefs, the incident has not placated many of the conspiracy theorists. As recently as March 25, 2017, protestors gathered outside the White House to demand further investigation.²⁶⁰ Many expressed frustration that the mainstream news was not taking their concerns seriously and covered the story only dismissively; they felt that, even if the claims were not true, they merited a more robust investigation.

Pizzagate illustrates a particularly wide range of related phenomena: a conspiracy theory developed and grew within online networked communities; misinformation and "fake news" spread virally through social media; believers undertook collaborative efforts that ultimately reinforced their previous views; an individual was quickly moved to action through exposure to false information; and coverage from the mainstream media simultaneously amplified the theory and left its believers feeling disenfranchised. Perhaps most importantly, the incident also demonstrates the real-world harassment and violence that can emerge as a direct result of media manipulation and misinformation online.