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WEBINAR

ELECTION 2020:
DIGITAL DEMOCRACY, DISINFORMATION,
AND BLACK VOTERS

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. WEST: Good afternoon. I'm Darrell West, vice president of Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution, and I'd like to welcome to our event on disinformation and Black voters. As we head into the last week of the campaign, there is considerable concern about disinformation in the 2020 election.

We all remember how this affected the 2016 campaign and how various foreign actors sought to suppress voter turnout. Last year the Senate Intelligence Committee put out a report documenting foreign disinformation activities and how a number of those efforts specifically targeted African American voters. They used such activities to keep turnout down and to try and inflame racial tensions.

This year, we're already seeing misinformation targeted on Black voters here in D.C., as well as elsewhere. And so some of the unanswered questions is how will these activities affect the 2020 election and what can people do to protect themselves and the integrity of the overall election.

In order to examine these issues professors at Howard University have launched a new project funded by the Knight Foundation on digital democracy, disinformation, and Black voters. That project is examining how disinformation is being used in D.C. and what could be done to combat it. And if you'd like to see additional material on that project, you can check out their website at digitaldemocracy.howard.edu. — that's digitaldemocracy.howard.edu. And they also have a Twitter account set up at #HUpdigitaldem — that's #HUpdigitaldem.

To help us understand these issues we're delighted to have four distinguished experts with us today. Dr. Ravi Perry, who's the chairperson of the political science department at Howard University. And I should note he is also a former Ph.D. student of mine from Brown University, so it's great to renew our acquaintance. And, congratulations, Ravi, in all the terrific work that you are doing. Dr. Keesha Middlemass is an associate professor of political science at Howard. Dr. Roger Caruth is an assistant professor of strategic, legal, and management communications at the university. And Dr. Bahiyyah Muhammad is assistant professor of sociology & criminology at Howard.

And if you have questions you can email them to us at Events@Brookings.edu or post

them on Twitter at #DigitalDemocracy. So we'll start with a few questions for our panel and then we will add some questions from the audience. So please send in any questions that you have.

So I want to start with Keesha. Maybe you could provide an overview on this project, what it is that you're attempting to accomplish.

MS. MIDDLEMASS: Excellent. Thank you so much for the warm welcome. It's great to be here.

So as the audience could tell, we are an interdisciplinary research team and that required the agreement of two deans in two different colleges, four different departments. And the administrative role is actually really important to bring this research to fruition. Our whole goal really is to be able to collect data in D.C. from primarily Black voters to find out about their use of social media and get the layout of the digital environment, but also then to use this data to answer questions about elections, disinformation, and then political activities that may either trigger — are triggered by the information they receive on social media or if they're dissuaded from doing things based on what they learned.

MR. WEST: Okay, thank you. That's very helpful to have that background.

So, Ravi, I want to bring you into the conversation. I know you have done a lot of work on urban politics and you're particularly interested in the Black vote in D.C. Can you tell us a little bit about disinformation, and particularly the targeting of Black voters?

MR. PERRY: Yes, and I'm really grateful to be with everyone today. As Dr. Middlemass mentioned, this is such a team effort here at Howard University. And this is driven by so much, as you mentioned at the outset, Darrell, about the Senate intelligence report from just a little over a year ago that was bipartisan that indicated that there was significant targeting toward African Americans. And in fact, no group that was targeted by Russia in the last presidential election was targeted more than African Americans via the group known as the IRA.

And so this really precipitated I think a lot of foundations — like the Knight Foundation — to kind of investigate how we might be able to develop the research to kind of better address this question. And we were fortunate to be funded in our effort to do so. And here in Washington, D.C. this is so significant because what we've seen over the years has been somewhat bimodal in that in the Marion

Barry years here you saw high turnout, particularly East of the River where predominantly much of the native Washingtonian African American population yet resides in Wards 7 and in 8, where they had high turnout in mayoral elections, in democratic primaries during other election cycles, really throughout much of the latter part of the 20th century. And some of that continued to the earlier parts of this new millennium.

But in the last 15 years or so we've seen significant drop off among African Americans participating in the elections here in D.C. at the local level. Whereas you might have 300-400,000 folks who turn out, for example, in a general election, but only a few tens of thousands of them may vote down-ballot in D.C. certain races. And of that drop off, the significant drop off is among African Americans historically in the last five or 10 years in Wards 7 and 8.

The shift, however, that we have seen perhaps because of the new attention that misinformation has gotten as a result of the media, and of course wonderful organizations that feature this topic from their nonprofit points of view, and of course those of us who research this topic and try to expose for the public what in fact is going on, all of that I think has resulted in many D.C. voters East of the River, particularly those that are African American, becoming that much more engaged this time around than they were four years ago.

So, for example, at this rate, just four years ago not only nationwide did you have only early vote returns in the single tens of thousands of digits, right now you have then in the tens of millions already. And that high proportion of significant increased turnout to date has also been the case locally here in D.C. elections as data recorded just today and last week, well in the lead up to early vote, by the D.C. Board of Elections where we see a higher turnout now of African Americans, particularly in Wards 7 and 8 as well than we did 4 years ago or even 2 years ago in the most recent primary. And I do suggest that perhaps some of that is due to the fact that many folks are motivated by the concern that they see perhaps associated with this current administration and the level of misinformation that they may have experienced.

MR. WEST: Those are all terrific points.

So, Bahiyyah, I know you focus in particular on young voters and you're concerned about

how disinformation trickles down to them. So what have you seen, both in the past as well as in this current election?

MS. MUHAMMAD: Thanks so much for that question, Darrell. We definitely thank you for this opportunity to engage in this conversation.

Absolutely, what we're looking for as the Howard University digital informers is to really utilize this platform and this evidence based practice underneath this study to be able to identify the ways in which Gen Z, all the way down to Gen X, are engaging in the American democracy. And so, specifically, for our pre-survey interviews we are asking individuals from 18 years and older on their different practices, really trying to understand what it means as it relates to misinformation, as well as disinformation on Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and even on Tik Tok. Often times individuals utilize servers and platforms where adult individuals are engaging with specifically among the Black community as a means of understanding how information is digested. And what we're seeing now, very different than what we've seen in the last four to five years is that the voters are becoming younger. They're also becoming more critically conscious about those individuals who are on the platform and on the ticket. And so we're finding that individuals, specifically Black youth, are more educated, more critically conscious as it relates to what really goes into the political endeavors. Their civic engagements also are directly determined by their engagements with the criminal and justice system. And so we're finding that they're thinking a lot about how to make their communities and societies a better place, and they find this as an opportunity to do just that.

MR. WEST: Okay. Thank you very much.

So, Roger, want to bring you into the conversation. I know you're interested in disinformation in the marketplace, the role of social media, Black voters as consumers of information. So what are you worried about, what are you seeing this year?

MR. CARUTH: There are a variety of topics being discussed. And, first of all, I want to thank Brooking and you, Mr. West, for hosting us today, and my colleagues for being a part of this panel discussion, and the audience members.

But what we're seeing, and given the digital nature that we're in and the 24-hour news

cycle, content is always in the marketplace, it's always been produced and consumed. The benefits that we're seeing now based on these digital platforms and the devices that we use, communications is now being handled in a two-way format. So now from this research what we're seeing is that consumers are choosing which way they want their content to be viewed and heard. And so what we're trying to do with this study through both qualitative and quantitative methods is we'll find out the what and then the qualitative aspects of the study will tell us the why. And, ultimately, what we want to do from a media and communications standpoint is figure out the best mechanisms in which to reach these audiences.

Primarily in the past you had opinion leaders in certain communities that would be the bearers of information that elderly populations would refer to, such as pastors, religious leaders, coaches, mentors, and civic community organizations that community members would gravitate towards. But now, from a younger generation, as Dr. Muhammad talks about, we're talking about influencers, right. And these influencers are in spaces where Gen Z and Gen X lie. So when you're looking at mediums such as Instagram, such as Facebook, Twitter, and now Tik Tok, these are various platforms that engage consumers and voters in a very unique way. And hopefully through this study we can look at the various sections of the D.C. population and see which aspects of these various communication mediums would be the best way to touch base with these consumers and see how are they not only consuming the content and information, but how they engage and react to it, and hopefully how that persuades or empowers them to act or not to act, based on the accuracy or thought of accuracy of that information.

So hopefully through this process we can answer some of those questions and then put some type of end product in place that can allow us to monitor and engage with these various voters in a variety of different ways.

MR. WEST: Sounds like a fascinating research endeavor and you're going to have very rich data based on all these activities.

So a question for reach of you, and I'll start with Keesha, what can we do to combat disinformation targeted against Black voters? Are there particular strategies that would be helpful here? I mean what can voters do to protect themselves and to safeguard their — Keesha, we'll start with you.

MS. MIDDLEMASS: Thank you.

So I think the best strategy is to figure out the difference between disinformation, the information used to manipulate people or to purposely dissuade them from acting either in electoral or civic engagement and related activities, and then misinformation. Misinformation being shared that is obviously false and it is wrong. And being able to determine, is this false information that's just a lie, or is this misleading information that is going to then dissuade me to do something?

So a strategy is literally stopping before we tweet or share something on Facebook and reading it. We've often got the ability to fact check ourselves before we share information. And I think that's the first step in learning how to combat disinformation, is not sharing it. Because we know once that false narrative is out there and then it might be picked up by a mainstream media source or echoed by an elected official, it becomes fact because we've heard it so many times. We believe, oh, I heard this before, it must be true.

And also I think the second strategy is to talk to people. So what we're doing today is we're talking to people about disinformation, to be aware of it, to know that it exists. And in particular for Black voters, because they were targeted in 2016, in 2020 it has absolutely exploded and now there's robocalls and social media. And so the other third strategy is literally awareness and educating people about what is going on and why it is happening.

MR. WEST: Ravi, your thoughts on how we can combat disinformation targeted against Black voters?

MR. PERRY: Well, I really appreciate Brookings hosting this discussion because this is an issue that has been brought to light really in recent years. And so it's very contemporary. And so the data that we're going to be producing based on the feedback we get here in D.C. is really cutting edge in that we're trying to assess how Black voters have in fact been perhaps targeted and misinformed. It's the first step.

And then the second step, of course, is saying that well if we do prevent that, can we prevent them from of course being persuaded by what they may have in fact been targeted by.

And those are two separate questions. And so I think what the possible solutions may look like as the research is concluded next year might suggest that people find just the preponderance of

new kind of social media disclaimers that in fact bring their attention to the fact that there is misinformation on line, that that awareness in and of itself may in fact encourage or discourage Black voters from believing information that they see on line in general, let alone information that may be just be targeted to them for let's say an election based purpose. This in some cases may have the kind of snowball effect of having the implication that folks don't believe news and media in general, let alone news and media associated with politics.

And so we don't know, of course, what the results will yield until the data is collected here in D.C. And so we hopefully, of course, are looking forward to working with a bunch of local community organizations and some of our partner centers at Howard University to gather that data.

One other hypotheses I would throw out there, you — might be helpful in encouraging people to identify disinformation and then make sure that they are in fact impacted by it would be to consider how it is that they access information to begin with. And I think that question, particularly here East of the River in Washington, D.C., is a unique question when we have challenges as it relates to digital infrastructure and the ability for some people to even access social media, let alone be targeted via social media as a result. And yet that population could still be influenced by those that are targeted by social media.

And so we're excited to figure out what the results may in fact be next spring.

MR. WEST: Bahiyyah, any advice you have on how people can safeguard their vote?

MS. MUHAMMAD: Absolutely. I think when we think about educating the next generation we have to begin to be innovative and creative. As an interdisciplinary team, there are members of this particular group, specifically Dr. Perry as well as Dr. Hogan, who are incorporating these sort of nuances into their college curriculums. And so really trying to get not only political science students, but also philosophy students to begin to think very deeply and critically about these issues and these concerns.

For this particular study, in fact we are incorporating undergraduate individuals into the research process as well as graduate students as a part of the process so that we are thinking about educating the pipeline. And, again, this intergenerational cycle of eradicating misinformation and

disinformation. I think some of the things that we can begin to do is to engage in conversation with the youngest among us, the children in our communities and in our homes. Often times we are through COVID-19 trapped inside of our homes and so children are watching the debates, children are on the sidelines when the adults in the homes are engaging in these conversations, which is very unique. Specifically, as we know about the Black family specifically in the D.C. area, often times misinformation has been targeted towards the adult. And now what we're finding is it's trickling down into the younger generation, specifically their forms of social media. Therefore, it means that the adults must begin to also engage in this same way, so if they are only using Twitter or only on Facebook they may consider going onto Tik Tok and Snapchat and being able to see the information that's circulating so that they can engage in a critical conversation with young individuals whose eyes and ears remain open.

At Howard University, we have a program on the campus called Freedom Schools. And often times these are elementary age children from the D.C. public school area who have an opportunity to be educated over the summer on the campus. And what they talk about are voting practices, what it means, what is your right to vote. And also, really trying to work to eradicate this draconian concept that your vote doesn't matter as a Black individual.

And so we really want to begin to educate intergenerationally individuals to understand that that is one of the myths that we must begin to get rid of and also continue to address it as it pops its head up in different ways.

So through this study we are very interested in gaining that understanding from the young individuals that fill out the survey for the presurvey assessment to let us know where they're actually getting this information from and how do they make sense of it. And from that we plan to use that information to construct an evidence based practice that we then can release to the nation on how Black individuals are gauging this information, because it is very important.

MR. WEST: I think it's great that you're involving students, both undergrad and graduate students in this because these problems are not going to be unique to 2020, we're probably going to see them continue in future years and we need the next generation to be equipped to deal with these things as well.

Roger, your thoughts on how to combat disinformation targeted against Black voters.

MR. CARUTH: Well, I come from a communications — school of communication specifically advertising marketing and media relations, so with any product, with any service, the main thing that you try to do is make an emotion connection with your consumer base, with your voter base, so you can then persuade and change behavior, right. So what I'm seeing is that if you look back at the 2016 Senate report, one of the things that came up, as Ravi mentioned, was the direct targeting by this specific group. And what they did, they actually looked at issues that were hot button topic issues, whether it was around a very violent killing of an African American male in a particular community, and they pounced on those activities, created forums and various platforms in which to get to provide venues to then start spreading information. And if I remember correctly, one page in the article suggested through one of the informants that gave a report to the Guardian, when something happened in the United States they would blame the Obama policy, Obama policies failed. And if I remember correctly, the Negroes are rioting in the street and something needs to be done, right.

So you hear that talking point, it gets picked up from a false narrative, from a false source, and then it spreads. And then if it comes from someone who unintentionally picks it up and passes it on to somebody who seems to be credible, as I mentioned earlier, an opinion leader, an influencer, then that whole narrative starts to spread. And if you look at happened with that election, with some people that may have supported some of the other Democratic candidates, if the outcomes wasn't as they desired, and this fuel added to that, they sat on the sideline, they decided not to participate. And therefore, that end result of what that disinformation campaign was designed to do was actually realized.

So what I think we need to do as voters, as well as local community members, is really, first of all, ask yourself several things. When was this information put into the public space, who sent it you, matter of fact, why is it coming to me, am I affiliated with you, am I connected to you through another person, through a civic organization? How did you actually determine that this information would be something useful or beneficial to me? So we have to actually take ownership to a certain degree of the information we consume and then how we behave and then pass that information on.

So, as my colleagues mentioned, getting students involved. At Howard University, we're

all in a central place now, although we're dispersed, but what these students do, they become change agents from our university that go back into their community and say, hey, guess what I'm learning at my university, check this out, check that out. So that process I think we can incrementally start to see change. And also, with that process and through that process, by having the students involved, they get to understand the process of civic engagement. So not only from the national level, but from a very local level. Here in D.C. we have school board officers that are being challenged right now, we have (inaudible) seats, we have city council seats, and a variety of other community based organizations or offices that are available for participation. So if they can see that and learn those processes from a very, very basic level, then they can actually spread that concept to how do I participate in my state in a gubernatorial race, in a Senate race, in a House of Representatives race.

So I think the idea of well, first of all, self-ownership in terms of the information I consume or how I pass that on and how I choose to engage in it with the people that are in my circle, as Dr. Muhammad mentioned. Because it really starts by the incremental step by step process.

MR. WEST: So, Keesha, we may not have a result on election night and several people have warned us it may take a while to count all those mail ballots. I mean we know half of people have already voted up until this point through absentee ballots or taking advantage of early voting.

So we've talked kind of mostly about disinformation in the context of the campaign part. What kind of about election night and thereafter? And let's just say it may take a few days for a Pennsylvania or other states to count the ballots.

What are the responsibilities of the news media in reporting on the election, particularly in terms of the disinformation angle? Like will there be new opportunities for manipulation if it takes a while to actually get the final results?

MS. MIDDLEMASS: Yes. And that's a really important question because this disinformation campaign will continue through until a candidate is actually chosen. And unfortunately, because of the partisan nature of U.S. elections, because of the types of policies that have been debated over the last couple of months, this election matters for a lot of people, particularly in the Black community as it relates to COVID-19 and being able to actually address its spread.

But for disinformation, it will continue because there may be one particular candidate that challenges the actual outcome. And I believe that the media need to take a conservative approach to election night on November 3. And that means not taking a conservative approach and calling a winner, but also educating voters about the process. There are millions of mail-in ballots, but there are 50 different state rules about when those mail in ballots will be counted. Is it that night that they have to arrive? Or in Pennsylvania for instance, they can arrive all the way until November 6, 5:00 p.m.

So we are going to really have to be educating individuals. I hope the media does this, but also on our own Twitter accounts and Facebook, is educating people that it is okay to take a few days to count ballots. This is democracy in action. And that we should be able to focus in on those five or six battleground states and tell people about the rules, what is acceptable, and that we should not rush to a conclusion just because we're on a media timeline or that someone else wants a response. I expect it might take up to a week before we actually know and have a clear idea of who gets to 270 electoral college votes. And that should be okay.

MR. WEST: I hope you're wrong on that prediction, but you may be right. And certainly, if it does take several days, the opportunities for mischief rise pretty substantially.

So, Ravi, your thoughts on election night and let's say it does take a few days to finalize the ballots, what should we be worried about there?

Ravi, you need to unmute please.

MR. PERRY: My apologies. I think it depends on who will honestly perhaps be leading at the top of the ticket in terms of how it will be interpreted live on Tuesday night. And I think the reason for that is because people remember that this current administration did put red lock boxes on post office boxes in their neighborhoods, that they have seen images on social media of boxes put up by various state boards of elections, et cetera, that have been set on fire. And so I think folks are very concerned about the pace of information they receive on election night because they are also concerned that perhaps a delay is funneling a narrative that certain groups of people were targeted to ensure that their ballots were not effectively received or counted.

And so, in other words, if I think the hunch of the media — because of course they're not

going to end the night without providing some presumptions and assumptions and arguments about where they think the race is headed if we don't have a conclusion on Tuesday, I think the tone of that is going to really matter. If Trump is kind of viewed as the likely victor, I think people are going to be very concerned about well what happened to my ballot, it wasn't even counted. If I put it in the United States Postal Service, was it even received? And if the result is different, I think people may still be curious about the pace of the counting in terms of their patience, but less concerned about whether or not the delay is related to some kind of misinformation effort.

And this is serious because, you know, we just saw this week that according to government reports that this election is being interfered with at the moment. And, you know, Black folks are used to being targeted by and through the use of government resources and support over centuries. And so for that feeling to be kind of the undercurrent for many in this election where the options are on the one hand a president running for reelection who has in fact been endorsed by the Klu Klux Klan, which of course has a particular insensitive relationship of horror with African Americans over centuries, and then you have on the other side, you know, a candidacy that includes a historic vice presidential nominee, of course, in that the background that she represents as part of the ticket. And so I think that that's going to be also on people's minds on Tuesday. And the question will be whether or not the narrative is driven by the media that's going to influence how people react to the delay in ballots being counted.

But, nonetheless, I agree with Dr. Middlemass that we won't likely have a result on Tuesday.

MR. WEST: Bahiyah, your thoughts about next week and what we should be thinking about?

MS. MOHAMMAD: Absolutely. I would say that, you know, in the midst of waiting for results it creates an incubator for misinformation. And I just want all of our viewers and individuals to know, specifically in D.C., that this team of digital informers are here. You know, we have a website. Please make sure that you all, you know, have an opportunity to go there, talk about your concerns, talk about, you know, your issues, share with us the things that you are reading. The team, as you heard

form Dr. Middlemass and Dr. Perry down to Dr. Caruth, that these are experts and so we're in a different space than we may have been found before.

I would say, you know, individuals must be patient, must be patient, and I think at this point focusing more so on the vote, getting out, doing what you need to do. If you didn't send the ballot in, send it in now. And if you didn't, you know, get out there and rock the vote and take care of — you know, put on a mask, social distance, don't forget about the realities of what we're being faced with right now in the midst of different misinformation and disinformation that will of course come out during that time. I think once you do your part, then it is to kind of sit back and really read and reflect and talk to individuals about it. I don't think that this should be something that's done in a bubble, that individual should be isolated and kind of feeling that they are alone. This is a community endeavor and I think as long as we lean into one another it gives us an opportunity to troubleshoot our ideas and our fears off of one another so that we act accordingly.

I think specifically, because my work rests itself in the criminal justice system that, you know, incarcerated individuals that are located in D.C. that will be voting often times are erased through COVID-19 of communicating with their families. And so some of these conversations need to happen early on, as well as through correspondence, being able to send in not misinformation, but sending in viable sources for those individuals that are incarcerated and are voting and also will be waiting much longer for those decisions to also be a part of this democratic process.

And so there are just so many prongs that are connected to it. I think right now we should definitely be focused on rocking the vote and making sure that we do our part on this end and really leaning into our patience and experts in our communities, specifically those among the Howard University community, to be able to help individuals specifically in D.C. walk through this process.

MR. WEST: So, Roger, I want to get your thoughts on things we should watch next week, and then we're going to turn to some questions from the audience. We're actually getting lots of really good questions.

MR. CARUTH: Sure.

I would say first of all from a perspective of communications and media and being a

communications scholar, we tend to rely on the media — we call it the Fourth Estate, the unofficial fourth arm of the government — to kind of be that bearer of truth, hold both parties accountable, and really be a resource to the people, the viewers that are watching and relying on them for credible information.

So I think at the point of the election, the night of the election, it kind of gives me an eerie feeling maybe about 2000 with Al Gore and George Bush, and maybe a little bit higher form of steroid, if you will, in terms of the anxiety and anticipation. So we're all going to be watching some form of preferred media, some form of content consumption on that night, you know, and even leading up to it. So not only should we rely on the media being fact checkers and giving us information, even if it's unverified information and they can't confirm, you know, make those references and make those notifications know so that at least we have a sense that something is going on and then we could choose to engage how we want to.

In addition to that, you know, some days you have social media feeding the press and vice versa. So you're going to have individuals on the ground who have access to cell phones, Tik Tok, Facebook, Instagram that are going to actually be chronicling and identifying things that are happening on the ground in their communities. And as that information trickles, it's incumbent on us and these other tech companies that are, you know, a part of this process, even though they're not necessarily held to the same standard, to be diligent in this process because of what we know now, because of the kind of inklings of what could happen. And that anxiety and that kind of idea of — I would necessarily say fear, but awareness and wanting to be engaged and understanding what's going on, needs to be monitored and it needs to be kind of regulated and it needs to be done in a kind of uniform order. So we're not actually getting information, finding out something, and we're circulating it without it being validated. And then that's kind of how things occur and spread, particularly within our community. Because if I get a message from a relative that says "X", it's the gospel, I'm not questioning it, and I'm just going to spread it. I'm going to get in a group chat and I'm hitting one button and then I'm going to say, "Did you hear?" and it's, "Oh my god." And by the time it spreads, it becomes the truth, right, or some version of that truth. So we have to kind of be mindful of that.

So we would encourage the media outlets and the platforms that we use to kind of take

the time to figure out what actually happened and make sure that that information is disseminated in an accurate and timely manner so we can all be informed in the best way while we hopefully wait for the results of, you know, the outcome of the election.

MR. WEST: Okay, thank you.

So now I would like to move to some questions that our audience has submitted. And I'll just throw the question out. Any of that want to address it are welcome to do so.

So one question is what strategies can local groups use to counter or disrupt the spread of disinformation via social media? Any of you who would like to address that?

MR. CARUTH: I'll jump in here a little bit. I think I'll go back to what I said earlier, just really trusted sources in your circle, in your community. If something is coming from an outside source or in ways that you haven't received that information before, you have to ask yourself again, 'Why is it coming to me? Where is it coming from, and what's the purpose of it? And then what is it saying?' Therefore, you can be discerning in that information before you even become an unknown or unwilling participant in the transfer of inaccurate information.

So I think, you know, we as voters and civic minded individuals should use as a first step of engagement prior to disseminating information.

MR. PERRY: I'll add one thing.

MS. MIDDLEMASS: Go ahead.

MR. PERRY: Sorry, Dr. Middlemass. I have one thing in addition to kind of piggy back on what Dr. Muhammad was saying earlier about what Howard is doing with Freedom Schools, right, reliving the idea that we have a responsibility to take care of our own communities. And I would suggest and recommend that local civic groups and organizations, neighborhood groups, D.C. particularly, perhaps East of the River, hold information sessions on misinformation, bring in college students, perhaps from Howard and other places throughout D.C. to educate the community there about what they may see. You know, I know most students carry around, you know, a notebook and a pen. If they don't have that they might have a cell phone and they sit down and they can in fact educate people really quickly about something that for an older generational member perhaps it might be a little more

challenging to do.

So I would encourage local groups to connect with students that are here in D.C. and/or connect with organizations and centers, like we have at Howard, to actually provide the educational resources in your community so that we don't have to guess whether or not people know what misinformation looks like. You know, we can perhaps set up a tutoring session where we show — you know, turn on Facebook or Instagram or Twitter and show what happens when you send a message that will result in a disclaimer appearing and have a discussion about that. I encourage us to do, you know, that kind of hands on applied real work here. And I think that that might actually be effective.

MR. WEST: Keesha, you wanted to jump in?

MS. MIDDLEMASS: I did. Thank you.

And this is applicable for any organization, local here in D.C. or across the nation, but on election night or election day, going forward until a decision is made, I really do think these organizations, because they're already credible sources, they're already known to provide information as it relates to ballot access or election data or even just being able to educate people on the electoral process. I think they have to take the initiative and literally tweet out, post on Facebook consistently to drain out any of the misinformation. And using credible sources and literally — I don't want to use the word tsunami, but tsunami of good, factual, correct information is one way we can counter information immediately for next week, versus waiting for disinformation to get rolling and then trying to counter it.

We have to take the initiative to send out factually correct information first, and credible sources like local organizations can do that.

MR. WEST: We have a question about different groups of people of color. And it seems to be a reference to African Americans, Latinos, and other ethnic groups. The question is: Are there similarities and/or differences in how disinformation is being targeted against different groups of color? Like, for example, are Latinos subject to disinformation in a different manner than African Americans?

SPEAKER: Yes. (Laughing) Go ahead.

MR. CARUTH: There was a report out recently about the use of WhatsApp. You know, I'm really from the Caribbean and most people who are from places outside of the United States use that

free service to communicate with friends and family. But what's now with — particularly with the Republican Party, if I will, they're using WhatsApp and providing what we're talking about now, according to our reports, where they have robocalls and they have targeted advertising in the language and they're providing information about policies that may affect immigration and status and bunch of litany of things on that agenda. And if I'm getting that message in language, meaning in Spanish or whatever my local dialect is, and it's coming from WhatsApp, so why would I not believe it, right? You know, who would take the time to put a message in Spanish that tells me what's going on and not check to see that it's credible?

So they are being targeted and we are being targeted, as I said, in language, in methods and mediums that we use in a way that we communicate that's effective for us, and in necessarily doing so with information that may not be 100% accurate. And once we get it from that "trusted source," we tend to just take it as the gospel and we don't question it. And then it helps inform our opinions and then ultimately how we behave, how we engage, how we disengage, and so forth and so on.

So I think there are definitely some similarities in the strategies and the techniques that are used.

MS. MIDDLEMASS: And the misinformation strategies also differ on who they target. So there's these racialized messages going out to Black voters that are not going out to Latino voters.

So, as Dr. Caruth said, the immigration issue goes out to Spanish speaking voters. They may or may not be in a mixed-documented family, but it's around immigration issues. For the Black community, they're racial messages and the misinformation is around like, oh, if you have a vote-in ballot your information will use to collect your back child support that's in arrears, or you will — if you've got an old — if you vote by mail, the government will use that information to get you on an old warrant. And so these really racialized — misinformation is used to target very particular communities. And enough of them will be dissuaded, be like, 'Well I better not vote because I don't want the government to know where I live or I don't want my information stolen.'

And one last point, they're also using robocalls in Michigan and Pennsylvania that are targeting Black voters and Latino voters and Spanish speaking voters in very different ways, but using this racialized language to instill fear in them so they don't vote. And we know from 2016, you shave off

1% or 2% in a few communities and that can literally change the outcome of the election.

MS. MUHAMMAD: And I would —

MR. PERRY: I would — oh, no, go ahead.

MR. WEST: All right, go ahead, Ravi. Or, Bahiyyah.

MS. MUHAMMAD: Yeah, I was going to add very quickly to that, and then you can go, Dr. Perry.

Bots, you know, we're talking about robots. You know, these are individuals that — not even individuals, these are programmed mechanisms that look at the different information that's tweeted out, the language that you use, kind of scouring through your posts, and then replicates it. So you're talking about non-Pacific Islanders, Indigenous communities, Black communities, Latinx communities, all individuals targeted through the nuances of the information that you actually put out. So definitely begin to learn a little bit more about bots.

And, you know, when you have a lot of followers you could go through your list of followers and you will identify at least 20-30 bots that are following and are posting things. And so you have to think about all of this kind of hot information — I call it the McDonald's culture of information. It all cannot be consumed.

And so just a few things to think about.

Go ahead, Ravi.

MR. PERRY: I appreciate it.

No, all I wanted to add is I think that one of the challenges that we want to hopefully see post this election is a little bit more attention on intersectionality, right, the bifurcation of Black versus Latino versus, you know, the Blatino families, and aware they may find themselves fitting at this current time. And I think that what we hopefully can also remember is that ultimately this project is still considering Blackness as its core variable, but not Blackness blended with any singularity of definition.

And so we certainly are inclusive of all kinds of approaches and inputs and outputs of Blackness, depending on how people may define themselves. And I think that's important to emphasize. And that is all deliberate in part because remember that of all the groups, while targeting certainly impacts

marginalized people in general, it was African Americans that were targeted the most, and I do think that's worth noting yet again.

MR. WEST: Okay. We have a very interesting question here. Someone wants to know whether the speakers can talk about the explicit link between disinformation campaigns and the more official efforts at voter suppression. And this individual wants to know like are they linked in some way, are they separable, and do they serve different purposes. So kind of, you know, the informal disinformation versus the official efforts at voter suppression.

MS. MIDDLEMASS: Luckily we are — luckily, unluckily — we're all really well informed, my colleagues and I about voter suppression.

So voter suppression are considered in two ways. There's the informal by government, but then there's also the formal ways of suppressing the vote by seeing in Texas there's one place you can drop off your ballot and people are literally having to drive 100 miles round-trip to drop off their ballot. You can also see limitations on the number of polling places that are open for early voting or the restrictive numbers of hours or the long line ups in Black communities but short line ups in white communities because the state has decided to invest money in upgrading the equipment in white communities, but leave the older broken down equipment in the Black communities.

So I consider those voter suppression tactics.

The informal voter suppression tactics is when the police may park their car outside of a polling place in a Black community, but not in a white community. What does that signal sending to voters? And that's the voter suppression aspect. I'm just giving a few examples.

And I'll let my colleagues talk about misinformation around that.

MR. WEST: Any other reactions from our panelists?

MR. PERRY: I would only add there that I — and this is complete conjecture I will throw out there, but I think that there is a link in terms of misinformation and disillusionment in that voters who are victims of misinformation, who receive information that they know to be false, but we also know from political scientists and political psychologists that have studied conspiratorial theories and their impact on political participation, is that that does in fact discourage people not only from voting but from participating

in the American political process at all, and in some cases even believing in the two-party system to the extent that they believed it ever at all.

And so misinformation is dangerous not only because of an immediate election, but because it really does have the power to discourage people from investing in the political institutions that govern their lives. And if they choose to disinvest from the one most locus of power that — as of course late Representative John Lewis framed it that was as related to the power of the vote — if we disinvest from that, then we are in many ways resigning our kind of misfortune.

And so I think the challenge, hopefully, is that people see the dangers of misinformation not just as an immediate problem because we have an election in the coming days, but as a real threat trying to encourage minority people to not believe that the system, while imperfect and certainly was not built to include us initially, is yet the same system that we must go to submit the redress of the wrongs that we petition.

MS. MUHAMMAD: And I would just add to that to say that I think it's a wonderful question. Thank you so much to the audience participant who posed that question.

As it relates to our particular study, specifically looking at misinformation and voter suppression, we do have ethnographic components tied into the study where we really are getting boots on the ground, out and looking to see, you know, in Ward 1 versus Ward 7, are there differences, do we actually see the police care on the outside of some of these localities. Is the information actually correct that is posted?

And so we really plan to explore this a lot deeper. Although we have a kind of understanding of some of the components that go to play, we really want to put evidence based knowledge behind it for this particular study. And so specifically the way that we engage students in going out and seeing what these sites are looking like will give us an opportunity to compare across the wards.

MR. WEST: Okay. We have time for one more question and this is a dynamite question. It's from a high school junior who is watching this webcast.

This person wants to know, "Do you think disinformation and misleading voters should be

illegal?”

That is a provocative question. It's a great question. It's a great way to end this session.

Any thoughts?

MR. PERRY: I was going to pass to some of my legal colleagues.

SPEAKER: And I was going to pass to Dr. Caruth, our communication expert.

MR. CARUTH: Oh, well, I think I can do both of those.

SPEAKER: We know.

MR. CARUTH: You know, there was a debate not too long ago, for example — we're going back — and I'll just use social media as an example: Should bloggers and influencers have to be credentialed, right? Meaning that they have such a high power of influence. We go through four years of college and we get certified to become experts and we work in industry in journalism and that give us a certain level of responsibility and accountability. So when you're having folks that have the ability to influence masses, should there be a kind of a process that they go to, to hold them accountable, as you mentioned, should the information they put in the marketplace not be true?

And I think there is some legality to it, but then you have to not only take into account the individual, you have to take into account the outlets that are pushing this information out. So where does the liability land and who is responsible for it? Right now within the social media space, people are looking at your Tik Toks, your Facebooks, your Instagrams, and these other places to be held accountable because information is consumed so fast and put into the marketplace so fast that there should be some kind of guidelines or regulations in place to fact check and verify. It may slow down the delivery of this information, but then it may put us in a situation where we can then be discerning about the information that we received because we know it's been somewhat vetted, right.

So to answer your question, and hopefully I did, I wouldn't necessarily say people should be arrested or, you know, it should be legal, but there should be some measure of accountability. And I go back to the Fourth Estate, because there is a — what do they say, honor amongst thieves, right. We are in the situation where as journalists we should be able to call out colleagues on either side of the fence, either side of the media spin, so to speak, and say, hey, we have an obligation to be as truthful as

possible to the public that consumes our information, that relies on us at 5:00 o'clock, 6:00 o'clock, 11:00 o'clock, to make sure that we're putting information out there. Because for most folks, this is really their only source of information, right.

You think about it. We did a study during the national disaster with NOA and elderly folks only got their information from local news.

I know we have to wrap up, but in a nutshell, there should be some form of accountability. Should it be legal, I'm not 100% sure — illegal.

MR. PERRY: I would only add to this as a part-time political theorist that, you know, what the brilliance I think of the high school student's question is about this idea of should, normative question, right, you know. Given that this is a study on primarily broad definitions of Black misinformation here in D.C., particularly East of the River, particularly perhaps deep in Wards 7 and 8, that have been historically disenfranchised, this roughly 7-800,000 population of mostly Black folks for decades and decades by, of course, the same federal government and Congress that has disenfranchised Black people nationwide for so long. And that one of those, of course, core documents, the 13th Amendment, still technically allows physical confinement, right, as related to the so-called commission of a crime. And as we all now, because we've all watched "Law & Order" that, you know, if you haven't gone law school ourselves, is that when someone is given the opportunity for clemency and to perhaps go home and be home with their families again, they have to answer the question of whether or not they will be a threat to society. The judge has to, right, make that declarative judgment before that person is "readmitted" to society. And, by the way, 5 million of those people right now are African Americans who are currently disenfranchised from their right to vote.

But to wrap up, my point here being that the "should" narrative here is what I think is really interesting. Given that Black folks have been historically the ones that have been assumed to have been a threat to society, certainly if people who are doing misinformation, what we may consider or maybe the media wants to consider as maybe more white collar crimes, perhaps, we need to I think be very honest about the level of danger that misinformation inflicts.

Now, we can have people going to jail for a lifetime because they stole hedge clippers. I

certainly would suggest as a personal suggestion to answer the should question, that perhaps some legal penalties, to the extent that this could be proven in a court, is something that we should consider going forward.

MR. WEST: Okay. Well, thank you very much. This was a terrific conversation. I want to congratulate you on the grant and this project. Very interesting findings. And it will be interesting to see the future work that you undertake.

So I want to thank Keesha, Ravi, Bahiyah, and Roger for participating in this event.

Those of you who would like more information, again you can check out the Howard University website, digitaldemocracy.howard.edu. And as they complete their research they will be updating that site and providing other information.

So thank you to our panelists and thanks to the audience for tuning in.

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