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ESCAPING THE MAINSTREAM?
PITFALLS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ENCRYPTED MESSAGING APPS AND DIASPORA COMMUNITIES IN THE U.S.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2022 will prove a pivotal year for the U.S. with mid-term elections scheduled in November and the country still battling the COVID-19 pandemic. Minority groups are affected by both these developments as they are exposed to and sometimes targeted by disinformation aiming to deter them from voting or receiving vaccinations. The Center for Media Engagement's Propaganda Lab aims to address this topic in three ways:

- Provide conceptual clarification of our research on "diaspora communities" in the U.S. by arguing that with encrypted messaging apps (EMAs), the potential to operate as "subaltern counterpublics" is created, which can inspire more confidence or trust among communities that have been historically marginalized.

- Draw on eleven in-depth qualitative interviews to argue that four main themes defined false content on EMAs: (1) the sowing of confusion via translational ambiguities, (2) the leveraging falsehoods to redraw ideological fault lines, (3) the use of religion to sow doubt about candidates' views, and (4) the oversimplification of complex perspectives, policies, and procedures to alter voting decisions.

- Outline tactical advantages of propagandists targeting diaspora communities.

This paper builds the foundation of our future research on diaspora communities, false information, and EMAs with regard to the 2022 mid-term elections and provides an assessment useful for the design of community-centric counter programs.

BRINGING TOGETHER THE STUDY OF ENCRYPTED MESSAGING APPS AND DIASPORA COMMUNITIES

Encrypted messaging apps (EMAs) offer users communication spaces secure from intrusion. WhatsApp and Signal are end-to-end (E2E) encrypted by default and Telegram offers a "secret chat" function which employs E2E.[1] But privacy is not the only draw for EMA users. The apps are also popular because they offer free modes of text messaging and user-friendly features such as easy, transnational audio and video sharing and intuitive group communication spaces. On Telegram, group chats can grow up to 200,000 members. Telegram and others also offer channels that have no limits on followers and are popular for broadcasting live messages.[2]

In other words, EMAs have several features offered by social media platforms (e.g., the sharing of messages through forwarding or, in some cases, the creation of news feeds) combined with the features of closed-communication channels (e.g., private chats). The combination of these characteristics make EMAs preferred platforms for a variety of people.[3] False information on encrypted messaging apps has proven dangerous during the COVID-19 pandemic, next to the spread of false information on other social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter or TikTok.[4]

For this study, which focuses on diaspora communities in the U.S., broader sociological parameters can also explain the success of encrypted platforms since these environments offer an alternative to what is considered the majority-dominated public discourse. In the words of Fraser, they have the potential to operate as "subaltern counterpublics," which can inspire more confidence or trust among communities that have been historically marginalized from the public sphere.[5] Our research also engages with one of Fraser's main deliberations, namely the move from understanding the public sphere not as unitary but instead as a plurality of contesting publics.[6] In our case, diaspora communities on EMAs create a partially protected counterpublic which can have implications for the consumption and spread of false information or the development of narratives for political candidates independently from dominating campaign rationales.

This paper focuses on one aspect of EMA use that is only likely to grow in importance over the course of the 2022 mid-term election year in the U.S.: the engagement patterns and narratives that spread among diaspora communities. In other words, it looks at how members of these groups interpret false information they encounter. The paper also assesses which messages or themes are successful in spreading on EMAs because recipients are compelled by the messages. This is relevant as false information continues to divide Americans on topics such as the right measures to fight the pandemic or the allegedly socialist agendas of politicians, which divert focus from coming together to rally against a common enemy like a virus or foreign powers interested in weakening internal cohesion of the U.S.[7]

Research Rationale And Methods

The Propaganda Research Lab at the Center for Media Engagement has been conducting research into the people and groups behind propaganda campaigns on EMAs since 2019. In the course of this research, we came across evidence that diaspora communities in the United States were the frequent targets of digital disinformation and manipulation. Existing research and reporting has examined disinformation on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube aimed at Hispanic communities, for instance arguing for an increased focus on Spanish-language disinformation in the U.S. for content moderators of Meta,[8] or outlining the "vaccination gap" between white Americans and Hispanic communities,[9] which is also related to misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines targeting Hispanic communities on social media.[10]

With these, and other, examples in mind, we decided to conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with members of the groups exposed to this false information in order to understand how it spreads on EMAs. We conducted a series of 11 interviews with community leaders and digital activists who self-identified as members of the Hispanic, Black, and South Asian communities in the swing states of Florida and North Carolina — communities and states that have experienced significant issues with digital disinformation.[11] We also spoke to civil society leaders who had established digital literacy programs and to leaders of local and international fact-checking organizations. Our research was led by a comparative approach and the limitations of the research are tied to the general parameters of interview-based research; we are not claiming to have captured all patterns of false information spread nor all diaspora communities that are affected by this. Instead, we are hoping to provide a deeper understanding about these ongoing phenomena by giving examples and analyzing our data in a qualitative manner.

From a media perspective, different experiences and interactions with the national media environment define communities' experiences of inclusion and representation. Fraser elaborates on two dynamics in this regard: one related to the stigmatization of stereotypical media frames in the context of multiculturalism and the second the vulnerability to populist rhetoric in different time periods.[12]

With regard to Mexican-Americans, for example, Aguirre et al. analyzed how the cultural production of Mexican identity in U.S. media produces a Mexican threat narrative in the American public's mind, emphasizing the alleged criminality or foreignness of those 'others' in U.S. civic culture.[13] With regard to Hispanic communities more generally, Retis explains how the formation of Hispanic diasporas in recent decades spurred racial frameworks and discriminatory discourses in North America which tend to equate the "Latino otherness as a homogeneous peripheral group."[14] This continues to marginalize a growing part of the population. Even in marketing campaigns aimed at different Hispanic communities, the homogenization of diaspora communities misrecognizes the various intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, language, religion, citizenship, and nation.

Similar dynamics have defined interactions between the national media environment and Black communities. Relying on research analyses of Black Lives Matter media portrayals, Kilgo and Mourão examine the effects news coverage has on the evaluation of the core ideas from the Black Lives Matter social movement agenda. They argue that conservative media increase negative evaluations with mainstream and liberal media consumption not leading to more positive views about Black Lives Matter's core ideas because of an already-triggered multidirectional feedback loop.[15] In spite of these negative experiences, Mehra et al. argue that the internet has tremendous potential to empower those on the margins of society, such as African-American women, by incorporating it into their lives in ways that are meaningful to them.[16] By 2022, EMAs are well-positioned to support in this regard.

Studying "Diaspora Communities"

For the purposes of this work, we use the term "diaspora communities" to include users who told us that they regularly use EMAs to communicate with people in their country of origin or where their family is from, with individuals who share their cultural context, and with people living in the U.S. identifying with the same community. While this approach risks over-including individuals who are not part of identical communities, the connecting thread for our research is the usage of these apps.[17] Our definition also aims to avoid the dominant rationale for the homogenization of people from non-white communities in the U.S. outlined in the previous section. Instead of basing the study on sociologically deterministic inclusion/ exclusion criteria, such as a certain age or nationality, this study follows well-established conceptualizations by Anderson that subvert the determinist scheme in which any nation is portrayed as a product of specific sociological conditions; instead the nation is an "imagined political community."[18]

For immigrants in the U.S., this means they engage in processes of how to fit in to this imagined community (or not). At the same time, they can influence existing conceptualizations by participating in the nation's discourse. By the time this paper was written in 2022, the need to assess globalization, and with it technological advances in a nuanced manner, has become common sense.[19] Developments in transportation and communication have changed both the origins and the processes of migration. As Lie explains: "In the history of global diaspora (…), television, telephone (…) [and] e-mail perforce occupy significant roles. These transformations make possible diasporic communities, flung across the globe, that sustain strong social and business ties."[20]

Content might originate in one country but be most important for a diasporic community in another, such as Naficy's exploration of Iranian content production in Los Angeles, which is consumed by Iranians from France to Japan.[21] With regard to our paper, we argue that the infrastructural possibility of diaspora communities with regard to EMAs is part of what Appadurai calls "diasphoric public spheres" since our interview data points toward an

emerging transnational reality among some of these groups.[22] Generally speaking, EMAs have attracted attention not only as intermediary spaces of collective action but also as incubators and crossroads for trafficking mis- and disinformation.[23] Disinformation is commonly understood as intentionally spreading false information, whereas misinformation is unwittingly shared false content.[24] For the purpose of this paper, we rely on using "false information" to avoid misrepresenting in cases where the definitional boundaries cannot be clearly determined.

Researchers of computational propaganda — who focus on the use of automation, algorithms, and other digital technology in attempts to manipulate public opinion — often encounter particular obstacles when attempting to study encrypted messaging apps. This difficulty arises precisely because these apps are designed for more private communication. This same feature directly leads to a corresponding affordance of the technology valued by individual users and exploited by malicious actors: EMA communication often occurs between existing, trusted networks of people with close ties to one another.[25] This more intimate information space can allow for manipulation via relational organizing — for potent content that begins as disinformation and is eventually spread as misinformation by loved ones, neighbors, local influencers, and other community members. From the perspective of credibility and public trust, these dynamics can work to increase trust of the sender by recipients of messages. The study of EMAs from a communication perspective therefore has relevance for continued debate about Lazarsfeld's eminent remarks on the "two-step flow of communication," since he asserted that the effects of media articles or any other output are not solely related to characteristics of that media output but instead mitigated by the processes of selectivity in attention and perception, which are in turn a function of predispositional and situational variables such as age, family history, political affiliation, etc.[26]

Our previous research into the propagandistic and disinformative use of EMAs in India, Mexico, and the United States spurred our use of the term *encrypted propaganda* — an emergent and novel form of political communication that occurs over EMAs and displays unique characteristics in both content and tactics — including relational organizing as a core mechanism for manipulation.[27] While EMAs are less widely used per capita in the U.S. than in other parts of the world, the Pew Research Center reports outsized importance of WhatsApp among U.S. Hispanic users (46% use it), compared to Black users (23%) and white users (16%).[28] Our own research suggests significant U.S. EMA usage numbers as well as corresponding evidence of EMA importance among particular U.S. demographics. In August 2020, we conducted a representative survey of 1,010 people aged 18 or older in the U.S. The survey was carried out through NORC at the University of Chicago. According to our data, 10.4% of participants said they had used WhatsApp within the past 7 days, with 9.5% saying they'd used WhatsApp in the last six months to discuss politics.[29] The demographic data was even more compelling. Of the communities we surveyed asking if they used WhatsApp in

the last six months, the following breakdown of people answering "yes" emerged: 27% of Hispanic communities; 21% of Asian communities; 9.5% of people who identified with two or more racial/ethnic categories, 8% of Black respondents, and a mere 4% of white people.

Overall, we wanted to understand how particular communities use EMAs, how they deal with false information on such apps, and whether EMAs have contributed to the development of counterpublics. This builds the foundation of our future research on diaspora communities, false information, and EMAs with regard to the 2022 mid-term elections and provides a first assessment on how to design community-centric counter programs.

IMPACTFUL MESSAGING: STRATEGIES OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AFFECTING DIASPORA COMMUNITIES ON EMAS

We identified four main themes among diaspora communities' political messaging on EMAs in the U.S. in 2020: (1) the sowing of confusion via translational ambiguities, (2) the leveraging falsehoods to redraw ideological fault lines, (3) the use of religion to sow doubt about candidates' views, and (4) the oversimplification of complex perspectives, policies, and procedures to alter voting decisions.

All of these themes exhibit cultural denominators and hence potential for long-lasting effects. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that while we identified these themes based on our interviews with the mentioned communities, we do not argue that these themes are exclusive to those communities. Overall, it is likely that the 2022 mid-term election year in the U.S. will see political messaging emerge that relates to the identified themes and targets both diaspora communities and other parts of the U.S. population.

Translation Ambiguities

The communication in the studied diaspora groups often floats between languages anchored in the communities' mother tongue and English as well. In our interviews with community leaders in Florida, we encountered examples in which false information arose in primarily Colombian, Cuban, and Venezuelan WhatsApp groups relying on slight mistranslations that can at times misconstrue facts – both intentionally and not.[30] These translation ambiguities are also pertinent in the case of Asian-American Pacific Islander communities that are defined by a variety of different, but often similar, languages — meaning the exact phrasing is not always clear to some.[31] False information in this paper refers to information that the authors could identify as being disproven from our own fact-checking resources, such as by comparing and contrasting these claims to the official news. Our research does not rely on information that was too granular for us to understand and fact-check.

As any language learner knows, some words or phrases lack a direct and unambiguous

translation to another language. Sometimes languages also have "false positives" when a word exists in both languages but means different things, such as "sensible" existing in both German and English but with different connotations (in German, the word "sensible" actually means "sensitive"). For instance, Republican campaigners repeatedly framed current president Joe Biden as socialist;[32] in an effort to speak to Hispanic voters, a video of Biden referring to himself as "the most progressive president ever" was translated with the word *progresista* as progressive and shared in several groups. However, one interviewee explained "if you're a first-generation Latin American it [*progresista*] is similar to *socialista* or *comunista*."[33] Deliberately or not, this video left an imprint on parts of the WhatsApp group then displaying their conviction that Joe Biden was a socialist.

Ideological Fault Lines

Related to the previous, potentially inadvertent invocation of Biden as socialist, other messages left less room for potential inconclusiveness.[34] The messaging we found during our research is in line with what reporters from *The New York* Times traced back to the Trump campaign. Social media accounts for "Equipo Trump" and "Latinos for Trump," which are official campaign operations, have claimed that Latin American socialists, such as Nicolás Maduro's socialist party in Venezuela, are in favor of Biden. These accounts implied a socialist axis reaching up to the U.S. and invoked a fear of creeping socialism.[35]

Naturally, these invocations do not sit well with people who have either directly fled socialist regimes, such as Venezuelan and Cuban immigrants, or who have been brought up with harrowing stories of living under (partial) socialism, such as some Colombian diaspora communities.[36] While our research only found examples targeting Biden's presidential bid, the qualitative design of our research was a limiting factor, so it cannot be argued that similar messages might not also have targeted the Trump campaign, for instance.

Using Religion to Sow Doubt

During our conversations, interviewees pointed out that Joe Biden was repeatedly denounced for being "Anti-Catholic".[37] Many of these messages seemed to be less targeted towards Joe Biden per se, which is reasonable given the fact that he is Catholic himself, and instead pointed towards the Democratic Party and its stance on abortion policies. For instance, videos were shared with the caption: "You cannot be a Catholic and be a Democrat," which elaborated on the conviction that "no Catholic can be aligned with the Democratic Party." Again, this messaging, which plays on identity-defining characteristics for many Hispanic communities such as their adherence to Catholicism, could be found on group chats purportedly concerned with sharing the latest information on COVID-19 developments, for instance.[38] A former Democratic strategist and member of several WhatsApp groups in the South Florida area asserted:

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> *"The racism that exists within our communities, is why we (...) Latinos being aligned with Trump because they consider themselves white and they're connecting with a man who shows (...) what they're thinking too."*[39]

The Power of Simplification in a Complex World

Our interviews with WhatsApp group moderators, political strategists, and polling experts revealed that EMAs played an important role in the spread of false electoral information among diaspora communities in the United States.[40] The complexities surrounding different state legislation around voter registration, as well as on the actual ballot, were frequently exploited.[41] For instance, one interviewee told us how minority groups such as South Asian Americans in North Carolina were inundated with false information regarding the state's voting rules via the studied WhatsApp groups.[42]

This false information seemingly achieved two things: it confused potential voters in the run-up to the election, which discouraged people to vote, and it preemptively sowed distrust, which nurtured wariness with regard to the election results before they were even announced. One example captured these dynamics well: "disinformation spread on WhatsApp told us [South Asian Americans in North Carolina] that we need to be careful because when you go to cast your ballot, if they mark your ballot with a pen, then your ballot will be considered not acceptable." In North Carolina, however, your ballot needs to get marked because that's how they get your precinct-specific ballot to the individual voter.

The quoted false information was sometimes shared by people within the WhatsApp group that were from other states, or was forwarded from other WhatsApp groups that claimed the information was relevant for all voters even though it only concerned some states and not others. The community organizer providing the cited example described a national organization dedicated to mobilizing South Asian American voters for Democratic candidates whose members, presumably unintentionally, spread dangerous false information by sharing voting laws from California that did not apply in North Carolina.[43] Another interviewee, the co-executive director of an independent political organization that has members in over 12 counties in Florida, cited various examples of relatively unsophisticated attempts at spreading false information such as providing wrong information about where and when to vote – nevertheless, these also fed into the previously described dynamics of voter

discouragement.[44] The co-executive director told us:

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> *"In 2020, there was a massive growth in misinformation [including] wrong information about where to vote, what time to vote."*[45]

Given the voting intricacies, especially for first-time voters, but also for returning voters, any apposite summaries or alleged helpful information are likely to be picked up as guidance within pre-established communities of trust, such as a group chat on an encrypted messaging app comprised mostly of diaspora community members.[46]

TACTICAL ADVANTAGES OF PROPAGANDISTS TARGETING DIASPORA COMMUNITIES: THE (EASIER) EXPORT OF STRATEGIES AND NARRATIVES

In addition to their respective languages being misappropriately translated on occasion, some interview subjects also noticed another trend when identifying false information messaging in their communities. In many of these circumstances, they outlined how false information messaging did not seem to target U.S. diaspora communities specifically, but rather seemed to originate from other countries or from the diaspora communities' country of origin.[47]

In other instances, it became clear that while the messages might have originated or been produced in the U.S., the distribution tactics were borrowed from popular forms of sharing information in the countries of origin, namely relying on audio and video messages in addition to text (as audio and video messages are more easily accessible for people with lower literacy rates).[48] We encountered community organizers who pointed out difficulties in moderating local Telegram and WhatsApp groups as the groups were inundated with people sharing disinformation content in Spanish including "one-hour videos (…) and people are watching these."[49] With regard to the videos, some links which could be traced pointed to crossplatform communication: the videos were first found on YouTube, then shared on WhatsApp and forwarded to different WhatsApp groups.[50] Longer videos also produce practical problems for fact-checkers, as two leaders at a major fact-checking organization specifically serving Hispanic communities told us:

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> *"[since] the videos are 15 or 20 minutes, it is almost impossible for small groups to check all incorporated statements. There are so many facts, and things to check [but] we are not necessarily going to give up."*[51]

One group moderator was convinced that "many Latino strategists in Miami that have done Latin American campaigns in Latin America" now use their proven tactics in the U.S.[52] While the transplantation of campaign tactics across country borders has been witnessed in the past,[53] the widespread use of EMAs combined with the described, particular EMA characteristics carries a new and explosive potential of reaching people all the time and right at home. One WhatsApp group admin sounded defeated:

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> *"It hurts me that they would abuse my community this way. In campaigns, it's a fight. And that's okay to fight. But when you start losing the facts to win? All you can do is expose them."*[54]

In general, attribution of false information on EMAs is complicated, in part because information flows easily across both international and state borders. One interviewee referenced that content from India reached American diaspora communities not only via group chats established by local diaspora communities, but also via individual chats with people "back home in India" which can easily be forwarded to the local group chats.[55]

Given these dynamic developments and corresponding challenges for transitionary democracies around the world and for established democracies like the U.S., policymakers are facing a demanding situation, and journalists are constantly confronted with finding the right way to reach the right audience.

CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed interview data collected from September 2020 through September 2021, including during the American presidential election on November 3, 2020. The upcoming mid-term elections will take place in a possible post-COVID-19 environment which is defined by continuing reverberations of the pandemic and related challenges – economically, socially, and politically. The results show how diaspora communities get some of their news from EMAs and contribute to the ongoing debate about declining trust of official news channels – and with it, the rise of alternative sources of news and information, such as social media.[56]

At the same time, it draws attention to the challenges of inclusion and representation in U.S. environments and the fact that this critique is still perceived as legitimate among minority groups.[57]

In critical media theory and cultural studies, community-owned media have empowered marginalized groups by offering them an alternative environment for inclusion and representation.[58] This study suggests that we are now observing a critical shift in the way diaspora communities in the U.S. engage with news. This raises important questions about the conditions for public trust through inclusion and representation. For instance, the described rhetoric of domestic privacy seeks to exclude some issues and interests from public debate by personalizing and/or familiarizing them; it casts these as private-domestic or personal-familial matters in contradistinction to public, political matters.[59] However, the public sphere is not the government or state; it is rather the informally mobilized body of nongovernmental discursive opinion that can serve as a counterweight to the state. And to this, conversations on EMAs among diaspora communities are contributing already.[60]

In other words, diaspora communities engage politically, and so these political conversations also happen on EMAs. They are very much informed by cultural context, political ideology, cultural history, and migration. All of this leads to different conceptualizations of U.S. politics that are not always in line with mainstream media narratives. Political persuasion happens there as it does in other spaces, but the topics and themes are particular, such as emphasizing Joe Biden as an Anti-Catholic presidential candidate. While these developments offer opportunities for diaspora communities to claim their own spaces, it also means that false information enters the fray. With regard to the latter, our research outlined four main themes that defined false content on EMAs: (1) the sowing of confusion via translational ambiguities, (2) the leveraging falsehoods to redraw ideological fault lines, (3) the use of religion to sow doubt about candidates' views, and (4) the oversimplification of complex perspectives, policies, and procedures to alter voting decisions. In addition to the tactical advantages of propagandists targeting diaspora communities, these research insights reveal areas of prioritization for any counter programs with regard to the 2022 mid-term elections that aim to focus on and work with diaspora communities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ENDNOTES

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