# UNFIN'SHED

**November 4, 2022**

# Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

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## What we're thinking about

It's time we talk about election misinformation and disinformation.

With the U.S. election right around the corner, both election misinformation and disinformation are rampant across social media platforms.

*Dis*information and *mis*information both contain false information, but disinformation is false information that is deliberately shared with the intention to cause harm, whereas misinformation is false information shared by people unaware that it's untrue.

Disinformation can become misinformation when campaigns to intentionally spread untrue, fraudulent information are re-shared by people who are unaware that the information is false.

According to ProPublica, there are **two primary themes** in the disinformation and misinformation landscape in 2022.

- Lies about the elections themselves (including election integrity and voter fraud)
- Lies and distortions about specific parties, candidates, and policies

While voter fraud is rare, **election integrity is a major point of contention** in 2022, and it's spawned numerous conspiracy theories about fraudulent ballots, rigged voting machines, and "ballot mules," or people paid to cast fake ballots. Some online posts encouraging people to safeguard ballot boxes **have led groups to police voting and polling locations** (including **people in tactical gear and masks** standing guard over a voting drop box in Arizona last week).

According to an analysis by Zignal Labs, a media intelligence firm, "stolen election" and "voter fraud" are now **two of the three most popular terms** included in online discussions related to this year's election.

In one recent study, researchers at New York University submitted advertisements to TikTok that featured election misinformation (including ads with the wrong election date, false claims about voting requirements, and rhetoric dissuading people from voting). **TikTok approved 90% of those advertisements**, leading the researchers to conclude that it "performed the worst out of all of the platforms tested." (Unfinished is supporting our Network Partner **Digital Public Library of America** to create research tools to better understand the impact of TikTok on elections – we'll highlight their learnings in a future newsletter.)

As for Twitter, **Eddie Perez writes in Tech Policy Press** that Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter could create multiple adverse effects on the midterms, including political violence, obstructing the voting process, and disinformation after the election.

Against mounting pressure, platforms like TikTok, Facebook and YouTube are doubling down on their efforts to combat fraudulent claims and conspiracy theories by making statements, adding labels and warnings to content, and prohibiting paid political advertising.

For example, **Meta has said** that anyone on its Facebook platform who conducts keyword searches related to the election or election fraud will see a pop-up window that recommends trustworthy voting resources. But such steps still might not be enough (You can check out Meta's self-published website on what else it's doing related to elections **here**.)

So what can individuals do?

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions has created a checklist for spotting fake news (see below). But as **Maria Ressa said at Unfinished Live** in her riveting talk, there is work to be done at the systems level (which is exactly what we are focused on with **Project Liberty** and its decentralized social network protocol, **DSNP**). **Rappler**, Ressa's Filipino news organization, is just one example of the strong independent journalism needed to confront tyranny and speak truth around the world. You can learn more about Ressa's 10-point plan to address the information crisis **here**.

# HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

## CONSIDER THE SOURCE
Click away from the story to investigate the site, its mission and its contact info.

## READ BEYOND
Headlines can be outrageous in an effort to get clicks. What's the whole story?

## CHECK THE AUTHOR
Do a quick search on the author. Are they credible? Are they real?

## SUPPORTING SOURCES?
Click on those links. Determine if the info given actually supports the story.

## CHECK THE DATE
Reposting old news stories doesn't mean they're relevant to current events.

## IS IT A JOKE?
If it is too outlandish, it might be satire. Research the site and author to be sure.

## CHECK YOUR BIASES
Consider if your own beliefs could affect your judgement.

## ASK THE EXPERTS
Ask a librarian, or consult a fact-checking site.

**IFLA**
International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
With thanks to www.FactCheck.org

# 📰 Other notable headlines

🧠 Teens are using TikTok to diagnose themselves for mental health conditions. While the videos, resources, and self-quizzes on TikTok can be helpful for struggling teens, they are often not a proper substitute for professional help. *The New York Times* reports that misdiagnosis is common, as is the adoption of ineffective treatments promoted on the platform. Destigmatizing mental health issues and finding a community of support online are considered steps forward to make mental health issues less taboo, but

some teens are blasé about their self-diagnoses, even considering a mental health disorder as something that is "trendy" or a feature of their personality instead of something they want to address.

📢 In his efforts to remake Twitter, Elon Musk has signaled that he might roll back features considered critical to Twitter becoming the "common digital town square" that he envisions. **Jillian York's opinion piece in the MIT Technology Review** raises concerns that Musk could 1) rewind Twitter's work to protect its most vulnerable users, 2) cut back on Twitter's extensive efforts to fight misinformation and disinformation, and 3) expose anonymous and pseudonymous accounts that rely on concealed identities to hold power to account.

🕵️ New laws in multiple U.S. states point to the rise of "community surveillance" where private citizens are incentivized to turn in their fellow neighbors. Whether it's reporting the parents of transgender teens to Texas authorities or turning in teachers who teach "divisive" subjects in Virginia classrooms, **WIRED reports** on the rise of distributed authoritarianism where individuals have a range of technologies—from Ring cameras to smart phones to social media platforms—to enforce specific moral norms across a society.

📉 With the economy sputtering, tech companies are being forced to give up on their futuristic bets for flashy new technology and instead return to strategies that drive shareholder value. **Christopher Mims of the Wall Street Journal** predicts that we're entering the age of boring tech, and how that's a positive sign for an industry that has been overhyped with promises of self-driving cars, the metaverse, and a crypto-dominated financial sector. The history of downturns tells us that when tech companies need to return to the basics, it often leads to an *increase* in the adoption of new technologies as companies focus on the products that have the best chance of solving existing problems in the market.

# Thank you for reading.

Follow Unfinished (**@byUnfinished** on Twitter and **@thisisunfinished** on IG) for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

The Unfinished team