



CSMaP

CENTER FOR SOCIAL
MEDIA AND POLITICS

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Annual Report 2023–2024

NYU's Center for Social Media and Politics

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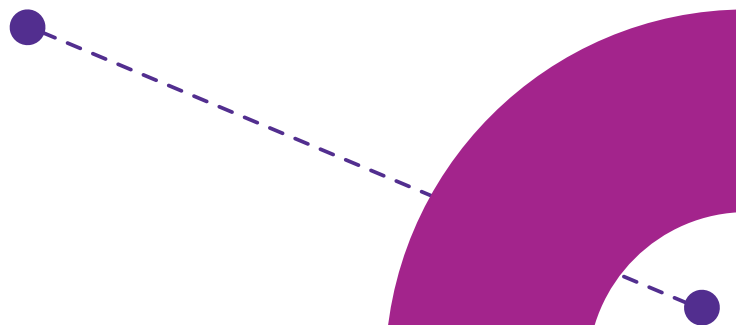
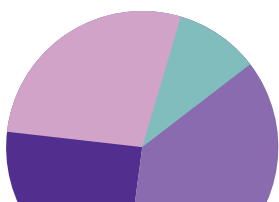
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ABOUT NYU'S CENTER FOR SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICS

Social media and digital technology have transformed our society and presented urgent challenges to democratic governance. As policymakers reshape laws governing the online sphere, it's critical that these policies are informed by high-quality empirical evidence. NYU's Center for Social Media and Politics is a leading academic research institute studying this ever-shifting online environment at scale. We work to strengthen democracy by conducting rigorous research, advancing evidence-based public policy, and training the next generation of scholars.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gifts and grants fund everything we do, from undertaking ambitious research to building out a talented team of researchers. We are extremely grateful for all the support we have received from our funders, including the Charles Koch Foundation, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, Google, Hewlett Foundation, Knight Foundation, National Science Foundation, Siegel Family Endowment, and Templeton World Charity Foundation.

Introduction

Over the past few years, the online environment has shifted radically. Not only have new social media platforms emerged, but the type of content that spreads on those platforms has been transformed as well. These changes largely defined how the 2024 election played out online, with three clear trends emerging.

First, 2024 was the so-called year of elections, with more than half the world's population voting at the national level. At the same time, social media platforms cut the budgets of trust and safety teams tasked with mitigating the effects of harmful content. Second, this year saw the continued rise of TikTok, where memes and jokes, served to users based on individualized algorithms, gain rapid attention before fading away. And finally, while there were widespread fears that generative AI would lead to a surge of disinformation and severely disrupt the electoral process, it seems like the hype was largely overblown. Nonetheless, the very existence of generative AI, which allows bad actors to claim anything is fake, may reduce general trust in the information environment.

The big questions now: How will users react to these new media trends — and what research do we need to measure those impacts? The new online ecosystem presents significant challenges for researchers trying to answer these questions. Most platforms have restricted or eliminated data access, while the social landscape continues to fragment. At the same time, new types of content, as well as the lightning-fast spread of information, makes it increasingly difficult to grasp online dynamics.

CSMaP is using innovative techniques to explore this shifting online environment, so that the policy conversation — among lawmakers, media, platforms, and the public — can be informed by high-quality empirical evidence. In the past academic year, CSMaP published several new papers informing this debate, including research on how search engines impact people's ability to correctly identify the veracity of news and new data exploring neighborhood dynamics on Nextdoor. At the same time, we've started several projects related to generative AI, while expanding data collection and research to explore burgeoning platforms.

At the heart of CSMaP's work lies a powerful combination: cutting-edge data infrastructure and the multi-faceted expertise of our scholars. Together, our community continues to push the boundaries of academic study while working to train the next generation of scholars and experts. Our team now comprises 18 full-time researchers and operations staff, along with numerous research assistants, affiliated faculty, and graduate students. We are deeply grateful for their dedication and collaboration, and to our community of funders and partners whose support makes our work possible.

Academic research is an ongoing process: We complete and publish papers while initiating new data collections to facilitate future research. The past year was remarkably productive on both fronts. The following report summarizes research accomplishments from the past year, and offers more insights into our ongoing work.

With gratitude,

Zeve Sanderson
Executive Director

Jonathan Nagler
Faculty Co-Director

Joshua A. Tucker
Faculty Co-Director

Research

CSMaP's primary focus is the production of rigorous academic research and advancing scientific knowledge in public discourse. In this regard, the past year has been tremendously productive. During the 2023-24 academic year, we released nine peer-reviewed publications, posted seven public working papers, pushed forward on ongoing research, and launched a number of new initiatives.

Research Highlights

1

Online Searches to Evaluate Misinformation Can Increase its Perceived Veracity ([Nature](#))

Significant attention has been paid to understanding the spread of and belief in misinformation on social media. But much less is known about the impact of search engines, even though searching is a primary way people find information online and is a central component of many recommended media literacy interventions. Surprisingly, in this paper we found that searching online to evaluate the veracity of misinformation can *increase* the probability of believing it by approximately 20 percent. In addition, this phenomenon is concentrated among individuals for whom search engines return lower quality information. The findings highlight the need for media literacy programs to ground recommendations in empirically tested interventions and search engines to invest in solutions to the challenges identified by this research.

2

Measuring Receptivity to Misinformation at Scale on a Social Media Platform ([PNAS Nexus](#))

Traditional ways of measuring the impact of online misinformation rely on user views or shares on social media. However, this approach is incomplete, since not everyone who is exposed to misinformation is equally likely to believe it. In this paper, we develop a method combining survey and Twitter data to estimate the number of users both exposed to and likely to believe a specific news story. We find that, while false news reaches users across the political spectrum, those with extreme ideologies are far more likely to both see and believe it. Importantly, the research also finds that extreme users tend to see misinformation earlier than others. This means that current social media interventions may struggle to curb its impact, as they are typically too slow to prevent exposure among those most receptive to it.

3

Digital Town Square? Nextdoor's Offline Contexts and Online Discourse ([Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media](#))

Research and reporting on social media tends to focus on national political discussions happening on large platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. But this limits our understanding of the digital media ecosystem as a whole, and its relationship with local communities and civic life in particular. In this paper examining Nextdoor — a popular hyper-local platform with users covering an estimated one-third of U.S. households — we help fill this gap, providing new data illustrating the offline demographics of communities in which Nextdoor neighborhoods exist, the presence of public agencies in those communities, and what topics are most popular.

View a full list of articles in the [Appendix](#).



Ongoing Research

In addition to our published articles, as of September 2024 we have also posted seven public working papers and have 45 ongoing research projects. Project highlights include:

1 Generative AI

We're currently exploring multiple lines of research related to new generative AI technologies. First, we're analyzing how real people use AI and to what effect. We launched a new [archive project](#) to track how political operatives up and down the ballot use AI in campaigns, are running experiments to understand the effects of labeling images as AI generated, and are studying the impact of using AI chatbots for fact-checking political news. Second, we're exploring how political biases are embedded in language models themselves — contributing to a relatively underexplored area in the important field of inquiry examining how biases impact model outputs.

2 Emerging Platforms & Beyond the United States

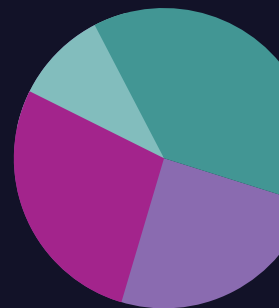
For years, social media was dominated by network-based platforms (i.e. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram). But this landscape is rapidly evolving, as users turn to algorithmically driven feeds and private messaging apps. CSMaP is setting up new research infrastructure to explore these online environments, including projects collecting data to understand how politics is talked about on YouTube, WhatsApp, and right-wing platforms (Gab, Gettr, and Rumble). At the same time, since most research focuses on social media in the United States, we're expanding our focus to explore more global contexts. We're currently collaborating on a 20-country study analyzing how deactivating social media impacts polarization and belief in misinformation, and are running a series of WhatsApp experiments in India, Brazil, and South Africa.

3 Propaganda

Studying foreign influence campaigns has been a key part of our research agenda for more than a decade. We have several ongoing projects looking specifically at the role of propaganda online. First, we're examining how propaganda from authoritarian regimes shows up in LLM training data, which in turn can shape the output for these models, making it more favorable to their cause. Second, we're developing automated tools to detect and analyze “narrative diffusion” — where content produced by malign actors is reused by other online news sources. Third, plenty of research focuses on algorithmic ranking on U.S.-based social media platforms. We're studying whether authoritarian regimes, specifically China, use algorithmic ranking to their own advantage, specifically by upranking state sources.

Public Impact

Over the last year, our team focused on increasing the public impact of the Center's work in four primary ways: policy engagement, academic and public events, strategic communications, and network building.



Policy Engagement

Much of the recent policy debate has centered on how generative AI would impact the 2024 election, with some worrying AI could lead to a deluge of misinformation and others finding the fears understandable but largely overblown. In January, CSMaP argued in [Brookings](#) that both could be correct. The past decade of misinformation suggests AI could be less impactful than many assume. Yet AI could also alter the media landscape in unprecedented ways. Over the course of the year, this framing — which in particular elucidated the danger of the “liar’s dividend,” or a scenario where the assumed ubiquity of generative AI makes it harder to convince people that true things are actually true — slowly became the conventional wisdom.

In the last year, we shared our expertise and research with policymakers, civil society groups, and industry professionals. We filed an amicus brief in the Supreme Court’s Florida and Texas social media cases; consulted with officials at the White House, State Department, United Nations, and the New York Attorney General’s office; and presented research to YouTube, Google, and OpenAI.

Academic and Public Events

Since fall 2023, CSMaP directors and experts gave 46 presentations at external events, ranging from academic conferences and lectures (e.g. Harvard Berkman Klein Center’s Institute for Rebooting Social Media speaker series) to public-facing panel discussions (e.g. the annual VivaTech conference in Paris, where Joshua Tucker, below, spoke in 2024).

At CSMaP, we also ran three events for public audiences, including a tech and democracy networking event, and virtual discussions focused on understanding media habits of Latino communities and the future of search engines in the age of AI. In total, our events welcomed more than 200 virtual and in-person attendees. We also hosted two academic conferences, including the first of our Research Coordination Network, which combined brought together dozens of scholars from a diverse set of disciplines to present research, discuss future opportunities for collaboration, and network.



Strategic Communications

Communications continues to be a critical part of CSMaP's overall strategy. By cultivating relationships with top journalists and sharing our research in a variety of digital platforms, our experts add scientific rigor to media coverage and inform public discourse about democracy in the digital age. Here are some key metrics from the past year:

Media

CSMaP experts and research was cited in more than **100 news articles** since September 2023, ranging from *The New York Times* and NPR to BBC and *The Economist*. In addition, we published five articles in popular outlets, including *Brookings*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, and *Lawfare*, ranging from data-informed analyses to op-eds.

Website

Overall web traffic has remained steady, and strong, for the past two years. We average more than **5,000 views** per month, which includes many repeat visitors who come to our site for our latest research and analyses.

Email

Thanks to several successful events, our email list continued to grow over the past year, increasing about **30 percent**. Despite this increase in audience, our newsletters and updates continue to garner high open rates of more than **50 percent**, which is well above industry benchmarks.

Social Media

As Twitter fades from public relevance, we're exploring alternative ways to communicate with our audience on other platforms. LinkedIn and Bluesky, where our following grew by more than **100 percent** last year, are the most promising options so far. We're also posting on Threads, where many journalists migrated to in the past few months.

Network Building

CSMaP has continued to support the field of academic, policy, and civil society groups focused on democracy and technology in two primary ways. First, our [NSF-funded](#) Research Coordination Network focused on Democracy in the Networked Era has helped a community of scholars across disciplines to collaborate on research and make findings more accessible to the policy community. And second, through the efforts of our Knight Foundation-funded Policy Fellow and others, we have increased our public event portfolio, bringing together experts from across fields for fascinating conversations on policy-relevant topics.

Data Engineering

Studying the online information landscape is more urgent than ever, but requires social and digital media data that is increasingly harder to come by. To address these challenges, CSMaP is using innovative techniques to gather data from platforms, creating new tools to collect donated digital trace data, and engaging in policy discussions to enable more data access for researchers.

Collecting Data from Platforms

For years, academic researchers were able to gather data from most major social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. But in the past few years, social networks have either eliminated or severely cut back on data access, making it harder for us to study what's happening online. Responding to this new reality, CSMaP experts are using innovative techniques to gather and analyze online data.

- **Social Media** - To maintain our robust data infrastructure, CSMaP engineers have created new cutting-edge data collection tools and expanded our focus to gather data from alternative platforms.
- **News Media** - As part of our project tracing how propaganda narratives spread from Russian state media to American media, we developed a pipeline to create a data set of news media. The data set now includes approximately 4 million unique articles from popular sources, low-quality sources, and Russian state media.
- **Accelerator** - We are also one of the founding consortium members of the [Accelerator](#) infrastructure project, which is designed to power policy-relevant research by building shared infrastructure to support data collection, analysis, and tool development in an effort to better understand today's information environment.

Collecting Data from People

One unique aspect of CSMaP's work is our ability to pair traditional surveys with digital trace data from respondents. This allows us to understand respondents' views — and the online information environment that influences those views. Last year we ran a YouGov panel surveying approximately 4,000 Americans. At the same time, we've also expanded and enhanced our tools for collecting digital trace data from these respondents and others. We have three main data pipelines:

- **Social Media** - We have collected Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube data from our YouGov respondents, and will be including TikTok data going forward.
- **Browser Extension** - We ask survey respondents to download a Chrome extension, allowing us to collect web browsing and additional YouTube data.
- **Mobile App** - Finally, we developed an Android-based mobile application, which measures users' individual app usage and collects granular data about the content users see on social media. In the past year we've developed additional versions of the app so it can be used in multiple languages and countries.

Pushing for Data Access

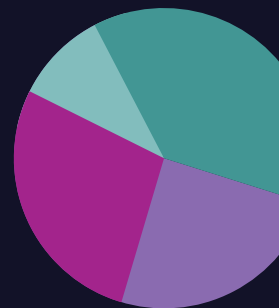
While our research teams find new ways to collect data, we also continue to advocate for more access to social media data. In the past academic year:

- We filed an amicus brief in two Supreme Court cases regarding social media laws in Florida and Texas, urging the court to craft rulings that leave ample room for legislative and regulatory efforts to mandate transparency.
- We joined a letter, signed by more than 50 organizations and individuals, urging Meta to maintain full functionality of CrowdTangle, a critical tool used to investigate the flow of information on its platforms.
- We wrote a white paper explaining how the policy conversations around data portability and data access overlap, using generative AI as a case study for how data donations can support urgent research agendas on digital platforms. (Zeve Sanderson, below right, presented the paper at a Washington, D.C. conference in February 2024.)
- And finally, our experts spoke about data access policy at several events, including a presentation for the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology.



People

Pushing the boundaries of academic study requires a talented and cross-disciplinary group of researchers with knowledge of the latest data and social science techniques. Scholars, research engineers, data scientists, and operations staff are vital to the breadth and depth of our research portfolio. Over the past year, we have continued our work to mentor students, train new researchers, and support and collaborate with CSMaP alumni.



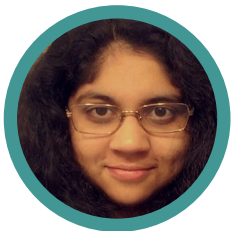
Training & Hiring

By training students and postdocs, CSMaP develops a new generation of scholars and experts to explore some of the biggest questions at the intersection of social media and democracy. In the 2023-24 academic year, our faculty co-directors taught both undergraduate and graduate courses, mentoring more than two dozen undergraduate, masters, and PhD students.

Since last fall, we also welcomed several new team members:

- **Lama Mohammed** joined as a Tech Policy Fellow and **Christopher Schwarz** as a Research Data Scientist.
- **Melina Much** and **Kylan Rutherford** started as Postdoctoral Fellows, joining **Benjamin Guinaudeau** and **Wei (Rocio) Zhong**. Together, our postdocs serve as the Center's core research engine, representing methodological, substantive, and disciplinary diversity.
- We also helped recruit two new core faculty members — **Jennifer Allen** and **Christopher Barrie** — to NYU to join the Center. Barrie started this fall in the NYU Department of Sociology, and Allen will join the NYU Stern School of Business in Fall 2025.

We also continued to support and collaborate with our alumni network, which includes more than 40 researchers across academia and industry. We said goodbye to several postdocs, researchers, and PhD students who transitioned to new roles.



RAJESHWARI MAJUMDAR
joined Yale University's Identity & Conflict Lab as a Postdoctoral Associate



HANNAH WAIGHT
joined the University of Oregon Department of Sociology as an Assistant Professor



AARON POPE
began his PhD at the University of Copenhagen's Center for Social Data Science



PATRICK Y. WU
joined American University's Department of Computer Science as an Assistant Professor



ROBERT VIDIGAL
started as a Senior Statistician at the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University

By the Numbers

RESEARCH

CSMaP papers cited **3,700** times in 2024

9 peer-reviewed articles and **7** public working papers published in the past academic year

45 ongoing research projects

4,000 people surveyed for YouGov panel

PUBLIC IMPACT

46 presentations by our experts at external events

200 attendees at 3 CSMaP public events

100 percent increase in LinkedIn and Bluesky followers

30 percent increase in email list

DATA ENGINEERING

4 million unique news articles collected from dozens of sources

1.5 million downloads of our open-source tools to date

PEOPLE

28 undergraduate, masters, and PhD students mentored

37 hours per week worked by CSMaP undergraduate research associates

44 CSMaP alumni across academia and industry

Appendix

Peer-Reviewed Publications by CSMaP Researchers

[Measuring Receptivity to Misinformation at Scale on a Social Media Platform](#) - PNAS Nexus

[Digital Town Square? Nextdoor's Offline Contexts and Online Discourse](#) - *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media*

[The Effects of Facebook and Instagram on the 2020 Election: A Deactivation Experiment](#) - *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*

[Online Data and the Insurrection](#) - *Media and January 6th* (Oxford University Press)

[Estimating the Ideology of Political YouTube Videos](#) - *Political Analysis*

[Online Searches to Evaluate Misinformation Can Increase its Perceived Veracity](#) - *Nature*

[A Synthesis of Evidence for Policy from Behavioural Science During COVID-19](#) - *Nature*

[Testing the Effect of Information on Discerning the Veracity of News in Real Time](#) - *Journal of Experimental Political Science*

[Replicating the Effects of Facebook Deactivation in an Ethnically Polarized Setting](#) - *Research & Politics*

Public Working Papers

[Survey Professionalism: New Evidence from Web Browsing Data](#)

[Reaching Across the Political Aisle: Overcoming Challenges in Using Social Media for Recruiting Politically Diverse Respondents](#)

[Misinformation Exposure Beyond Traditional Feeds: Evidence from a WhatsApp Deactivation Experiment in Brazil](#)

[Beyond Competition: Designing Data Portability to Support Research on the Digital Information Environment](#)

[Concept-Guided Chain-of-Thought Prompting for Pairwise Comparison Scaling of Texts with Large Language Models](#)

[Large Language Models Can Be Used to Estimate the Latent Positions of Politicians](#)

[Reducing Prejudice and Support for Religious Nationalism Through Conversations on WhatsApp](#)

Articles in the Popular Press

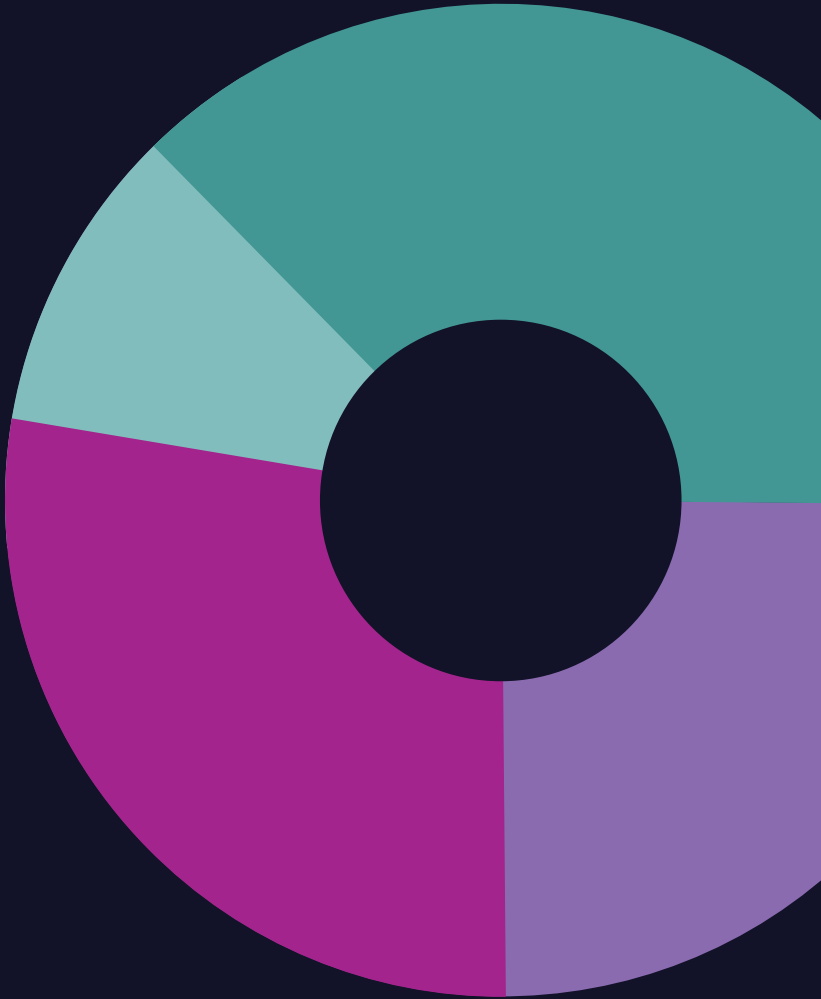
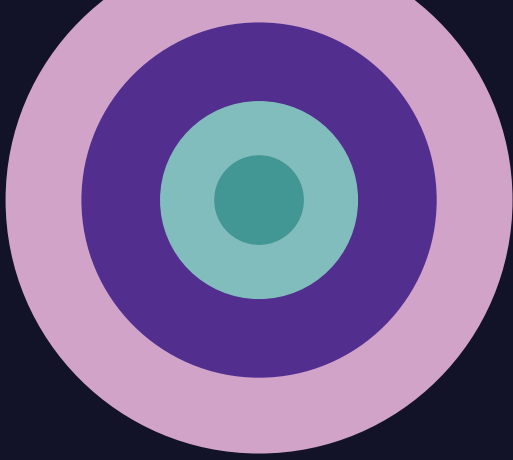
[Reducing Exposure to Misinformation: Evidence from WhatsApp in Brazil](#) - *VoxDev*

[People Trust Themselves More Than They Trust the News. They Shouldn't.](#) - *Columbia Journalism Review*

[Why the Texas and Florida Social Media Cases are Important for Research Transparency](#) - *Lawfare*

[Misunderstood Mechanics: How AI, TikTok, and the Liar's Dividend Might Affect the 2024 Elections](#) - *Brookings*

[Beyond Red Teaming: Facilitating User-Based Data Donations to Study Generative AI](#) - *Tech Policy Press*



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