

Being Sensemakers: A Framework for University-Based Rapid Research of Elections, Crisis Events, and Beyond

BEING SENSEMAKERS: A FRAMEWORK FOR UNIVERSITY-BASED RAPID RESEARCH OF ELECTIONS, CRISIS EVENTS, AND BEYOND

DANIELLE LEE TOMSON; KATE STARBIRD; MERT CAN BAYAR;
MICHAEL GRASS; AND EMMA SPIRO

University of Washington Center for an Informed Public
Seattle



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PART I

A RAPID SKETCH OF RAPID RESEARCH

Sometimes, a hunch pays off—especially after years spent tracing the contours of online election rumors. A seasoned researcher with a cultivated instinct can quickly make sense of what others might miss.

On a Monday morning at the start of the University of Washington’s Fall 2024 term, an undergraduate research assistant spotted something noteworthy during her “Discovery” shift. The student was part of a group of undergrads hired to monitor social media looking for “rumors”—or unverified stories—related to election processes and procedures. She was part of the “Election Rumor Research Project” at UW’s Center for an Informed Public (CIP).

While monitoring keyword queries related to the election on X, she logged a post from a prominent MAGA influencer—one that featured a screenshot from then-candidate Trump’s Truth Social account:

“The Democrats are talking about how they’re working so hard to get millions of votes from Americans living overseas. Actually, they are getting ready to CHEAT! They are going to use UOCAVA to get ballots, a program that emails ballots overseas without any citizen check or verification of identity, whatsoever. (Foreign interference?) Remember they say, we have the “most secure elections in history,” and anyone can get a ballot emailed to them! They want to dilute the TRUE vote of our beautiful military and their families, who Comrade Kamala has totally disrespected and abandoned. Republicans must act to stop them from stealing our military votes. WATCH! Remember, IF YOU VOTE ILLEGALLY, YOU’RE GOING TO JAIL.”¹

To confirm the meaning, she googled “UOCAVA.” This wonky acronym stands for “Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act,” which guarantees and makes provisions such that Americans abroad can vote. This post clearly fell within the scope of the project—it featured unsubstantiated claims questioning the security and administration of U.S. elections.

That afternoon, a graduate student on an “Analysis” shift saw the logged entry in the team’s shared project management database. She immediately recognized its significance. Months earlier, while reviewing voter registration deadlines, she had flagged UOCAVA applications as a potential vector for rumors, drawing on a

1. Donald J. Trump (@realdonaldtrump), “The Democrats are talking about...” Truth Social, September 23, 2024 <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/113187829420592812>

framework for viral rumors the team had generated from previous elections.² At the time, UOCAVA hadn't been added to the team's list of query terms. Now, here it was—surfacing in the data.

She messaged the research manager on Slack: "I knew we should've added UOCAVA to the queries this term!"

It was a moment of validation. This was her second election cycle with the CIP, and experience coupled with formalized guidelines had sharpened her eye for which rumors might spread. UOCAVA hit the trifecta: it was obscure, technical, and tied into a larger, familiar narrative—in 2024, that meant fear-mongering around non-citizen voting. She and the research manager agreed: this post was a signal. The rumor was about to gain traction, and their team needed to follow it closely.

The Analysis shift team quickly copied a blog post template to a shared document and renamed it for UOCAVA. From there, this interdisciplinary team divided up tasks. One information science graduate student downloaded social media data to map the rumor's growth and spread—hoping to clarify who was amplifying it and how long it had been circulating. Others gathered additional posts to better understand what the rumor was alleging and assess the accuracy of those claims. A law school graduate student focused their time on learning the intricacies of UOCAVA itself.

The research manager knew they needed more context on this obscure act. What were some of the legal provisions? How did UOCAVA voter registration actually work? What technology was involved? She called up an external election technology expert the team had known for years to help walk her through how UOCAVA worked to get a more personal tale. She also called an old teacher abroad who had voted using UOCAVA. Both people were happy to share their insights—they felt valued. In rapid research, warm relationships with different stakeholders and friends are critical to understanding both technical and human aspects of a given phenomenon.

A week later—after numerous rounds of internal editing—the research manager published the collaboratively written blog post on the CIP Substack, a platform which automatically emails new posts to subscribers. The Center's full-time communications director then cross-posted it to the UW CIP website.³ Afterwards,

2. Emma S. Spiro and Kate Starbird, "Rumors Have Rules," *Issues in Science and Technology* XXXIX, no. 3 (Spring 2023), <https://issues.org/rumors-research-misinformation-spiro-starbird>

3. "Examining Rumors That Democrats Are Trying to Commit Voter Fraud via the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA)," Election Rumor Research @ Center for an Informed Public, October 1, 2024, <https://uwcip.substack.com/p/examining-rumors-that-democrats-are>.

civil society organizations became aware of the emerging rumor and published their own explainers clarifying UOCAVA policy and procedures.⁴

The rumor didn't fade. It evolved—both as a narrative and legal issue. Discovery shift students flagged more posts. Elon Musk tweeted about UOCAVA. The RNC sued to block UOCAVA ballots in Michigan and North Carolina. In response, the Analysis team published a follow-up blog post about the lawsuits, showing how this misleading rumor had moved into the courts. This informed a larger, reflective piece the team wrote on “Evidence Generation Infrastructure,” exploring how online rumor cycles can produce apparent “evidence” used to justify legal or political action.⁵

Then, an old UOCAVA rumor from both 2020 and 2022 surged about a debunked video alleging that Iranians were using UOCAVA to hack the election. In a weekly rumor round-up memo, the team explained the evolution and reemergence of this Iran rumor.⁶ These public memos were often a big help to journalists, but also served as useful research documentation for the team internally.

By the end of the month, major press outlets like *Science* and *The Guardian* covered the team's UOCAVA rapid research.⁷ Multiple outlets requested op-eds on the “Evidence Generation Infrastructure” piece which editors found useful for helping readers understand not just whether election rumors were true or false, but how they functioned.

The team had come to use the concept of “collective sensemaking” to describe online rumoring dynamics, where the public shares information and influential actors wrap “evidence” in different explanatory frames

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4. Erin Geiger Smith and Josh Bell, “Facts and Myths About the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act,” Brennan Center for Justice, October 18, 2024, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/facts-and-myths-about-uniformed-and-overseas-citizens-absentee-voting-act>.
 5. Stephen Prochaska, Danielle Lee Tomson, and Kate Starbird. “Making the Case: Evidence Generation Infrastructure in the 2024 Election.” Election Rumor Research @ Center for an Informed Public, October 29, 2024. <https://uwcip.substack.com/p/making-the-case-evidence-generation>.
 6. “Rapid Research Memo October 28: Early Voting Opens, Claims of ‘Illegal’ or Suspicious Activities at the Polls and at Drop Boxes Increase,” Election Rumor Research @ Center for an Informed Public, October 28, 2024, <https://uwcip.substack.com/p/rapid-research-memo-october-28-early>.
 7. Kai Kupferschmidt, “As U.S. Election Looms, This ‘Rumor Researcher’ Tracks—and Combats—Falsehoods in Real Time,” *Science*, October 30, 2024, <https://www.science.org/content/article/u-s-election-looms-rumor-researcher-tracks-falsehoods-and-counters-them-real-time>; Rachel Leingang, “Factchecking the Most Pervasive Myths and Lies about US Elections,” US News, *The Guardian*, October 30, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/oct/30/election-harris-trump-myths-lies-fact-checkfalse-claims-include-that-noncitizens-are-voting-in-broad-numbers-and-attacks-on-the-voting-and-counting-process>.

to help the public “make sense” of what is going on in times of uncertainty. It seemed this team of rapid researchers were sensemakers too.

PART I

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE



Above: An in-person voting location in Ypsilanti, Michigan. (Photo by [Corey Seeman / Flickr](#) via [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#))

The previous “rapid research” vignette offers a glimpse into the day-to-day of the 2024 Election Rumor Research Project (ERRP) at the University of Washington’s Center for an Informed Public. This kind of research often runs counter to traditional academic norms and incentives: it moves fast, responds to urgent public information needs in real time, spans and integrates multiple disciplines, and prioritizes public impact over publication in peer-reviewed journals. Building on two previous election cycle efforts, ERRP operated within a research center designed to support scholarship in the public interest, providing essential infrastructure, staff, funding, and coordination across efforts.

Though academic incentives are often misaligned with this kind of work, there is value in the academy engaging in real-time research and publication during unfolding news events. Echoing the “rumor clinics” of the Second World War—which sought to dispel morale-killing gossip¹—rapid research projects like ours can help the public make sense not only of what is happening in the moment, but also of how rumors, or unverified claims, operate generally during times of uncertainty. In doing so, they contribute to both civic and psychological resilience. Time-sensitive work also fosters strong relationships among students, faculty, journalists, election officials, and the public—relationships as valuable as the datasets and outputs produced in the course of research. By providing timely insight, such work can build trust in the academy and underscore

1. There are documented challenges and critiques of these efforts by the very social scientists and government actors involved at the time, particularly around the framing of gossip. In many ways, these critiques prompted scholarship of Tomatsu Shibutani, humanizing the role of rumors while also distinguishing them from propaganda efforts. Respectively, see Cathy Faye, “Governing the Grapevine: The Study of Rumor during World War II,” *History of Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2007): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1037/1093-4510.10.1.1>; Anya Schiffrin, “Fighting Disinformation in the 1930s: Clyde Miller and the Institute for Propaganda Analysis,” *International Journal of Communication* 16 (2022): 3715–41; Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966).

its civic function. It also creates data, builds contextual knowledge, and generates insights that can be leveraged for more in-depth research after the fact.

Yet how can one set up the social and technical infrastructure for this kind of rapid research? What personnel are needed? What stakeholders should be considered? What technology can support efforts? This paper introduces a working framework and offers tools—both strategic and tactical—to approach developing and executing a rapid research project. The paper provides a variety of views into our model for rapid research including:

- An overview of the human and technical set-up of our assemblage
- A step-by-step account of how outputs move from template to publication, including tools and workflows
- Reflections from external stakeholders
- Insights for academia, particularly reflecting on how this kind of research benefits the public, trainees, and the academy
- Recommendations for administrators, funders, and academics

This paper is designed to provide the theoretical and practical foundations for implementing the institutional setup for real-time rapid research of rumoring during unfolding events. This could be applied within academic, journalistic, or other institutional settings. While our implementation focuses on election integrity rumors studied from a university-based research center, researchers studying other forms of breaking news and crisis events (such as natural hazards and disasters, where early iterations of this framework began) may find elements of this rapid research framework applicable to their work.

As scholars of rumor, we often describe the dynamics of online and offline information in uncertain events as a form of “collective sensemaking,” a social process by which individuals and groups assemble evidence and apply frames to that evidence in order to develop an explanatory story of an unfolding event. Traditionally, journalists have been the primary “sense-givers” to the public during unfolding news events with high uncertainty, helping the public discern what is happening and why, as facts are verified.²

This dynamic has evolved in recent years with transformations in the news and technological landscape. As people increasingly turn to online platforms for real-time information, Internet influencers, many acting as “newsbrokers,” have come to play an increasingly powerful and acutely visible role in narrating unfolding news events, curating emerging “facts” and “evidence” such as videos, photos, and testimony, then applying narrative

2. Julian Marx, Milad Mirbabaie, and Christian Ehnis. “Sense-Giving Strategies of Media Organisations in Social Media Disaster Communication: Findings from Hurricane Harvey.” ACIS 2018 Proceedings, January 1, 2018. <https://aisel.laisnet.org/acis2018/5>.

and symbolic frames to help their audiences “make sense” of what’s going on.³ Unlike traditional journalism that “gives the facts,” online sensemaking processes are highly participatory, engaging both influencers and audiences, visibly “making sense” together on social media platforms.⁴ This engagement builds relationships, shared language, and trust between influencers and audiences.⁵

Since starting our rapid research work in 2020, the CIP has not only studied collective sensemaking, but also acted as public and visible sensemakers in unfolding election cycles. As we try to make sense of rumoring dynamics—the ways in which people and platforms impact the visibility and spread of rumor narratives—and share that knowledge publicly, we’ve cultivated relationships with various stakeholders, built a participatory audience, developed our brand, and cultivated trust. Rapid research is one way of being a sensemaker. In our work we offer frames to help others interpret the data and dynamics we are witnessing both during and after elections, collaborating with various public stakeholders to offer context and insight into broader social and information dynamics.

In an era of declining trust in expertise, with attacks both political and economic on universities, finding ways for the academy to visibly serve the public good is increasingly important. Thus, this framework for rapid research offers an organizational intervention to the 21st century information environment and expert knowledge production ecosystem, in part by advancing a new model for research and institutional communication.

3. Kate Starbird, “Facts, Frames, and (Mis)Interpretations: Understanding Rumors as Collective Sensemaking,” Center for an Informed Public, December 6, 2023, <https://www.cip.uw.edu/2023/12/06/rumors-collective-sensemaking-kate-starbird/>; Mike Caulfield, Mert Can Bayar, and Ashlyn B. Aske. “The ‘New Elites’ of X: Identifying the Most Influential Accounts Engaged in Hamas/Israel Discourse.” Center for an Informed Public, October 20, 2023. <https://www.cip.uw.edu/2023/10/20/new-elites-twitter-x-most-influential-accounts-hamas-israel/>; Bayar, Mert Can, Stephen Prochaska, Ashlyn B. Aske, Joey S. Schafer, Danielle Lee Tomson, and Emma S. Spiro. “Breaking News in the Hands of Few: Newsbrokering on X during the Trump Assassination Attempts.” Center for an Informed Public, October 14, 2024. <https://www.cip.uw.edu/2024/10/14/newsbrokering-on-x-trump-assassination-attempts/>.

4. Kate Starbird, Renée DiResta, and Matt DeButts. “Influence and Improvisation: Participatory Disinformation during the 2020 US Election.” *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 2 (2023): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177943>.

5. Do Yuon Kim and Hye-Young Kim, “Trust Me, Trust Me Not: A Nuanced View of Influencer Marketing on Social Media,” *Journal of Business Research* 134 (September 2021): 223–32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.024>.

PART I

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a collaborative project of the research team responsible for the Election Rumor Research Project and is informed by the personal experiences of the authors, as well as over 20 hours of interviews with 19 different project stakeholders, both internal and external. These included graduate student researchers, principal investigators (PIs), election officials, technologists, journalists, and CIP staff. These interviews were loosely qualitatively coded in Atlas.ti and also summarized by a graduate student researcher. We also conducted a survey of subscribers to our Substack blog, with 45 respondents.

PART I

UNPACKING THE ERRP ASSEMBLAGE

This section explores the human and technical architecture of the ERRP. Broader technological, institutional, and stakeholder dynamics shaped how the team was built, how it conducted research, and how it shared its findings. Given these contextual aspects, the ERRP’s organizational structure, staffing model, tooling choices, and goals formed a distinctive assemblage.¹ By offering a detailed account of our configuration, we aim to inform and inspire others pursuing rapid research as they consider how to structure teams, select tools, develop outputs, and engage with stakeholders.

As an overview, the ERRP had 21 dedicated researchers—undergraduates, graduates, professors, a research scientist, a postdoctoral fellow, and a full-time staff research manager—detecting and analyzing election rumors on social media in shift work, in real time. Additionally, five full-time support staff from the CIP supported communication, technical, data, finance, and administrative needs related to the research.

A variety of factors informed our rapid research model. These included parameters such as the election timeline, educational value for students, graduate student research agendas, data access, student employment, available tools, external stakeholders like journalists and election officials, and location within the university system.

With these elements in mind, this section examines the ERRP assemblage, including its history, institutional home, data, technical tools, student workers, staff, outputs, and external stakeholders. It also offers an example of how the team went from discovering a rumor to publishing it, showing the sociotechnical infrastructure at each step.

1. The concept of an assemblage was first put forth by sociologists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in the 1980s and later expounded upon by Bruno Latour in his *Actor-Network-Theory* (2005) to describe the ways in which human, non-human, and discursive elements interact to formulate a given arrangement or constellation. For more information on assemblages see Thomas Nail, “What Is an Assemblage?,” *SubStance* 46, no. 1 (2017): 21–37, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sub.2017.0001>; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

1.

SITUATING THE 2024 ELECTION RUMOR RESEARCH PROJECT: ITS HISTORY AND OBJECTIVES

The ERRP is housed not within a particular academic department, but within the Center for an Informed Public (CIP), a collaborative, interdisciplinary research center at the University of Washington. The CIP was founded in 2019 by faculty and researchers in the Information School (iSchool), the School of Law, and the Department of Human Centered Design & Engineering (HCDE). The CIP is administratively housed at the UW iSchool, with an oversight body composed of deans and other academic leadership across its cofounding schools and departments. The CIP researcher community includes affiliate faculty from other UW departments and academic units, such as Biology, Communication, Computer Science, Global Health, International Studies, and Psychology.

The 2024 ERRP was, for our team, the third iteration of our rapid response election work. In 2020 and 2022, we participated in the Election Integrity Partnership (EIP), a non-partisan collaboration whose mission was tightly defined as finding, investigating, and rapidly communicating about false rumors and disinformation about election processes and procedures.¹ In 2020, this work was done with EIP partners Stanford Internet Observatory (SIO), the Digital Forensic Research Lab at the Atlantic Council (DFRLab), and social network analysis company Graphika; in 2022, the CIP collaborated with SIO.

The EIP was subject to political and legal attacks from adversarial figures given it had tracked, analyzed, and in some cases reported election rumors and disinformation campaigns to social media platforms, including rumors related to the 2020 “Stop the Steal” efforts to overturn the presidential election and the subsequent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.² These attacks made it difficult for some partners to

1. Steven Lee Myers and Sheera Frenkel, “G.O.P. Targets Researchers Who Study Disinformation Ahead of 2024 Election,” *The New York Times*, June 19, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/19/technology/gop-disinformation-researchers-2024-election.html>.

2. For further reading about this phenomenon see Philip M. Napoli. 2024. “In Pursuit of Ignorance: The Institutional Assault on Disinformation and Hate Speech Research.” *The Information Society* 41 (1): 1–17. doi:10.1080/01972243.2024.2419105; Renée DiResta, *Invisible Rulers: The People Who Turn Lies Into Reality* (New York: Public Affairs, 2024); Shannon Bond, “A Major Disinformation Research Team’s Future Is Uncertain after

sustain their work in this space. After a series of staffing changes beginning in late 2023, the SIO wound down its operations so that, by June 2024, a partnership was no longer possible.³

Our UW team, however, remained committed to our election research. In 2024, we continued our rapid research election work without formal research partners. Operating independently has not changed our scope of work of identifying and analyzing rumors related to election integrity, processes, and procedures. During the 2024 presidential primary, a downsized but dedicated research team at the CIP continued to conduct both rapid research and larger academic projects in the election rumor space. By August 2024, we had ramped up operations for the 2024 general election, putting an expanded rapid research team into place.

In 2024, ERRP loosely collaborated with external non-partisan stakeholders such as journalists, fact-checkers, community organizations, think tanks, and the public at large to identify, diagnose, and communicate about rumors. On occasion, we reached out to election officials for clarification around how an election procedure worked before publishing posts about specific rumors. We did not liaise with law enforcement, social media platforms, or political parties.

The remit of the project was to identify, document, and analyze emerging rumors across social media platforms related to election processes, administration, and procedures in order to support the aforementioned stakeholders. We did not include analysis of political rumoring (e.g., allegations of corruption or personal attacks against candidates), though political themes emerged in certain kinds of election rumoring. We tracked, analyzed, and published posts on our Substack and website about rumors across the political spectrum in accordance with our approach as a non-partisan research organization.

Political Attacks,” Consider This from NPR, NPR, June 14, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/06/14/g-s1-4570/a-major-disinformation-research-teams-future-is-uncertain-after-political-attacks>.

3. Casey Newton and Zoë Schiffer, “The Stanford Internet Observatory Is Being Dismantled,” Platformer, June 13, 2024, <https://www.platformer.news/stanford-internet-observatory-shutdown-stamos-diresta-sio/>.

2.

CIP AS A CONTAINER

Housing the ERRP in the CIP, as opposed to an individual academic department, was essential to its operation. The CIP is a distinct, interdisciplinary research center dedicated to public interest and supported by full-time staff. Having a distinct research center within a university department allowed the ERRP to benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration, distributed faculty leadership, shared resources, and a shared brand—all of which helped with fundraising and efficient resource use. While students and faculty focused on research (amidst an academic quarter with its own rhythms and time commitments), other technical and managerial staff were there full-time in a reliable and timely way to offer support to achieve broader research goals. As one engineer said, “My job is not research ... I’m just the person who helps.” These full-time jobs offer fulfilling work to academically adjacent professionals and create consistent camaraderie in a dynamic, meaningful environment.

Staff and Support

These were some of the full-time staff available to support the ERRP:

- **Communications Director:** Critical to this project was a dedicated communications director who triaged journalist requests by assessing their inquiries and objectives before determining the appropriate team member to speak with. They also managed certain public events and public relations issues related to the CIP and ERRP. They managed publishing through our website and social media handles. Generally, this role was responsible for cultivating and protecting the external presence of the CIP and ERRP. This person previously worked as a journalist and newsroom manager, bringing valuable domain knowledge and experience managing breaking news events.
- **Research Manager:** This person oversaw project management, certain external relationships, staffing, project strategy, research prioritization, workflow, and publishing. They fielded many of the media requests. This person had received a doctoral degree researching social media ecosystems and understood academic institutional dynamics more generally. They brought and managed existing relationships with the press and civil society. Prior to the CIP, this person had experience in non-academic project management, as well as in writing op-eds and longform features for magazines and newspapers.
- **Director of Strategy and Operations:** This person managed grants, fundraising, budgeting, hiring and other kinds of leadership level operational management.

- **Postdoctoral Fellow:** Supported by ERRP funding, the role participated fully in rapid research while also pursuing academic outputs during and after the project. The postholder led academic research projects in collaboration with team members, contributing peer-reviewed scholarship arising from the rapid research work.
- **Full-stack Engineer:** Unlike a lot of full-stack engineers who work on one app or project, this person supported a variety of projects depending on researchers' needs. They managed different subscriptions of tools and the CIP's tech stack. They also kept up-to-date on new trends or vulnerabilities in the tech sector.
- **Data Engineer:** This engineer worked with researchers on their data needs, particularly in the extraction, transformation, and storage of data for a wide variety of projects at the center. They also helped to facilitate access to data and analysis tools.
- **Administrative and Program Coordinator:** This person was dedicated to subscription management, payments, room reservations, food orders, and other kinds of administrivia.

The team also had access to lawyers and communications consultants. Having faced litigation and partisan attacks related to our rapid research during the 2020 and 2022 election cycles, the ERRP could not have existed without the explicit support from leadership not only in the iSchool, which housed the CIP, but the Law School, the College of Engineering, and the University of Washington more broadly. As one full-time staff member reflected, “We were very lucky that UW did not turn away, in a very tangible way. I mean, they financially supported us through the lawsuits and through some of the other things that we were dealing with. But they also provided moral support, institutional support across the board, comms support, I mean, you name it. What we needed, they were there. I think that was a critical component to why we made it through the way that we did.”

3.

NAVIGATING A FRAGMENTED AND OPAQUE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Previous iterations of our election rumoring work in 2020 and 2022 utilized access to the then-Twitter API to discover and analyze rumoring trends using data collection and analysis tools built in house. After his purchase and subsequent renaming of Twitter to X in late 2022, Elon Musk limited researchers' access to the API and made it prohibitively expensive for non-corporate entities to observe real-time data as was previously possible. As such, our team lost X API access. The team also previously used Crowdtangle, a tool to analyze data across Meta products like Facebook and Instagram. CrowdTangle, which had been owned by Meta since 2016, was shuttered in August 2024.

Since 2020, there have been several migrations of users across platforms as well as the introduction of new platforms, leading to an increasingly fragmented social media ecosystem.¹ Some of these migrations have been politically-motivated. After the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, in recognition of the role that social media played in motivating those events, many platforms including then-Twitter and Meta banned then-President Trump and many of his supporters' accounts.² Trump-supporting personalities and audiences found new homes on alternative platforms, including Truth Social, started by President Trump, Rumble, Telegram, and others. Later, a similar migration would happen after Elon Musk acquired Twitter, as many Democrats and progressive users left that platform, leading to the rise of Meta's Twitter alternative called Threads, and Bluesky, a Twitter-style feed run on a federated social protocol. Many of these newly-popular platforms had or developed political slants or biases.³ Also during this period of time, the rise in popularity of short form video saw a surge in users and content-production on Instagram and TikTok.

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1. Muhammad Ittefaq, "Digital Disconnective Practice: Online Platform Migration and Technology Non-Use in the Age of Emerging Social Media and Polarized Societies," *Media, Culture & Society* 47, no. 4 (2025): 815–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437251326397>.
 2. *Final Report: Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attacks On the United States Capitol*, House Report 117-663 (117th Congress, Second Session, 2022), <https://january6th-benniethompson.house.gov/report-executive-summary>.
 3. Emily A. Anderson, Brooke Auxier, and Monica Anderson. "Partisan Differences in Social Media Use Show up for Some Platforms, but Not Facebook." Pew Research Center, April 7, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/04/07/partisan-differences-in-social-media-use-show-up-for-some-platforms-but-not-facebook/>.

These drastic changes in data access and platform usage patterns required the team to find new methodologies and tools in order to discover and analyze social media rumors across different platforms. Sourcing and experimenting with third-party research tools at the beginning of 2024 was not an easy task. It required trial and error. It required building new relationships with data providers. And in some cases it required additional financial resources. Other research groups were in the same position and collaborations took root, particularly because such products are expensive. Through an academic collaboration, we were able to use Brandwatch, a social media monitoring tool designed for marketing and brands that queries data from X. Fortunately, the platform features allowed us to access data needed to construct cumulative and temporal graphs of X conversations based on a set of query terms over time. This was our primary tool for inquiry given its access to real-time data on X, which remained a critical platform for election conversations—and especially emergent rumors.

Recognizing the multi-platform ecosystem was important, we also developed our own netnographic TikTok research team, which created a series of “archetypal” accounts to understand different communities’ experience of election content.⁴ Through a civil society collaboration, we gained access to Zelf, which offered TikTok analytics; however, we found such data to be of limited use to the discovery of rumors during rapid research. We purchased Open Measures to query “alt-platforms” like Truth Social, Gettr, and Gab. We had access to the Meta Content Library but did not use it for rapid research due to strict publishing and data use restrictions. One doctoral candidate built an initial prototype for a Telegram querying tool based on a collection of channels. Finally, a small crew of doctoral students developed a Bluesky monitoring tool, which was particularly useful for monitoring rumors on the Left. Typically, the CIP data engineer supported each of these efforts to build tooling and manage data access.

One postdoctoral researcher reflected on our team’s persistence in spite of all of the changes to data access, “It’s kind of like a little bit of a candlelight in a very dark room. Especially with the data collection access lost. [...] It’s dark not because there is no sun. It’s because people who have the power to open the curtains actually close the curtains by restricting data access.” The change in data access meant smaller datasets than previous years, but the forced scrappiness led to innovations in querying new platforms, making “thicker” qualitative descriptions, and researching across platforms.⁵

4. Coined by marketing researcher Robert V. Kozinets, “netnography” is a qualitative, real-time observational method that adapts ethnographic research to online environments. Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research, Third Edition* (SAGE Publications, 2019).

5. Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973).

4.

SOCIOTECHNICAL ARCHITECTURE OF SHIFT WORK

The CIP began ERRP work in “beta” during the U.S. presidential primaries in Winter 2024, with a team that included a research scientist who had worked on the 2020 and 2022 elections, a returning graduate research assistant from 2022, and a newly hired postdoctoral researcher. When the research scientist departed the CIP, the search began for a new researcher who would also assume project management leadership.

In Summer 2024, a full-time research manager was hired to take over the ERRP. Through interviews with CIP staff and affiliates, the new manager began to assess the landscape—mapping out graduate student research goals, the existing tech stack, data access limitations, project management systems, data collection processes, and past workflows. The aim was to design a workflow attuned to shifting realities in technology, platform data access, staffing dynamics, and the political environment.

In 2020 and 2022, the CIP worked with partners at other universities and organizations in the EIP. Collectively, the collaboration operated with a tiered model of rapid research: “Tier 1” (Discovery) work was led by undergraduate research assistants who surfaced relevant content; “Tier 2” (Analysis) involved graduate students and PIs evaluating and contextualizing that content; final decisions about publications and outputs were made by project leadership.¹ Within the CIP team, a “Tier 1.5” evolved to transition or filter between what was discovered and what was analyzed. In 2024, we built on this model.

“Discovery” shifts (Tier 1) focused on identifying election-related rumors across multiple social media platforms, with undergraduates working in shifts under the guidance of a graduate student lead. Logged content was entered into a shared project management tool and then passed to concurrent “Analysis” shifts (Tier 2) where graduate students, led by the postdoc and faculty advisors, collaborated to analyze, visualize, or draft written outputs. To support this workflow, the team built out our Notion instance—a collaborative note-taking platform that we used for project management and data organization, tailored to the updated structure.

1. Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika & Stanford Internet Observatory. *The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election*, 2021. Stanford Digital Repository: Election Integrity Partnership. V1.3.0 <https://purl.stanford.edu/tr171zs0069>

This section dives into each of the constituent parts, technical and human, to explore how we organized our rapid research.



Shift Schedule

This is a draft shift schedule. Please note that lead times are not confirmed.

This schedule will be for discovery up until the week before the election, October 28th. Then we will increase shifts

Bold names* indicated time preference/acceptance

The lead analyst is responsible for booking a room or finding location.

Undergrad RA Discovery Schedule (Starting September 23rd)

- 1. Any ER-Submit-to-notion tickets in Slack should be added to Notion (and checked with a green check mark when added)
- 2. Students should do discovery on the platforms they are trained in
- 3. In the final 15 minutes, students should report to the lead analyst who write a memo in the "ER-Discovery-Shift" channel (forthcoming) about emerging trends

T= Tiktok

X = x research on brandwatch

TG = Telegram

	Monday	Tuesday (link)	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Hours	10-12	9:30-11:30	10-12	10-12	10-12
Lead Analyst(s)					
Students					
MEETINGS	All-Hands Meeting 1 PM	CIP Staff Only 12-1:30		9 AM TikTok Memo Meeting (ALL ON TIKTOK)	

Figure 1: A screenshot of the shift schedule, visible by all on our project management software. This helped every team member be aware of who was working when, and the general responsibilities of the shift.

Project Management and Data Collection

Absent the EIP's project management infrastructure from 2020 and 2022, a new sociotechnical workflow had to be developed. The CIP had already been using Slack for instant-messaging within the center, which became an essential tool for immediate communication during rapid research shifts. Yet the team needed some kind of project management and content logging tool to keep track of data, writing projects, and project management that could support our flexible, evolving research process.

In previous years, the ERRP team at the CIP worked with researchers at other universities and institutions, using a project management tool typically used in software development called Jira. The Jira systems scaffolded a rigid ticketing system that structured coordination between different teams working on discovery, analysis, and communication. Though it helped with communication flows across teams, it had limitations in supporting deep, collaborative engagement with the data.

In 2024, the team chose Notion, a productivity and wiki platform with database functionality, to manage workflows. This tool was much more flexible, allowing us to iteratively adjust it depending on team needs compared to the previous Jira tool used by the EIP. Notion's easy-to-edit databases, tagging systems, and wiki structure reflected our more collaborative and less linear workflows.

Unlike email threads, messaging apps, or scattered Google Docs, Notion also allowed us to centralize shift schedules (Figure 1), publishing workflows, query terms, and data collection in one transparent, shared space accessible to the entire team. The design and implementation of the workspace was supported by a doctoral student.

The flexibility of Notion also allowed us to architect the relational structure of the system we used to archive data, reflecting our evolved thinking around how to categorize “rumors.” Through work in previous years, we understood that a “rumor” is not simply one piece of content, but a collection of pieces of content typically surrounding an event. After iterating many times in the data collection infrastructure and archive in 2020 and 2022, by 2024 the team had found a way of collecting “artifacts”—social media posts and other kinds of online content—that could be associated together as “rumors.” Our workflow emphasized the categorization and documentation of “artifacts” and their related rumors, which also involved thematic kinds of tagging. The tagging infrastructure was dynamic and not fixed, often with new tags being generated at the moment of discovery, though regularly reviewed by graduate analysts. This dynamism sometimes produced inconsistency, resulting in a lot of post-election cleaning of the tagging infrastructure, requiring a lot of student labor.

Given the new data landscape (as outlined in the previous section), Notion did not need to support large volumes of API-pulled data. Instead, the tool supported research assistants who were logging “artifacts”—individual pieces of content surfaced from social media platforms and monitoring tools—into a structured database with tagging capabilities. A separate, linked database enabled artifacts to be grouped and

tracked as part of broader “rumors.” These artifacts, typically surfaced by undergraduate researchers, prompted analyst teams to do large quantitative and qualitative analyses leveraging third-party tools.

The Notion platform had advantages over Jira, the more structured project management software we had used in the past. It was easily adaptable to emergent needs and insights about our process. Together with Slack, it kept most team members out of their email inboxes and in more dynamic and synchronous environments. The data kept in Notion, consisting of posts identified by team members, offered visually rich examples of what we were seeing with ways to track related posts and link things together. Like our past system, it offered a searchable content database that was used as a starting point for post-election data collection, qualitative analysis, and illustrative evidence. But Notion was especially good for browsing visual content and building small samples of cross-platform data around particular narratives and stories. In part because the data was all added manually by team members, this also meant it did not offer a higher level nor representative picture of the online discourse.

This new system was first stress-tested in a planned shift during and after the June 2024 presidential debate. The team also came together in “Discovery” and “Analysis” shifts after the unexpected Trump assassination attempt in July. Both events revealed areas for improvement in how the team categorized and recorded artifacts, prompting refinements to the tool’s input fields and tagging structure.

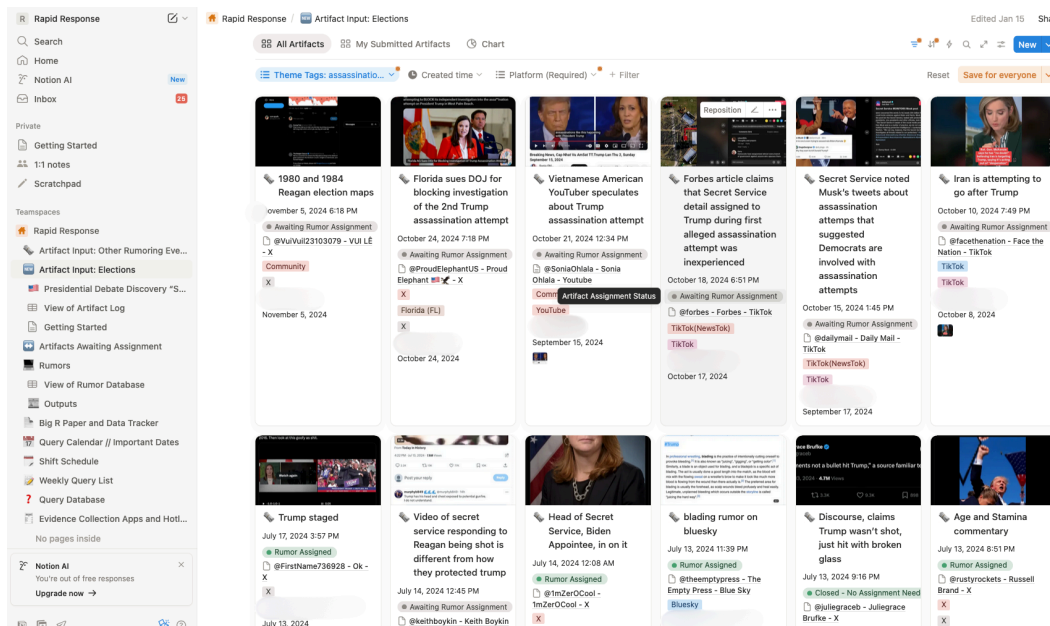


Figure 2: This is a screenshot of the project management software interface developed by the team. It included a way to add, tag, and sort “artifacts” or pieces of content found during discovery shifts.

Discovery Shifts

Eight undergraduate research assistants were hired to work 10 hours per week, starting on September 15—a bit later than ideal, due to UW’s academic quarter schedule, which has a delayed start. Undergraduates worked primarily in two-hour “Discovery” shifts overseen by a graduate student supervisor. The team scheduled two

shifts per day, with increased coverage in the weeks leading up to Election Day. Each undergraduate received training on what types of content were considered “in” or “out” of scope for the project. When uncertain, they could consult the graduate shift lead or log the content for later review—at which point it would be formally tagged as in or out of scope. In addition, each student was trained in at least one of the following social media querying and discovery methods:

- **Brandwatch Querying:** This method involved scouring a dashboard of results from X that came from pre-set, real-time queries related to election processes and procedures. Students would log findings from these analyses into Notion.
- **TikTok Netnography:** Searching via text on TikTok, a video platform, often did not yield rumors as they emerged. Instead, we employed a qualitative ethnographic method which involved scrolling the *For You* feeds of a set of “archetypal” accounts representing different communities and logging in-scope rumor content. This method encountered the most “out of scope” content, such as cultural, political, or entertainment content. We did not use the TikTok API.
- **Telegram Querying:** Using pre-existing lists of channels known to spread election rumors in previous years, we collected Telegram data using a public API. One undergraduate student trained in advanced querying techniques logged election rumors with the support of a doctoral student overseeing the research.
- **Bluesky Querying:** Using the Bluesky API, three doctoral students built a custom feed to be used for discovery by undergrad research assistants.
- **Open Measures Querying:** The team purchased access to Open Measures, a tool that allows researchers to run bulk queries of “alt-platforms” such as 4Chan and Truth Social.

Most of the team focused on Brandwatch and TikTok. Telegram, Bluesky, and Open Measures had limited user access or lacked the flexibility for real-time trend analysis. Graduate student leads with special access to Open Measures or Bluesky tooling conducted parallel discovery work during their shifts, often alongside undergraduates. Most shifts took place in person at the CIP, though some occurred virtually over Zoom.

At the end of each shift, the shift lead would write a brief memo explaining what the team had worked on, including any ongoing analysis, and pass it to the next shift manager via a shared Slack channel. These channels, visible to the entire team, helped everyone stay updated on emerging rumors and outstanding tasks.

Some undergraduate and graduate students brought additional capacity through their non-English language skills, particularly in Spanish and Vietnamese. Using curated Spanish-language keyword lists and monitoring Vietnamese rumors surfaced by community partners, the team expanded its scope beyond English-language content. A dedicated graduate student researcher managed these community relationships and helped guide this aspect of the project. Because non-English rumors often required more historical, cultural, and contextual interpretation, deeper scoping conversations were sometimes necessary (see the following section on scope).

These discussions enriched the team’s understanding of how election rumors circulate differently within non-English-speaking communities.

Analysis and Writing Shifts

Identifying and analyzing a salient rumor is both an art and a science—requiring qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as deep prior experience, insight, and ability to discern promising pathways forward. Analysis shifts lasted three hours and occurred twice daily, with increased frequency as Election Day approached. A rotating team of eight graduate students staffed these shifts, overseen by a group of five leadership figures: a research scientist, a postdoctoral scholar, the research manager, and two faculty principal investigators (PIs). Most of the analysts had participated in the 2020 or 2022 EIP work, bringing both contextual knowledge of election rumors and familiarity with established research methodologies.

Each shift began with a review of memos from the preceding Discovery and Analysis shifts. If a rumor was flagged by leadership as particularly salient, the team would conduct a deeper investigation. Over time, the team developed a template for “rapid research” blog posts, which outlined a range of possible tasks: contextual research, documentation, timeline development, and quantitative analysis (e.g., generating graphs from social media data). Sometimes the work involved consulting external stakeholders—fact-checkers, or experts in law, technology, or politics. Depending on complexity, some memos took several days to produce; others came together in a matter of hours.

Given the team’s deep knowledge of election rumoring and crisis informatics over a decade, the team also authored a series of public primers titled *What to Expect When You’re Electing*. These pieces used examples from previous election cycles to highlight anticipated trends, themes, and timelines for 2024. Many of these resources were used by journalists in advance of the election to educate the public about potential rumors they could expect to see.² Recent research shows that, in the United States, exposure to prebunking messages that warn about potential false claims in future elections increases confidence and reduces belief of fraud in elections.³

Writing progress was tracked using a shared Kanban board, which documented the status of each piece—whether it was in ideation, being written, posted, or retired as a project (Figure 3).

2. Cat Zakrzewski, Rachel Lerman, and Shelly Tan. “Misinformation Is Everywhere This Election. Can You Tell What’s Real?” *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/interactive/2024/election-misinformation-quiz-ai-fake-real/>.

3. John M. Carey, Brian Fogarty, Marília Gehrke, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler. “Prebunking and Credible Source Corrections Increase Election Credibility: Evidence from the US and Brazil.” *Science Advances* 11, no. 35 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adv375>.

Output Tracker

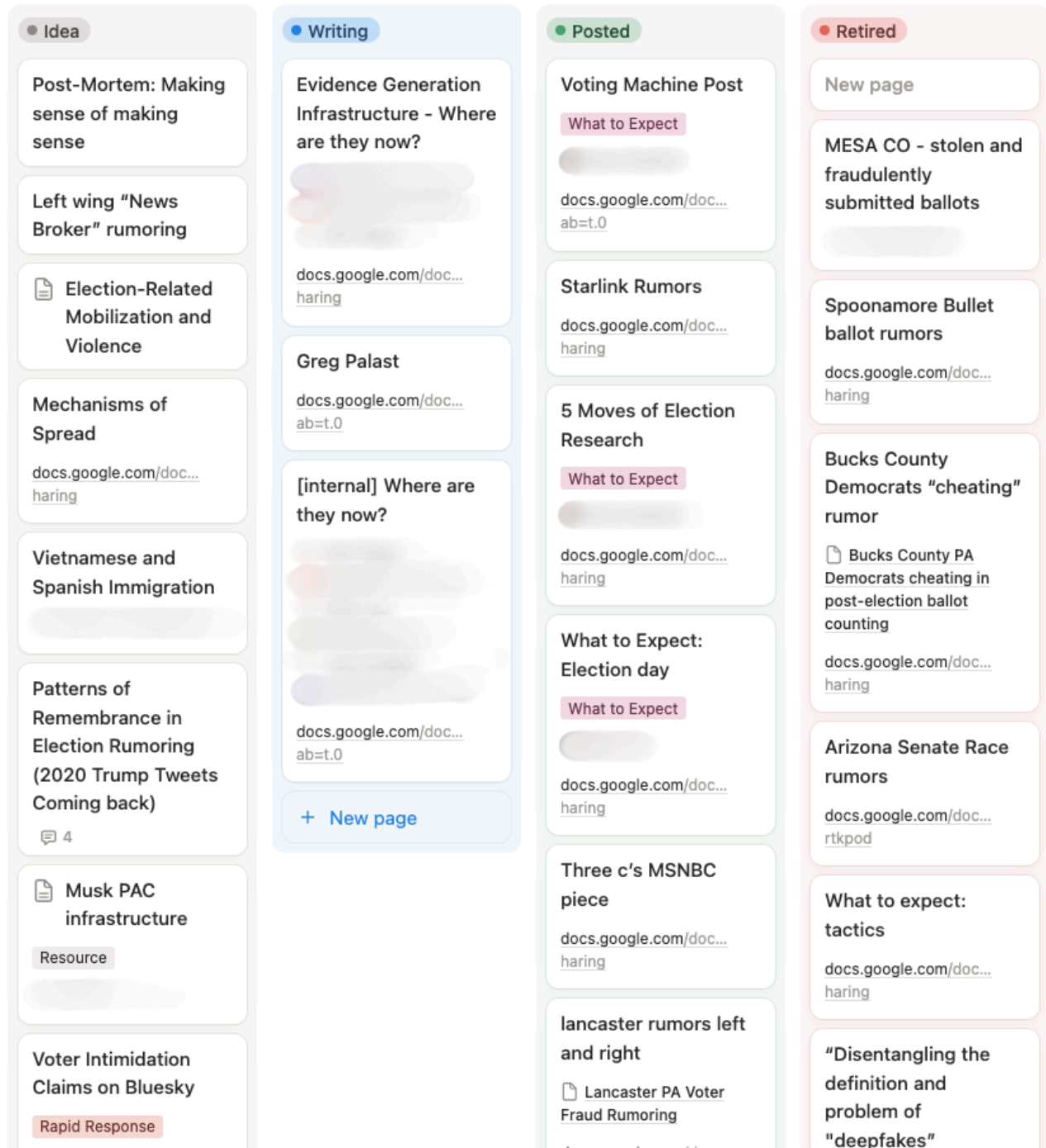


Figure 3: This is a screenshot of the “output tracker,” which was a Kanban board used to keep track of different blog post ideas and their status. This helped people easily find documents and who was in charge of them (names blurred out).

5.

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

Given the goals of the CIP to support and engage the public, we had ongoing relationships with a series of external stakeholders that informed how to make research relevant, useful, and timely. In some instances, the collaboration between stakeholders and ERRP graduate researchers informed doctoral dissertations and other research projects.

Journalists and Fact-Checking Organizations

The most active external stakeholders in ERRP research were journalists. The ERRP provided timely quantitative and qualitative analysis of rumors, while situating their significance in a larger contextual landscape. For journalists working under tight deadlines, ERRP researchers' "sensemaking" role was especially useful, providing accessible expertise. This included offering contextual commentary about a given rumor, supplying data visualizations of rumor spread, or offering a larger theoretical concept about how election rumors work. We are not a fact-checking organization and journalists generally did not reach out to us under that pretense.

This commentary was offered primarily for print and digital journalism, with some radio and podcasts. There were minimal television appearances in part because they took a lot of time to plan and prepare for, but did not necessarily offer opportunities to share the deeper analysis our team specialized in.

Journalists and fact-checking organizations had multiple ways of engaging the ERRP. Many cold-emailed the CIP's email address or reached out directly to researchers on social media or email. Through the years, some of these journalists had developed long-standing relationships with lead PIs and the communications director, who had years of experience himself working as a journalist in Washington, D.C. The communications director often honed the questions of reporters before passing them off to researchers whom he briefed. The lead PI had a formidable Twitter presence (~50K followers) before the platform was purchased by Elon Musk. Though they were no longer active there, many journalists became familiar with this particular PI on Twitter and had carried those connections over to other channels. Lastly, the ERRP held a series of virtual press conferences leading up to the election, organized by the communications director.

Additionally, a doctoral candidate studying researcher–journalist interactions in rapid research environments since 2020 served as a dedicated liaison for the ERRP to a consortium of journalists on the election beat. They

collaborated in a Slack channel “helpdesk” where journalists could ask experts in policy, law, and information science for advice or comment. The candidate later drew on these interactions as data for their dissertation.

Most journalists came in good faith, trying to understand information dynamics online and how they could impact election administration and trust in democracy.

Community Organizations

The ERRP also liaised with a number of non-partisan nonprofits and community-based organizations dedicated to educational and social service work in underserved and non-English speaking communities. One doctoral researcher had spent years doing workshops with Vietnamese and select Spanish-language communities running cultural-specific trainings for media literacy and cultural preservation, particularly around election work. They acted as a liaison to language-specific fact-checking and media literacy community organizations, particularly when a specific diasporic community was involved in, targeted by, or generating a rumor. This doctoral researcher also had an undergraduate research assistant flagging narratives in Spanish and Vietnamese as they were received through a WhatsApp chatbot set up in collaboration with community organizations. Work engaging community organizations is a large time investment in developing and keeping ongoing relationships. Thus, this sustained engagement was dependent upon the research interests of doctoral students and community organizations’ trust in research and media institutions.

Rumors, misinformation, and disinformation often appeared differently to these communities (and others) in culturally specific ways that certain generalizable queries about election integrity do not capture. Narratives organically or intentionally targeted in these communities may have had less to do with election administration or procedure but rather stoked latent historical or cultural anxieties pertinent to those communities’ histories with American imperialism, communism, or election fraud in their countries of origin.¹ Thus, scope became a challenging issue when engaging rumoring dynamics in other languages.

The discovery shifts had one dedicated Spanish-speaking undergraduate searching for Spanish-language election rumor content on X and TikTok. Sometimes, content from other countries informed rumors about election integrity in the U.S. (for instance, claims that the Venezuelan elections were rigged prompted rumors that then-Vice President Harris would similarly rig the U.S. elections, particularly since she had congratulated the declared winner). Such narratives were distinct from the more technical and culturally non-specific rumors about machine failures, ballot mistakes, or voter roll accuracy.

1. Sarah Nguyễn, Rachel Kuo, Madhavi Reddi, Lan Li, and Rachel E. Moran. “Studying Mis- and Disinformation in Asian Diasporic Communities: The Need for Critical Transnational Research beyond Anglocentrism.” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, March 24, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-95>.

Election Officials

State election officials, particularly in Washington, had engaged the CIP and ERRP to do anticipatory educational training about election rumors and about how to quickly communicate accurate information to maintain public trust. These trainings occurred months prior to the election and months after. Some such officials subscribed to the ERRP Substack. That said, election officials did not have daily or even weekly touch-points with the CIP. Our resources could be made more useful to election officials, but there are some challenges due to capacity, limitations in our professional networks, and a politically-charged environment that makes those connections vulnerable to partisan attack.

Despite the national nature of the ERRP work, communications with officials beyond Washington State were rare in 2024. Given that U.S. elections are administered locally across thousands of jurisdictions with hundreds of different administrative protocols and technologies, sustained relationships beyond local non-Washington officials were unrealistic.

Election Administration Think Tanks and Experts

Most of the researchers in the ERRP were primarily coming from UW's Department of Human Centered Design and Engineering and Information School—with a few in Law, Communication, and Political Science. Some had contextual expertise in election administration from having worked on the ERRP in previous election cycles. Yet sometimes the ERRP needed to rely on external experts in election administration, election law, and election technology when making sense of claims made in rumors. Conversely, these experts leaned on the ERRP to identify rumors seen on social media so that they could put out proactive and timely messaging. Given this was the third election cycle that many ERRP researchers had studied, a network and CIP's notoriety had evolved around the work. This made communication channels more open and answers timelier. Most of these relationships were managed by the research manager and the lead PI.

The General Public

The CIP has “public” in the name, but also understands that there are many “publics,” with different interests, access points, languages, and media habits. Not every public can be spoken to in a highly fractured media environment. That said, transparency, legibility, and accessibility were all considered in ERRP public outputs. In previous years, the ERRP team, particularly the lead PI, published graphs and other visuals to then-Twitter which received a lot of attention from journalists and other Twitter users. This changed after Elon Musk purchased Twitter and the platform became a more adversarial environment for ERRP researchers. This cycle, the main social media outlets were LinkedIn and Bluesky.

ERRP published research directly to the CIP blog and a dedicated ERRP Substack, where anyone could subscribe for free to receive emails as soon as research was published. This was a resource for local news and community organizations to use in their reporting for the public.

6.

MISINFORMATION? DISINFORMATION? RUMOR? CONSPIRACY THEORY?

After Brexit and Trump’s election in 2016, “misinformation” and “disinformation” studies expanded across disciplines, in part owing to the novelty of a president using social media to spread factually incorrect information. Some of these studies took on a normative bent and others simply drew attention to certain kinds of activity that threatened political actors, providing fuel for a political backlash against the field of so-called “Big Disinfo.”¹ This reflects a larger academic debate about epistemology and value-judgements when identifying something as misinformation, disinformation, or propaganda.² In a so-called “post-truth” world, academic authority itself is under attack, making our own language, choices, and descriptions subject to a degree of external scrutiny extending to most knowledge authorities.³

Through the years, our ERRP team had an ongoing conversation about the terminology we used to describe the online conversations, networks, and communities involved in the information flows we tracked. In our early work (2012-2015) our team had studied rumors—or unverified claims—during crisis events. In 2016, rising public and academic attention shifted focus towards the study of misinformation and social media manipulation. In 2020, through the Election Integrity Partnership, we had developed a framework that enabled students to monitor platforms at scale and route findings to researchers and officials for response. Yet, we found the terms “misinformation” and “disinformation” often too cumbersome, confusing, or imprecise for the work at hand.⁴

In the fast-moving environment of the ERRP, it was particularly difficult to determine whether a piece

1. Joseph Bernstein, “Bad News: Selling the Story of Disinformation,” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 2021, <https://harpers.org/archive/2021/09/bad-news-selling-the-story-of-disinformation/>.
2. Joseph Uscinski, Shane Littrell, and Casey Klofstad. “The Importance of Epistemology for the Study of Misinformation.” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 57 (June 2024): 101789. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2024.101789>.
3. Henrik Enroth, “Crisis of Authority: The Truth of Post-Truth,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 36, no. 2 (2023): 179–95, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-021-09415-6>.
4. Emma S. Spiro and Kate Starbird, “Rumors Have Rules,” *Issues in Science and Technology* XXXIX, no. 3 (2023), <https://issues.org/rumors-research-misinformation-spiro-starbird/>.

of information was factually incorrect (misinformation), misleading, false, or deliberately deceptive (e.g., disinformation or propaganda). Primarily defining the object of study as “misinformation” or “disinformation” in rapid research requires making determinations of intentionality and coordination that are extremely difficult to prove in real-time (and ever increasing with the growing data restrictions researchers face, especially in rapid research projects). That approach can also lead to mistakes, which can further muddy the information space and cause reputational harm to those who make and repeat them.

In 2022 and 2024, we leaned on the PI’s earlier conceptualizations of information in crisis events, framing the object of our study as online rumors related to election processes and procedures—a conceptualization that does not declare facticity, truth, or intention of the observed claims. It avoids making strong assumptions about intentionality (as disinformation or propaganda frameworks might) or independent determinations of factuality (as misinformation or misleading information labels would). We know that rumors emerge during crises and uncertain events—like elections—as people come together to make sense of evolving information, especially when “official” accounts are delayed.⁵ This framing suits our endeavor well, as the curation, circulation, and dissemination patterns we observe strongly resemble rumor dynamics.

We made a choice to prioritize describing how a rumor was misleading when we were able to identify it, versus labeling something as a certain phenomenon we could not always confirm in real time. Our study of rumors did not preclude us from labeling things as “disinformation” or “propaganda” when such kinds of intentional, coordinated media manipulation campaigns could be proven; labeling something accurately is important. Looking back from 2025, many scholars have noted an overemphasis on “misinformation” and “disinformation” research as a way to “fix” democracy. Many have questioned if there can even be a “science of misleading content.”⁶ Yes, solving a “disinformation problem” (as it often was framed) does not resolve deeper democratic challenges.⁷ Yet abandoning the study of misinformation and disinformation altogether would be an overcorrection—these phenomena still exist.

Looking back at our choice to primarily label the claims we studied as “rumors,” many students and some staff reflected that they felt frustrated that we didn’t proactively label certain phenomena when it had the hallmarks of a disinformation campaign or a conspiracy theory. One graduate student felt that not calling something “misinformation” or “propaganda” sometimes felt limiting, “I felt very constrained. I felt like the work and

5. Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966).

6. Dan Williams, “Misinformation Researchers Are Wrong: There Can’t Be a Science of Misleading Content.,” *Conspicuous Cognition*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.conspicuouscognition.com/p/misinformation-researchers-are-wrong>.

7. Zeve Sanderson and Scott Babwah Brennan, “We Failed The Misinformation Fight. Now What?,” *Noema*, August 26, 2025, <https://www.noemamag.com/we-failed-the-misinformation-fight-now-what>.

the scope and what we were being told and asked to do was actually constraining what I feel is like my public duty or my duty as a researcher in this space.” One staff member explained that sometimes the claims weren’t so much rumors but something different entirely: “It is bullshit. [...] It doesn’t matter if it’s true or false. It’s just that it doesn’t care whether or not it’s true or false. There’s rumors and there’s bullshit. They’re slightly different, but there are a lot of overlaps.”

More research can be done looking back at how journalists, academics, and think tanks navigated the terminology and labeling of phenomena during this period, given political and public reactions to the concepts. Sometimes these terms did not necessarily help make the public make sense of these phenomena, but rather give them quick and politicized heuristics for understanding how to categorize that information (and the people sharing it) in their mind. Understanding how the public takes up academic terminology, where it can take on a social and political life of its own, is also a topic for further inquiry.

PART II

RAPID RESEARCH OUTPUTS

During the period of rapid research shift work, our team primarily produced four kinds of outputs along different timelines:

- **In-Depth, Single Rumor Analysis:** These focused on a single rumor found to be 1) spreading across multiple platforms, 2) in a critical geography, like a swing state, 3) spread by notable or powerful personalities, 4) part of a breaking news event, 5) or a novel rumor that appears to be taking off. Sometimes these would take a day or two to write up, other times they took a week or more. These posts were scaffolded around a template (Figure 4) usually including context of the rumor, how and where it was spreading, how it misleads (if it does), and graphs illustrating the key moments and growth of the spread.
- **Weekly Memo of Rumor Round-Ups:** Not every rumor needed a full, individuated analysis, but all were important to take note of in case they developed into something more prominent. Rumors across platforms were collected into a weekly memo by a research scientist and published. We considered our rumor detection memos as a means of informing others, especially journalists and even fact-checkers, giving them a place to start their own verification work. Even if this was not always used that way, it was how we saw our role in the broader sensemaking ecosystem.
- **“What to Expect When We’re Electing” Series:** These explained what we could anticipate in online rumoring dynamics at different moments in the election cycle. These acted as “pre-bunking” of certain themes we expected, based on years of previous research and expertise into both election rumoring dynamics and crisis informatics. The team started publishing these as early as September 2024.
- **Event-Level Analyses:** These analyses were produced in response to a key crisis event that generated multiple related rumors, with rumoring activity unfolding around the central event itself. For example, following the assassination attempt on Donald Trump on July 12, the team produced two pieces: a rapid blog post capturing the immediate dynamics of the multiple rumors, and a longer-form research report that analyzed (1) the discourse surrounding the event, (2) the actors involved in spreading or responding to the rumors, and (3) the broader political and informational context. These reports tackled high-impact events that triggered cross-platform rumoring and required coordinated, multi-angle analysis from the team.

Each of these types of outputs were published on the ERRP Substack, where subscribers would instantly receive it in their email, and on the UW CIP website.

Copy of Analysis Template

File Edit View Insert Format Tools Extensions Zotero Help

100% Normal text Arial 11

MAKE A COPY - Rapid Research Analysis Template

[Heuristics for Figuring Out What to Use this Template For](#)

Instructions (to delete):

You can think of "rapid research" as having two distinct parts: research and writing. |

Research requires legibility, "receipts" for data that may only be internally facing, and transferability of data assets (graphs, tables, etc). Consider these almost like "memos" for the next shift.

Writing requires brevity, translating that research into a public facing document. This should happen almost last.

This template helps you break out the document into two parts. No one should be "writing"

- **Research Phase:** This has a few constituent parts. Each section can be "tweet sized"
 - **Timeline:** This is the first and perhaps easiest thing to assemble. Who said what, and when?
 - **Context:** What is this a "case" of? Why is this important? Cite journalistic sources.
 - **Queries:** Develop a query for others and yourself to use, keep it in the research doc.
 - **"Receipts"** of social media evidence - these don't have to be public, they are just to inform the people writing and other researching
 - **Journalistic sources:** these are the most relevant sources covering whats going on. They must include quotes/quotations WITH citations to back up claims
 - **Community and External Experts:** Do we need to reach out to them? Who has reached out to them?
 - **Graphs** - these may be working graphs (cumulative, temporal) or **tables** (top influencers etc.) that can be used to illustrate a story.
 - **Hand off Process for Graphs** When passing off a visualization, the following should be included at the bottom of the working document (research note, blog post, etc.) so others can edit if necessary:
 - Link to notebook or tool where visual was created so others on the team can adjust code if needed

Figure 4: This is an example of a Google doc template used during analysis shifts to scaffold a blog post around a rumor.

7.

SCOPE

One of the core challenges of conducting rapid research at both speed and scale is determining what content falls “in scope” of the project’s research mandate—i.e., how that mandate should be described and interpreted based on information available at the time, and which findings warrant publication. The guiding “north star” for this work was a clear focus on rumors related to the processes and procedures of U.S. elections, regardless of political party, ideology, or posture. This scoping principle often meant excluding viral political rumors that, while popular, did not pertain directly to election administration. As outlined in our undergraduate training materials: “*We are not interested in purely political rumors (e.g., the love lives of candidates, mean tweets, or Taylor Swift’s endorsement—though rumors about her voter registration efforts are relevant).*”

We drew on guidelines developed and iterated on during previous election cycles with the EIP in 2020 and 2022. Most rumors were considered in scope if they were related to procedural interference, participation interference, solicitation of fraud, election misconduct, delegitimization of election processes, or threats to (or harassment of) election workers. Additionally, rumors that connected election fraud in other countries to U.S. elections were also considered within scope. (For more detailed information, please see the Scope Appendix).

These scoping principles were reflected in the keywords used to query the platforms the team had access to. (For an example of our baseline query, please see the Query Appendix). Occasionally, rumors surfaced during Discovery shifts tested the boundaries of the project’s scope, prompting ongoing, robust, and iterative internal discussions—rather than strict adherence to a fixed set of guidelines established at the outset.

Unlike in previous election cycles that involved multiple research partners across the country, the 2024 ERRP was housed within a single research center, which allowed for greater agility and responsiveness. One graduate student reflected, “I think we had a couple of conversations around scoping of the project. I think that was very productive because historically we were like, ‘Okay, what qualifies as an election process or procedure?’ And it turns out in practice, it’s often a little different than it is in theory.” Maintaining an open, iterative, and evolving conversation around scope proved critical to the team’s ability to stay responsive to the unpredictable nature of emerging rumors.

Certain rumors challenged the boundaries of scope because they drew on latent tropes or long-standing narratives, rather than novel occurrences. This was especially true in rumors circulating within distinct non-English-speaking communities.

Take the following example: On the day then-Vice President Kamala Harris was floated as a potential replacement presidential candidate for Joe Biden, Spanish-language tweets began circulating, alleging she would engage in voter fraud—just as, they claimed, had happened in Venezuela earlier that summer (Figure 5). These speculative and unevidenced claims loosely linked Harris to Venezuela’s contested election, largely due to perceived-to-be-shared left-wing political identification and the fact that Harris had tweeted congratulations to the declared winner, even though Biden’s secretary of state had simultaneously suggested that there was evidence the opposition won.¹

While these posts weren’t directly about U.S. election administration, they reflected deeper concerns within diasporic communities—specifically, fears that echoed political experiences in their countries of origin. As one graduate researcher who split time between shift work and media literacy workshops with non-English-speaking communities explained, misleading election narratives in these contexts were “less about the operations of the elections and more about the policy implications that people were concerned with.”

These narratives drew less from specific incidents in election administration—like alleged mail-in ballot fraud or voting machine hacks—and more from diasporic collective memory or lived experiences that framed certain American officials or elections as untrustworthy. This made scoping these rumors trickier.

1. Peter Taddonio, “What Happened After Venezuela’s Presidential Election?,” *FRONTLINE*, February 4, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/venezuela-maduro-gonzalez-tainted-election-saab-biden-trump/>

ROMAROSA @RobertoMTico · Jul 29

URGENTE. Como en **Venezuela** la progresista **Kamala Harris** estaría preparando fraude electoral. Supera en 20% a Bonald Trump en las encuestas. María Corina Machado regresará a EEUU para apoyar a Trump

2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION
18-34 YEAR OLDS

Candidate	Percentage
KAMALA HARRIS	60%
DONALD TRUMP	40%

AXIOS/GENERATION LAB POLL, JULY 22-24, MOE ± 3.5%

JOHNSON DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST

MSNBC
ALL IN WITH CHRIS HAYES

40 492 743 14K

Figure 5: A screenshot of an X post suggesting that Vice President Kamala Harris would engage in voter fraud, comparing her campaign to recent one of Venezuela's president elect.

8.

AN EXAMPLE OF AN OUTPUT: FROM DISCOVERY TO PUBLICATION TO FOLLOW-UP

To illustrate how a piece of content moves through the full research pipeline—from discovery to analysis, to write-up, and follow-up—this section takes a deeper look at the vignette introduced at the beginning of this frameworks paper: the rumor surrounding the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA), which enables U.S. citizens, including military personnel and their families, to vote while abroad.

This particular rumor was fueled by a series of articles published in early September 2024 by right-wing outlet *The Gateway Pundit*, which alleged that Democrats were planning to cheat by registering non-citizens and ineligible voters overseas under UOCAVA provisions. It gained traction and went viral after candidate Donald Trump amplified the claim on Truth Social later that month. Digging even deeper, the rumor had a multi-year history, recycled to suit the present.

This section includes screenshots of our internal workflow to show how the rumor was identified, logged, analyzed, and ultimately published. These visual artifacts illustrate the tools and processes used to document the rumor, trace its spread, assess its claims, and communicate findings publicly via publication.

Project Planning

In the summer of 2024, a graduate research assistant began putting together a calendar of important dates in the voting calendar, such as voter registration deadlines and absentee ballot deadlines. We knew from previous research that registration deadlines often incite rumoring.¹ One set of deadlines were the UOCAVA registration deadlines, which vary state by state, though the Federal Voting Assistance Program advises sending

1. Kate Starbird, Melinda McClure Haughey, Rachel Moran-Prestridge, Danielle Lee Tomson, Emma S. Spiro, and Michael Grass. “An Election Rumoring Timeline.” Election Rumor Research @ Center for an Informed Public, September 5, 2024. <https://uwcip.substack.com/p/what-to-expect-when-were-electing>.

the application by August 1.² Initially, the research manager felt this might have been too obscure a concept to actively monitor. However, the graduate researcher's instincts were correct.

Discovery

In late September, an undergraduate student researcher monitoring X noticed that Trump had posted allegations that Democrats were planning to “CHEAT” using UOCAVA provisions, falsely alleging that there is no identity verification or citizenship check on Americans trying to vote while abroad.

2. “How to Vote Absentee from Abroad,” Federal Voting Assistance Program, <https://www.fvap.gov/citizen-voter/overview>

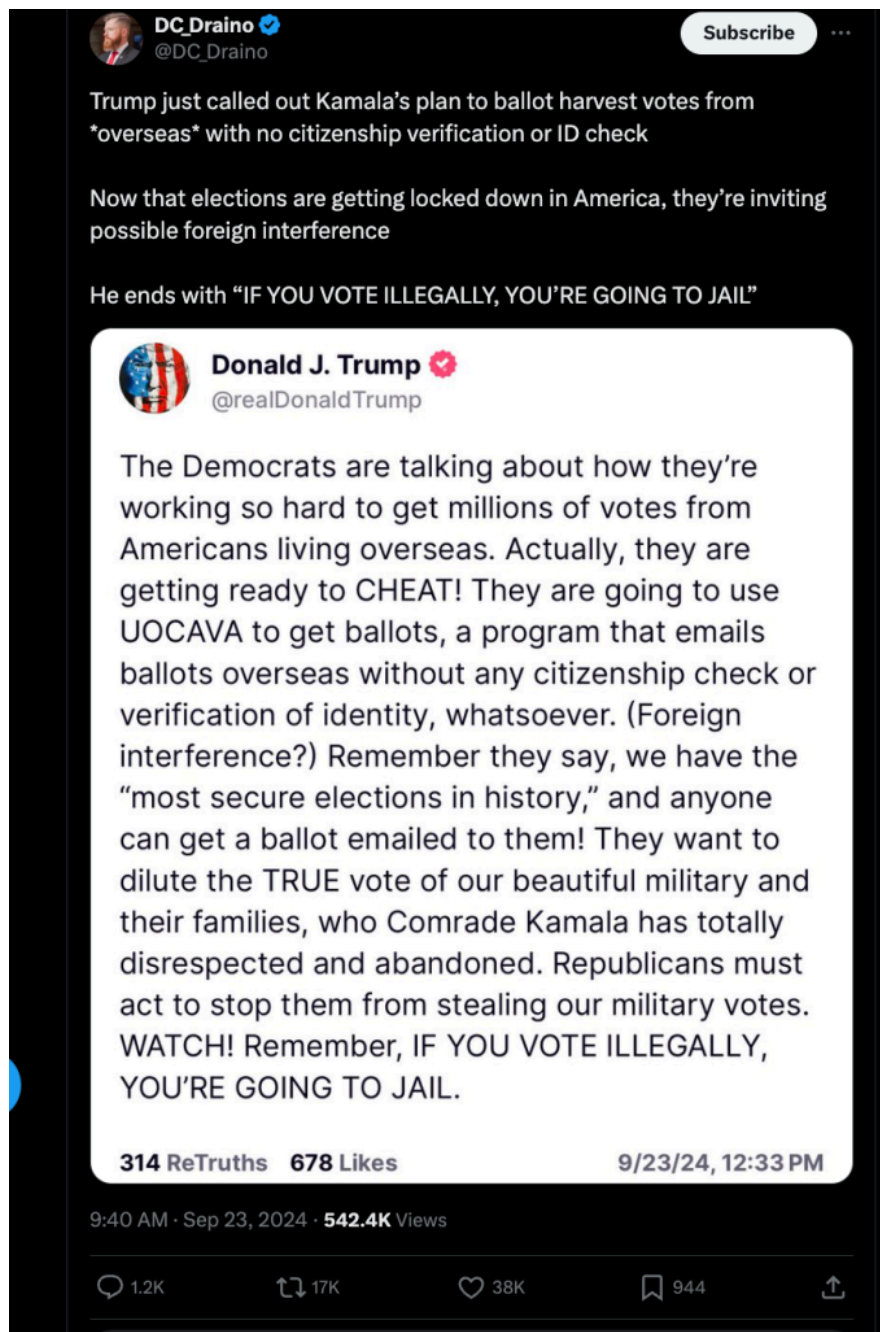


Figure 6: A screenshot of an X-influencer sharing Trump's Truth Social post about UOCAVA voting.

The graduate student researcher leading the discovery shift recognized UOCAVA from their summer calendaring exercise and dug deeper, recognizing that UOCAVA fit certain criteria for what could become a persistent rumor: This particular allegation was *novel*, but it played into a *familiar* narrative of non-citizen

voting, and it was *amplified by an elite*.³ The team continued to monitor the spread, documenting content on X, Truth Social, and TikTok.

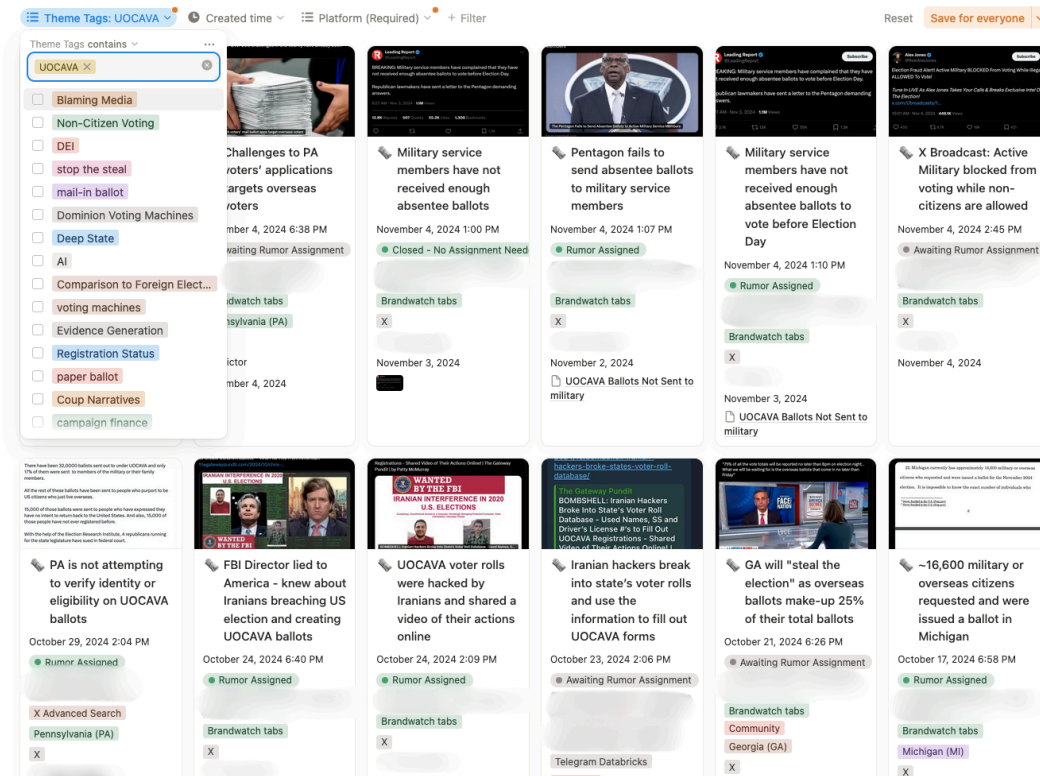


Figure 7: A screenshot of the Notion interface showing the “artifact input” database, filtered on UOCAVA tags, which allowed the team to easily search for rumors thematically. This screenshot was taken after the election, showing that the UOCAVA rumor persisted well through election day.

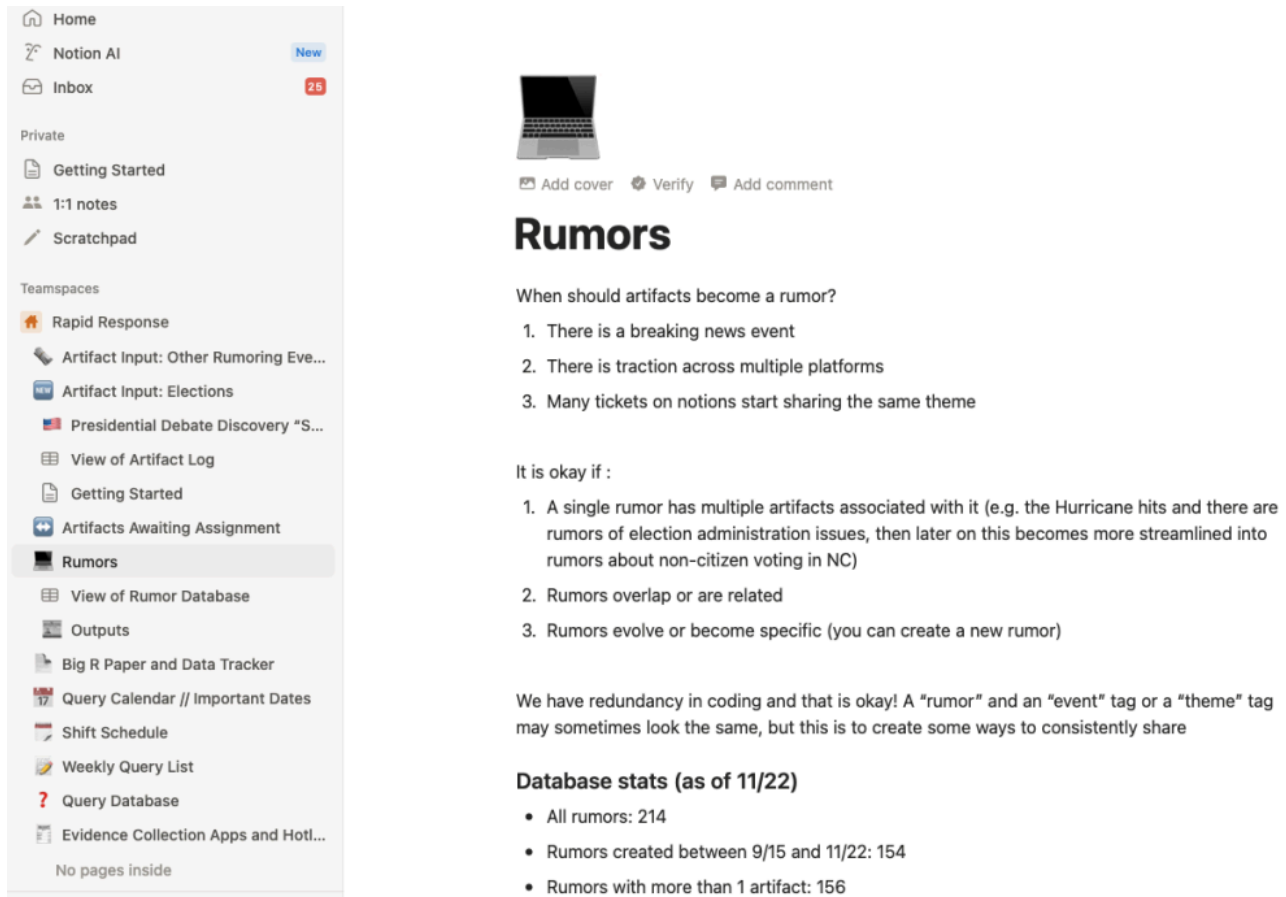
Analysis

The analysis shift picked up artifacts related to UOCAVA, created a dedicated “rumor” entry in a separate rumor database, and began associating the relevant pieces of content with it (Figures 8 and 9). This structure allowed all materials tied to that rumor to be connected and tracked in one place. A conversation between the research manager, faculty, and graduate research assistants, resulted in the decision to pursue a deeper rumor analysis.

Given that the rumor centered on non-citizens—a recurring and salient trope throughout the 2024 election cycle—and invoked a little-known voting provision with a highly searchable acronym, the team anticipated that it had the potential to persist and spread. A shared document was created for collaborative writing and

3. Kate Starbird, Mike Caulfield, Renée DiResta, Emma S. Spiro, Madeline Jalbert, “10 Factors That Shape a Rumor’s Capacity for Online Virality,” Election Integrity Partnership, September 21, 2022 <https://www.cip.uw.edu/2022/09/21/10-factors-that-shape-a-rumors-capacity-for-online-virality/>

linked to a corresponding ticket in the “Output” column of our project management Kanban board, making it clear who was involved and what work was underway.



The screenshot shows a Notion workspace interface. On the left is a sidebar with navigation options: Home, Notion AI (New), Inbox (25), Private (Getting Started, 1:1 notes, Scratchpad), and Teamspace (Rapid Response). Under Rapid Response, there are several items including 'Artifact Input: Other Rumoring Eve...', 'Artifact Input: Elections', 'Presidential Debate Discovery "S...', 'View of Artifact Log', 'Getting Started', 'Artifacts Awaiting Assignment', and 'Rumors' (highlighted). Below 'Rumors' are 'View of Rumor Database', 'Outputs', 'Big R Paper and Data Tracker', 'Query Calendar // Important Dates', 'Shift Schedule', 'Weekly Query List', 'Query Database', and 'Evidence Collection Apps and Hotl...'. At the bottom of the sidebar, it says 'No pages inside'.

The main page is titled 'Rumors' and features a laptop icon at the top with options to 'Add cover', 'Verify', and 'Add comment'. Below the title is a section titled 'When should artifacts become a rumor?' followed by a numbered list:

1. There is a breaking news event
2. There is traction across multiple platforms
3. Many tickets on notions start sharing the same theme

Below this list is a section titled 'It is okay if :' followed by another numbered list:

1. A single rumor has multiple artifacts associated with it (e.g. the Hurricane hits and there are rumors of election administration issues, then later on this becomes more streamlined into rumors about non-citizen voting in NC)
2. Rumors overlap or are related
3. Rumors evolve or become specific (you can create a new rumor)

Below this list is a paragraph: 'We have redundancy in coding and that is okay! A "rumor" and an "event" tag or a "theme" tag may sometimes look the same, but this is to create some ways to consistently share'.

Below the paragraph is a section titled 'Database stats (as of 11/22)' followed by a bulleted list:

- All rumors: 214
- Rumors created between 9/15 and 11/22: 154
- Rumors with more than 1 artifact: 156

Figure 8: This is a screenshot of the interface for analysis shift workers who would chunk “artifacts” into “rumors” by associating these pieces of content in a separate database. The screenshot shows some of the criteria for doing this work.

The screenshot shows a search interface with a top navigation bar containing 'Gallery', 'Chart', '1 more...', and a search bar with 'uocava'. Below the navigation bar is a '+ Filter' button. The main content area displays four search results:

- UOCAVA Ballots Not Sent to military**: November 2, 2024; November 3, 2024; 2 results. Tags: UOCAVA, Absentee Ballots, Absentee Ballots, UOCAVA.
- Rumors of Iranian hackers stealing voter info to fill out UOCAVA ballots**: October 23, 2024; October 24, 2024; 2 results. Tags: Foreign Interference, UOCAVA, UOCAVA, voter rolls.
- Democrats are using UOCAVA to cheat**: September 19, 2024; October 28, 2024; 16 results. Tags: UOCAVA, ballot harvesting, Non-Citizen Voting, Fore.
- + New page**: A button to create a new page.

A large black redaction box covers the text of the second result, which appears to be a snippet of a tweet or post. The text visible in the snippet reads: "Americans living overseas. Actually, they are getting ready to CHEAT! They are going to use UOCAVA to get ballots, a program that emails ballots overseas without any citizenship check or verification of identity, whatsoever. (Foreign interference?) Remember they say, we have the 'most secure elections in history,' and anyone can get a ballot emailed to them! They want to dilute the TRUE vote of our beautiful military and

Figure 9: Taken after the election, this is a screenshot of some of the various distinct rumors involving UOCAVA in the searchable database.

The team got to work unpacking the context of the rumor, the intricacies of how UOCAVA functions, and mapping the rumor's spread on X. Using Brandwatch we generated cumulative graphs that traced the key accounts fueling the rumor and showed how it eventually went viral following Trump's Truth Social post (which was repeatedly cross-posted to X and other platforms). This process combined both qualitative and quantitative approaches, with each researcher building iteratively on the findings surfaced during their shift.

Some analysts working on social media queries and graphing traced the rumor's origin back to a series of

articles published by *The Gateway Pundit* earlier in the month. These pieces, which dropped nearly weekly, featured misleading claims about how UOCAVA registrations supposedly worked—laying the foundation for the Trump post that followed. This discovery raised new questions about both the rumor’s content and its underlying mechanisms.

Very little clear public information existed online about how UOCAVA actually operates, creating a “data void” exploited by rumor spreaders on social media and in online searches.⁴ While the team’s role wasn’t to directly fact-check the article’s claims, we often endeavored to use our knowledge and networks to help resolve an emerging rumor, and in this case that meant getting a better understanding of the underlying policy. As part of our analysis, we reached out to context experts to clarify the actual registration process and to determine whether and then how some of the allegations and screenshots featured in *The Gateway Pundit*’s articles were misleading.

These experts explained that many partisan and non-partisan organizations build web-based tools to help voters complete the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA), but that filling out this form does not guarantee voter registration—despite the implication in some screenshots that a simple web widget could enable foreigners to register. We also learned that states mail UOCAVA ballots 45 days prior to the election—precisely around the time this rumor began circulating and voters abroad were beginning to receive their ballots.⁵

With these insights, the team was able to clarify its own understanding of UOCAVA and provide more accurate context about the rumor and its trajectory.

Publishing

Once we had a clear understanding of the rumor—its content, how it was misleading, and how it was spreading—we compiled our findings into a public blog post. These posts underwent multiple rounds of review by graduate student researchers, the research manager, the communications director, and at least one principal investigator. Editors focused on verifying the accuracy of claims, ensuring that visualizations of the rumor’s spread were clearly labeled and representative, and flagging any parts of the post that might be misinterpreted or weaponized.

The final piece was published on our Substack—for timely delivery to our subscribers—and cross-posted to

4. Michael Golebiewski and danah boyd, *Data Voids: Where Missing Data Can Easily Be Exploited* (Data & Society, 2019), <https://datasociety.net/library/data-voids/>.

5. “How to Vote Absentee from Abroad,” Federal Voting Assistance Program, <https://www.fvap.gov/citizen-voter/overview>

the UW CIP website. Once published, we updated the article’s status in our “Output” column on the project’s Kanban board.

The publication, which went live in early October, alerted key stakeholders in the election ecosystem, including policy and legal experts in election administration. Some of these organizations followed up with their own posts diving deeper into UOCAVA, helping to equip researchers, journalists, and election communicators with more accurate context and messaging around the topic.⁶

Follow Up

We added “UOCAVA” as a term to our ongoing query for monitoring X. The trope persisted and new storylines emerged and frames evolved. Later in October 2024, we saw a recycled rumor from a previous election cycle alleging that Iranians had been found using UOCAVA to illegally register voters. Many on the team were familiar with this rumor and we were quickly able to write up a follow-up to explore the spread and re-emergence of an old rumor that might have looked new to new eyes. A similar analysis and publication process was repeated for the new derivative rumor. Towards the end of October 2024, our analysis of the UOCAVA rumor was profiled in *Science* magazine.⁷

This kind of collaborative work moves at a fast pace. We made sure not to sacrifice accuracy, but sometimes had to reflect on academic instincts to meticulously explain or contextualize claims. Balancing the urge to provide more context with the need to move quickly while providing clear, easy to understand information meant “code-switching” between academic and journalistic instincts.

6. Erin Geiger Smith and Josh Bell, “Facts and Myths About the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act,” Brennan Center for Justice, October 18, 2024, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/facts-and-myths-about-uniformed-and-overseas-citizens-absentee-voting-act>.

7. Kai Kupferschmidt, “As U.S. Election Looms, This ‘Rumor Researcher’ Tracks—and Combats—Falsehoods in Real Time,” *Science*, October 30, 2024, <https://www.science.org/content/article/u-s-election-looms-rumor-researcher-tracks-falsehoods-and-counters-them-real-time>.

PART III

INSIGHTS FROM EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

Because this rapid research effort engaged a wide range of stakeholders, we received diverse insights about its value, anecdotal impact, and practice. One consistent theme—surfacing across interviews and responses from our Substack readership—was a deep sense of appreciation that the ERRP existed at all, especially given the attacks and challenges faced by earlier iterations in 2020 and 2022. As one Substack reader put it: “Just knowing this research is being done is helpful. I am able to focus more on my day-to-day actions, knowing that this resource exists as a source of truth.”

The following section explores the key insights and feedback offered by external stakeholders about the role, significance, and evolving practice of rapid research.

9.

JOURNALISTS RESPECT ENDURING, RESPONSIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTAND THEIR NEEDS

Journalists from local, national, and international news organizations, radio and television stations, and podcasts reached out to us regularly for comment, explanations, profiles or media appearances. From September to December of 2024, CIP ERRP researchers were featured in more than 75 separate articles, news segments, and interviews, not including articles republished through news wire services and interviews distributed through broadcast networks to local affiliates.

Yet appearances, views, and clicks are surface level to the deeper networking between the press and academics that is required for an informed public. The CIP had sponsored events for journalists prior to even the 2020 election. One graduate student reflected, “If we want journalists to be looking at our work, we have to be investing in relationships with them before the election. And that might mean inviting them to your university or holding workshops or like working with other organizations that work with journalists. But I think that that’s something that we had taken for granted in the past because we always just had those connections.” Many journalists had developed relationships with the communications director, faculty members, and other researchers through the years, which one journalist described as unique: “Usually it’s a one and done conversation. It’s not an ongoing relationship.”

Journalistic access to expertise and the infrastructure that supports it—particularly in high-stakes news events like elections—can be patchwork.¹ Considering this, the CIP had been investing in relationships with journalists in a variety of ways. Our communications director, who was a former Washington D.C. journalist, understood the journalistic mindset, and had a professional Rolodex of journalists and editors. Journalists and staff appreciated having a communications director with journalism experience who was proactive in providing background information to reporters and assessing their inquiry before connecting them with the right researcher for an interview. This would not have been possible if the communications director was

1. Melinda McClure Haughey, *Truth-Seeking as Collaborative Work: Expert-Journalist Infrastructure in High-Stakes News Moments*, Dissertation, University of Washington, August 1, 2025, <https://hdl.handle.net/1773/53219>.

only involved at the end of a workflow pipeline, as is the case with many communications professionals. Our communications director was an active and daily participant in research meetings, Slack conversations, editing, and workflow. The communications director reflected:

“I think the difference for a lot of university communications professionals is that they are coming in pretty much at the end of the process. My role was structured in a way where I was seeing things take shape in real time. That gives me, in some cases, the necessary insight from the research itself and being able to communicate that and think about what journalists are going to be really interested in or what are the likely questions that are going to come up. So I think it is important to recognize the value of an embedded communications professional ... if your research entity ... is trying to figure out what’s going on ... If you expect to communicate around it in a timely fashion, that communications person can’t come in at the end of the process.”

The value-add to many of these journalists’ work was not a fact-check, but a gut-check and an explanation. As one journalist reflected, “I think it’s just... It’s really, really nice to have a place you can go and a place that is not just fact-checked, but like explained. I don’t want a fact-check, necessarily. I really want an explanation.” By explanation, they meant a bit of contextualization around the rumor and its dynamics. They further explained, “I think you guys were really helpful in terms of thinking like what is, ‘What narratives are working? What is powerful? What is spreading? What is having a sort of real impact in terms of views or networks?’ And so that was really helpful.” The ERRP was, in short, a kind of sensemaker for the journalist trying to understand what was going on.

10.

ELECTION OFFICIALS APPRECIATE BEST PRACTICES IN A SPARSE FIELD

Election administration—and its financial and personnel resourcing—is different across thousands of jurisdictions in the U.S. Finding external research and best practices can be challenging in part because there are a limited number of academic institutions supporting these institutions in real-time or on timelines that are useful to them. Particularly since the election denialism and conspiracy theorizing in 2020, even small local elections can be impacted by larger, well-resourced, national political debates. As one elections communicator mused, “Both COVID and then, of course, all of the rhetoric that came out of 2020 fundamentally changed the entire conversation around elections. It changed how we have to be proactive and responsive to folks. Whereas we used to get a handful of questions or a handful of public records requests a year, now it’s a handful of public records requests a day.”

Election officials themselves reflected that their positions have been politicized. As one election technologist shared, election officials are “under-resourced, under-supported, frightened.” With the politicization of their jobs, some now “fear for their lives.” When it came to addressing rumors or narratives about election processes and procedures, many officials found using the terms “misinformation” and “disinformation” unhelpful when serving inquiries from clients—these terms didn’t necessarily describe rumoring dynamics correctly, particularly given that election rumoring is normal and not all rumors are part of malicious disinformation campaigns. Our team helped a few election officials who reached out to use better, less triggering and more accurate terminology, while also getting buy-in from their bosses (“It’s confidence inducing”). They reflected:

“When speaking online to our voters, when creating content, when even myself responding to folks, thinking about ‘rumors’ and how people experience rumors and how they’re normal... that was all very, very helpful. I made a presentation to government communicators and I referred them to your site.”

As the CIP, we could not cater to every jurisdiction or state beyond our home state of Washington. Rapid research requires proactive relationship building; the team cannot know in advance to build relationships with a small county in Pennsylvania that will suddenly become the site of national attention because of rumors. Building trusted relationships in advance with every vulnerable jurisdiction is not viable. That said, one of the motivations for providing this framework is so other labs can replicate this work across the country, providing local capacity and expertise. Consistency matters, though, as well. Our team was able to rely upon national recognition that we had cultivated through our work on election rumors since 2020, which enabled us to make

our articles and other materials more visible and therefore useful to election officials and other community partners.

Election communicators acknowledged that there are not a lot of resources out there to help them do their work on the timeline when they need it. In many cases, election offices don't even have a dedicated communications official. As such, our work meant a lot to elections officials, with one reflecting: "I would say that without the Center for Informed Public, that election administrators across [our] state and across this country would be left without a trusted and proven resource to help us develop the most effective messages that we need to do our work."

11.

WHAT IS 'THE PUBLIC?'

Being a “Center for an Informed Public,” one might ask, “What is ‘the public?’” The notion of a unified public sphere—once imagined through the lens of a 2010s-era Twitter—no longer held in 2024. During the 2010s, Twitter was often conceptualized as a singular space where diverse publics could converge to engage in a shared political discourse, especially in high-stakes events like elections. By 2024, this sense of uniformity fragmented.¹ Instead of one dominant platform facilitating a collective conversation, the “public sphere” (in the minds of many media elites at least) had splintered into multiple smaller publics, distributed across a variety of platforms with distinct affordances and cultures. This shift represented a deeper fracturing, where audiences were not only segmented by ideology exacerbated by algorithmic recommendation, but platforms and infrastructures themselves.

Our approach is to see the public as a series of different stakeholders and audiences, not a single public or public sphere so much as a collection of “public sphericules” that have different interests, stakes, technology platforms, and identities.² We also did not look at the “public” as solely an online phenomena—offline dynamics are critical. Some of the public engaged our work via the press or public events. But select members of the public subscribed to our Substack, which published daily as we neared the election.

A reader survey gave us some insight into the demographics and interests of these subscribers, though we recognize it is imperfect and not fully representative of our readership. Most respondents were academics (22%) or journalists (13%), but many self-reported as retirees (15%). The majority of our readers were in Washington state (35%). Most had heard about the Substack on the news or on Bluesky, specifically CIP co-founder and then-Director Kate Starbird’s account. Many readers said they were acquaintances of CIP researchers (24%).

Most respondents commented on the timeliness and speed of the outputs. Several respondents still (mis)understood our work as a form of “fact-checking,” but most appreciated it as a source of sensemaking itself, explaining how rumoring worked without having to expose oneself to the content, “It’s a great way of

1. Eduardo Di Martino, Alessandro Galeazzi, Michele Starnini, Walter Quattrociocchi, and Matteo Cinelli. “Ideological Fragmentation of the Social Media Ecosystem: From Echo Chambers to Echo Platforms.” *PNAS Nexus* 4, no. 9 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgaf262>.

2. Todd Gitlin, “Public Sphere or Public Sphericules?,” in *Media, Ritual and Identity* (Routledge, 1998).

tying everything without having to crawl through a bunch of terrible X posts, and it's really well written and interesting!"

PART IV

INSIGHTS FOR ACADEMIA

The ERRP was a unique one to be housed in academia. We worked on an hourly, not monthly or quarterly, timeline. Blog posts were reviewed internally by our team, but given the “rapid” nature, could not be peer reviewed via traditional mechanisms. Our team efforts were through in-person shifts. Group work was highly interdisciplinary, with law students supporting information scientists. Our objectives were not to bolster C.V.’s but were to support the civic information ecosystem in democratic elections. Despite some features that could seem misaligned to academic incentives, the ERRP thrived in an academic environment. This kind of work can also take an emotional toll on all involved, particularly given the condensed exposure to potentially disturbing or disorienting content, a deep commitment to nonpartisan action in a high stakes election with profound impact on their lives, as well as the known risks in conducting election integrity rumor research that the team experienced first hand in prior years.

The academy does have some built-in features that make it an attractive home for rapid research. Being institutions of higher learning, methodological experimentation and exploration are encouraged, perhaps more so than if this work happened in a corporate or government environment. The academic year is divided into semesters or quarters which creates time-bound containers where students can be hired or work with teams on independent studies, allowing us to quickly expand our workforce during critical periods like elections. For instance, UW has “Directed Research Groups” where students can earn credits for these hands-on, team research projects sponsored by a professor. Given UW’s 10-week quarter system, there is a regular turnover of students which also helps to reduce burnout. Projects that create non-traditional classroom settings for learning are highly sought after as they create opportunities for students to apply skills in real-world contexts. Finally, rapid research creates a location, a “field,” for data collection that students and faculty can use for future research papers, projects, and dissertations.

University-based rapid research may be particularly helpful in the context of U.S. elections, which are organized at the local and state levels and vary in terms of laws, materials, and procedures across thousands of different jurisdictions. Above, we noted that it would be difficult for one research team to support election officials and voters in so many different places at once. However, it would be less difficult for dozens of different research teams to do this work in a loose network, sharing resources, but adapting their expertise to and building their networks within their own local communities and states. This framework paper is a contribution to this vision.

This section goes deeper into some of these insights from various participants, while also noting some of the challenges academics face when doing this kind of research.

12.

STUDENT EDUCATIONAL VALUE AND SUITABILITY TO THE ACADEMY

Student workers on the project appreciated exposure to a different style of learning, leading, producing data, researching, and working, while also being able to feel part of a historic election process.

The ERRP offered a unique and critical educational opportunity to work on a team, at-speed, and in-shifts while operating from uncertainty—all important skills for a 21st century workforce or research team. Rapid research trains students to work at different paces, something students say they appreciate: “I like the rapid response work because it keeps me nimble. It’s kind of engaging. It forces me to do research quickly and not just, like, dwell on things.” The educational value of this project has been recognized by other campus units. One PI reflected:

“Bringing their expertise to unfolding events and situations—where their work in real time could change the course of those events—is an attractive thing for many folks right now. As an example, we’ve had discussions with other units on campus that have particular training programs and they want to embed their trainees in the CIP so that those trainees, other graduate students, can get and participate in and learn the kinds of things we do with our rapid response projects.”

Doing a rapid research project—especially one revolving around a fixed date, like an election—at a university can have advantages. A consistent supply of skilled undergraduate students and the academy’s culture of intellectual experimentation allowed the project to adapt in ways that would be difficult to achieve outside an academic setting. One PI reflected: “Having people with pretty flexible schedules like students is actually not a bad thing, right?”

This rapid research project offered a notable opportunity for building community, finding collaborators and developing datasets for future research. Several graduate students reported that they were continuing to work with undergraduates from the ERRP via Directed Research Groups in the following quarters. Some of these undergraduates presented at campus research showcases and won awards for their work. Since 2020, over 15 papers related to our rapid research at the CIP have been presented at conferences, published in journals, defended as dissertations, or are currently under review.

Graduate students expressed the satisfaction of being mentors for undergraduates. One doctoral student with tech industry experience shared, “I want to train the next generation of internet researchers. That’s just

something that's very important to my mission." The intensity and daily touch-points with professors via shift work also meant students got more time with faculty, building closer relationships. One postdoc reflected, "I know other postdocs who don't have the time with their supervisor. I've been very lucky to work with [the PI's]."

13.

ENGAGING FULL-TIME STAFF IS KEY

Most students, PIs, and external stakeholders reflected the importance of having full-time staff engaged in this project. This included specifically a communications director and a research manager. These roles require different professional skills than typically learned in academic training, but are important to public-facing rapid research. They also give the project and participants consistency in presence and leadership that faculty whose time is typically divided between a variety of obligations have difficulty providing.

As one graduate student reflected, a research manager was critical for this project that required speed, hourly decision-making authority, academic knowledge, and management skills. The student said, “Overall, I thought that the project management style structure was really important. And I think that you know in academia especially, it can be hard to find people who know how to do that and can do that well. And I think that we’ve struggled before with academic leaders trying to fill that role and not being incentivized, like either not knowing how to do that well or having too many other things on their plate.” As another graduate student noted regarding the research manager, “I mean, we have to advocate for this role or else they’re going to pretend that these things are smooth working without this large invisible hand that’s doing it.”

The communications director managed media, events, and press for many projects within the CIP. As rapid research was unfolding, the communications director had access to all of the Slack channels, the Notion project management software, and weekly meetings. They were not a “marketing” professional waiting to engage research once it was fully baked; they were actively part of the process of doing research. As they reflected, “It is worth underscoring the value of having a communications professional embedded with a team of researchers who attends the weekly meetings, who is monitoring updates on Slack because there’s a lot of nuance that is communicated within the workflow of this type of rapid research approach.” Engaging communications staff in the process of doing research also helps prime relationships with press and set expectations for what is in the pipeline.

14.

IMPORTANCE OF BRAND

Running the ERRP out of the UW Center for an Informed Public was essential to the project's success. Having an interdisciplinary center with established, long-term collaborations and a full-time support staff allowed this project to scale up and down in a seamless way. The CIP was founded in 2019, though collaborative work among the PIs predates its inception. One of the co-founders reflected on the reasoning for the CIP:

“Part of the launch of the CIP was motivated by institutionalizing what used to be sort of siloed or small partners or smaller collaborations into something where you know the sum was greater than or the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. And part of that was thinking about the resources needed, both human, technical, partnerships and stakeholders needed to scale the impact of research and translate that research into practice or policy in a much more concrete way.”

The CIP and ERRP mutually benefited from each other's activities, building a brand given our commitment to helping individuals, communities, and institutions navigate our complex information environment. By “brand,” we mean being recognized and top of mind to a variety of stakeholders for a certain kind of consistent offering and expertise. While branding may be something academic experts rarely think about (or actively bristle at), our team was aware of the need to think about public informational needs on their terms and timeline—which means considering attention dynamics, platforms, aesthetics, and consistency.

In 2020, the team broadcast its real-time analyses (initially independently and then later as part of the EIP), including innovative graphs for tracking rumor spread, over then-Twitter. The UW faculty members on the EIP team had prior experience studying and reacting to crisis events, providing the team over a decade of experience in sharing preliminary research findings on social media as such events were unfolding. One faculty member reflected, “It's not just about what [content] says. It's about getting people's eyeballs on it in a way that intersects with the attention dynamics of the platforms that we're studying right. We don't want to create clickbait, but we do want to make sure that the content we create has the capacity to get in front of people in this environment.” This was made more difficult in 2024 by not using X, changing our own relationship to attention dynamics. The team did experiment with a small Directed Research Group of undergraduates dedicated to making short-form vertical video on TikTok aiming to explain our research, but this was an exercise.

Given Trump's and the broader MAGA contestation of the election results, the 2020 EIP's work mapping the

rumor and disinformation dynamics of the “Big Lie” gained notoriety, from fans and foes. This also boosted our work among democracy advocates. One election technology expert noted, “Honestly for my money, I think of [your team] and UW, as [people] who move in social media and democracy circles. I think that actually says a lot, that’s my immediate go to in that sense. You had a distinct and specific kind of elevated ‘brand.’ I’m sorry to use the term but that’s true.” The recognizability of the CIP’s brand and association with election rumor research through the years helped us connect with journalists, election officials, and other non-profit stakeholders.

In a polarized and adversarial climate, the survival of CIP’s ERRP project was not guaranteed. Following the partisan backlash after the 2020 election, institutions such as Stanford’s Internet Observatory ceased their operations on election integrity research.¹ Academic research on the topic became increasingly scarce, with fewer platforms, newspapers, and institutions allocating resources and personnel (e.g., fact-checkers, content moderation teams) to such a contested and politically charged space. As one technologist reflected on the importance of the broader and unquantifiable value of the continuation of ERRP’s work:

“The critical and essential importance of continuing to tell the truth is, in my opinion, not something that can merely be measured against some statistical question of scale and well, how many people did you reach or how do you know I think about that question from the very simple standpoint of. I think the fact that there is... an insistence and a motivation for critical analysis at all, to me, that’s a success.”

The CIP, in its very name, strives to have an academic commitment to serving the public’s informational needs by supplying empirically sound and critical analysis, even under constraint.

1. Casey Newton and Zoë Schiffer, “The Stanford Internet Observatory Is Being Dismantled,” Platformer, June 13, 2024, <https://www.platformer.news/stanford-internet-observatory-shutdown-stamos-diresta-sio/>.

15.

SUSTAINABILITY AND EMOTIONAL TOLL

Students and staff expressed a lot of satisfaction in working on the ERRP. That said, working on a project that could expose you to disturbing or disorienting content and opinions that are drastically different than your own as well as open doorways for potential internet attacks, political scrutiny, and lawsuits can take an emotional toll. Team morale and sustainability must be considered when doing rapid research in such an environment.

Thoughtful hiring and training are critical. “I think we had a very rigorous kind of application process. We chose students who were quite ready to do that kind of research, which is not easy,” one graduate researcher mused on hiring undergraduate shift-workers, “I think it requires a level of emotional maturity.” A staff psychologist, not just at the campus but with specific hours dedicated to the CIP, was available free of charge to all students working on the project. CIP leadership worked with school Deans to ensure this support was available and committed resources to continued staff support. Additionally, digital security training as well as mental health best practices were part of the onboarding for all students.

Given the political attacks and litigation against our team that worked on 2020 election monitoring, many senior staff members came into 2024 a little battle-worn and concerned for new students should such attacks continue. “It’s one thing to feel it yourself and be able to manage it. I can manage it. But to know other people are getting stressed?” One PI worried about impacts on students, preparing them for potential outcomes while also not hyperbolizing risk, “We want to do this kind of work and we want to really be honest and transparent about what’s happening, but you also don’t want to scare and depress students.”

One full-time staffer reflected on the “burnout” from the attacks. “This kind of work is not sustainable across multiple aspects for long periods of time. Part of it is funding, part of it is staffing. Part of it is burnout.” Even with all of the proactivity of hiring mental health, legal, or communications support, trying to do this work for long sprints can become difficult. In this sense, choosing a specific period of time for the project and scoping it well becomes critical. Being in a university means there is a natural turn-over of students, who can also pass down knowledge to each other while keeping fresh minds. Staff also changed. A previous research scientist managing the team left in early 2024, which meant finding a new research manager who could steward the team. “Coming in seeing folks a bit burned out by the experience of having been subject to very political attacks,” that manager reflected, “It was nice to be the fresh blood and to have a different approach and different perspective.”

Discovering, analyzing, and writing about election rumors may also sometimes feel like it is “not enough” to make positive change. One graduate researcher mentioned that doing this research repeatedly discouraged her attitude towards human nature, showing her that “a sentiment of distrust in elections or antagonism towards the other party is actually so resilient to [...] events or information that you would maybe think would alter that stance.” That said, graduate students felt the team was making a difference. As one student reflected, “I often described myself as a mix of a naive idealist and a cynical realist. I intentionally try to think of this work as providing value or potential value. [...] I think just documenting what we’re seeing is valuable.” This sense of purpose kept the team going.

16.

REAL-TIME SENSEMAKING AS INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION

In light of attacks on institutions of knowledge and media, many experts have been reflecting on how better to improve how institutions communicate with the publics they serve, mindful of the resources they have at their disposal.¹ Many institutions, including the academy, are risk-averse in their communication practices, with many layers of approval needed for official institutional messages. Communications in many institutions remains either a practice in risk-mitigation or sales, as opposed to a holistic part of public service, where the communications themselves serve a public need. Academic institutions are also realizing that they have fallen short in communicating the value of research to the public; many recent efforts evidence new approaches.² Rapid research like the ERRP is a form of academic institutional communication, where our timely research is contributing to trustworthy public “sensemaking.”

Instead of trying to “message at” the public as a university trying to “prove” value through marketing, rapid research responds to public informational needs when they are needed, not after the fact. Our team’s wealth of empirical knowledge gathered in rapid research informed by years of novel methodological development and dozens of peer-reviewed outputs offered us an opportunity to be a trusted real-time “sensemaker,” offering frames that explained how and why rumors we saw emerging in the “collective sensemaking” process leading up to and just after Election Day spread. As mentioned earlier in the paper, this is a social process by which individuals and groups assemble (and reassemble) evidence (videos, hearsay, photos) and apply frames (narratives, call-backs to other events or histories) to that evidence in order to develop an explanatory story of an unfolding event.

Rumoring, or the spread of unverified claims, is a natural part of “collective sensemaking.” Sociologist Tamotsu

1. Renée DiResta and Rachel Kleinfeld, “For Expertise to Matter, Nonpartisan Institutions Need New Communications Strategies,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 10, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/09/communications-social-media-nonprofit-institutions-new-media-environment?lang=en>.

2. See the “Research Makes America” initiative at UW <https://www.washington.edu/research-makes-america/>; Erin Schumaker, “Harvard.Edu Gets a Makeover,” *POLITICO*, November 7, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/future-pulse/2025/04/16/harvard-gets-a-makeover-00292530>.

Shibutani described rumoring as “improvised news” exchanged within informal groups during moments of uncertainty or information gaps.³ Management scholar Karl Weick defined sensemaking as “the ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs.”⁴ Thus collective sensemaking in a rumoring event—such as a crisis or election—is a group effort to understand what is happening and what has happened.

By analyzing the dynamics of rumoring in addition to the content of rumors, and offering that knowledge publicly, we helped audiences see events from a broader vantage point that could help resolve uncertainty and, consequently, ease anxiety. In doing so, we acted as sensemakers ourselves, offering insights that stabilize rapidly unfolding stories, utilizing our rapid research knowledge as an empirical underpinning. Framing the behavior and tactics—not just the claims—in a relatable way that acknowledges our natural tendency as humans to engage with rumors has the potential to build trust by recognizing rumoring as an ordinary, even empathetic, human response to uncertainty. As one graduate researcher noted, it gives the public “a more reality-based understanding of the real issues of election administration.”

This real-time sensemaking through blogs, media appearances, and social media helped build trust among election officials, journalists, and civic organizations. Describing phenomena broadly—not only the minutiae—helps stakeholders keep sight of the bigger picture, while offering useful frames and heuristics to understand what is happening. For instance, election officials valued using “rumors” as a framing tool, moving away from politically charged (and not always accurate) terms like misinformation or disinformation. Journalists appreciated our rapid, big-picture explanations and connections to other narratives. Public policy organizations specializing in voting access relied on our “pre-bunking” and *What to Expect* series to anticipate and prepare for rumor dynamics in real time.

Rapid research offers an opportunity to engage in the collective sensemaking process at the time when our expertise and capacity to support the public is most needed. In the context of broader “collective sensemaking” during crisis events, not participating in that process by sharing important research can be devastating. One PI recalled the cost of delay during earlier research on disinformation campaigns targeting White Helmets, a Syrian humanitarian group:

“I remember being like ‘I’m sitting on this stuff and it could help people and we’re not publishing it because I’m waiting for review.’ And eventually, one of the people that was helping the White Helmets ends up taking his own life, in part due to disinformation that had targeted him. So it was very hard. It was a very, very hard case for our team. To sit there on our hands and wait was really hard.”

3. Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966).

4. Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, vol. 3 (SAGE, 1995).

Sharing insights at speed is critical not just for impact, but for team morale. Sharing rapid research becomes an active contribution to public understanding, rather than passive observation. As one PI reflected, “We’ve been studying these ‘framing contests’—strategic efforts to shape sensemaking processes—and now we’ve put ourselves within them in a way that if we can help people see the dynamics, maybe people can be less manipulated by things.” Critical to this perspective is our emphasis on supporting public information needs in ways that enable individual autonomy and decision making. We were, in other words, part of the sensemaking process itself.

17.

INCENTIVIZING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Despite the many benefits of rapid research—creating datasets for future scholarship, giving students valuable teamwork experience, contributing real-time sensemaking, strengthening academia’s reputation, and serving civic health—this work often sits uneasily within current academic incentive structures. While several funders have begun building pathways to connect academic insights on media and technology with policymakers and journalists, stronger incentives and more robust pipelines are still needed.¹

This paper was made possible by private foundations that have cultivated the field over the past decade, inspiring subsequent public funding; NSF funding (2022–2025) made this study into rapid research methods possible. Despite critical needs for rapid research and studies of online information, the NSF terminated funding for misinformation research—including the grant that funded this work.²

There are ways of adjusting disciplines of media studies, information science, human-centered design, computational social science and journalism studies in order to incentivize rapid research and “sensemaking” work as academics. To do this, we must encourage funders, consider this work as part of promotion packages, and get administrators to see rapid research as a means of building publicly visible relationships with different kinds of stakeholders.

There has been growing awareness of the value of public scholarship for universities, including recognition within hiring and promotion, and we want to underscore the importance of this shift—our organization’s very name “The Center for an Informed Public” reflects this trend. Graduate students and junior faculty rarely receive the same credit for rapid-research blog posts or media engagements as they do for peer-reviewed publications or conference presentations. Yet our rapid research—including the visualization techniques we developed—draws directly from established, peer-reviewed methods. As technology evolves quickly, many scholars have turned to preprints as a way to balance the need for timely public engagement with academic

1. Issie Lapowsky, *Bridging the Divide: Translating Research on Digital Media into Policy and Practice* (Knight Foundation, 2024), <https://knightfoundation.org/features/bridging-the-divide-translating-research-on-digital-media-into-policy-and-practice/>.

2. Ethan Porter, Aaron Shaw, and Emma S. Spiro. “Misinformation Research Continues to Be Urgent Science.” *Science Advances* 11, no. 22 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.ady9839>.

rigor.³ Applying peer-reviewed methods to rapid research (which is branded and understood as such) allows us to maintain methodological integrity while responding to real-time demands for expertise.

One full-time staff member reflected that the CIP had existing relationships with journalists, policy makers, and actors in the elections and democracy world. The project got many requests from them for our expertise, to help them make sense of things happening in election rumoring and election communications. This is a public service even if such work isn't necessarily credited in the academic job market. As they said, "I think to our researchers' credit, they said OK [...]. This did not help them get tenure. This did not help them secure billions in research funding. This did not help their CV, but I think there was a real recognition that there were community needs across the board in that moment that we, in many ways, were uniquely placed to respond to."

The rapid research our team conducted was meaningful, public-facing work during a period when universities were under political attack from factions claiming that intellectual elites and academia were out of touch with the nation's needs. This work directly countered that perception by engaging with real-world problems and serving clearly defined stakeholders: election officials, journalists, and the general public. It fostered a sense of pride and purpose among team members. After all, many enter academia with a commitment to creating knowledge as a form of public service. Rapid research embodies that service-oriented mission, demonstrating the public value of the university in real time.

3. Clare Watson, "Rise of the Preprint: How Rapid Data Sharing during COVID-19 Has Changed Science Forever," *Nature Medicine* 28, no. 1 (2022): 2–5, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-021-01654-6>.

PART V

CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

Rapid research of rumors unfolding in real-time events, when conducted through an interdisciplinary research center, can generate significant returns in education impact, scholarly output, societal benefit, funding acquisition, and public institutional trust.

Moving forward, we implore academic institutions, educators, and funders to consider the following topline recommendations when implementing rapid research:

- **Restructure Incentives:** Universities should incentivize rapid research and similar sensemaking support activities by expanding evaluation criteria to include measurable public engagement alongside traditional metrics. Specifically, consider tracking media citations, policy briefings, collaborations with other public institutions, community partnerships, public-facing educational resources, stakeholder consultations, translation to real-world policy, and practice changes informed by research, all alongside peer-reviewed publications in tenure and promotion decisions. Funders can accelerate this shift by prioritizing more grants to projects, departments and centers that perform public scholarship with documented community impact.
- **Build on Proven Models:** Universities should establish their own “Sensemaking Centers” to support interdisciplinary and cross-industry work, building on the approach taken by the Center for an Informed Public. This helps build intellectual, social, and professional sinews that keep a vibrant public sphere. It also cuts down on overhead across and between projects through shared resources and staff. The creation of such a “Sensemaking Center” (in name!) could also develop a nationally recognized concept by journalists, stakeholders, and the public who can help make sense of massive changes in how we talk about the world in the 21st century. This can also cultivate stronger ties with the local community, especially for public universities.
- **Engage Students in Experiments at Speed:** Universities are uniquely positioned to engage students in critical public service semester-long “sensemaking” sprints across disciplines while creatively experimenting with new ways in doing research. Student engagement in these structured rapid research experiences helps build 21st century skills in team-work, project management, problem-solving, and digital media literacy. Utilize this capability for both educational and research purposes, while also offering visible public outputs.
- **Change Your Approach to Institutional Communication:** Reshaping institutional communication

towards this collaborative model represents a strategic shift for universities navigating an uncertain landscape. Instead of relying on traditional “marketing,” rapid research projects can position academic institutions as responsive knowledge partners—meeting public information needs in real-time and engaging public partners when they need knowledge most. This shift can make a profound impression on the public in ways that other kinds of “advertising” may not, while demonstrating institutional relevance and a commitment to public service at a time when it is desperately needed.

- **Sustain and Scale the Efforts:** Institutions that commit sustained funding for this work will create a durable capacity to serve the public good. Successful rapid-research efforts require sustained infrastructure and strategic annual investment, not one-time funding. Maintaining the ability to respond rapidly to unfolding events depends on dedicated personnel, technical infrastructure, and institutional support structures that are available year-round—even during periods without active crises. This includes funding to support core research staff, training of junior scholars, communications capacity, and other resources that can be mobilized quickly when rapid response is necessary. While the upfront and ongoing costs are not insignificant, the returns in educational impact, scholarly innovation, public trust, and institutional relevance justify treating rapid research as a core strategic investment.

While academia’s established methods—such as peer-reviewed publishing, scholarly conferences, and university education—remain foundational to knowledge production and engagement, there is also a growing need to develop complementary forms of scholarly engagement where knowledge is shared in real time in key and time sensitive topics. Our rapid research enterprise is not a replacement for traditional academic practice, but a complement to it, anchored in established methods, theories, and principles. In the context of a drastically accelerated information environment, the conventional academic timeline often cannot match the pace at which information—including false rumors and disinformation campaigns—spreads and shapes public discourse, especially during events such as elections.

Of course, there are risks of doing rapid research that comment on public events. Given it operates outside of traditional peer review practices, rapid research and contributions to public sensemaking during breaking events hold innate risks, especially if not done in an incredibly cautious and well-structured manner. To mitigate these risks, our work leverages the infrastructure and methods established in the course of conducting peer-reviewed work—underscoring the importance of resourcing ongoing research that has a strong foundation of infrastructural support, expertise, resources, and experience. Recently, maneuvering by the Trump administration has added a new dimension of risk. The White House presented a “Compact for Excellence in Higher Education” to several universities, offering to give them preferential treatment for funding

if they accepted a number of policy changes outlined.¹ One of them included abstaining from commenting on current events—which rapid research inherently does. The language says, “all university employees, in their capacity as university representatives, will abstain from actions or speech relating to societal and political events except in cases in which external events have a direct impact upon the university.”² The compact was rejected by the vast majority of the nine schools it was offered to, in part due to perceived impositions upon academic freedom.³ The very fact public interest research like this is under attack underscores the importance of conducting it.

By developing an alternative model of scholarly publishing and public engagement, one that thoughtfully responds to emergent informational crises in real time informed by rigorous academic methodological training, we offer a new form of 21st-century academic intervention through sensemaking support. This model allows scholars to document, interpret, and engage with rapidly evolving media dynamics, providing timely insight and public value in highly scoped domains without compromising scholarly integrity. In doing so, we extend the relevance and impact of academic research into the contested and fast-moving arenas of digital communication and public knowledge.

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1. Katherine Knott, “What to Know About Trump’s Compact for Higher Ed,” *Inside Higher Ed*, October 20, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/politics-elections/2025/10/20/5-things-know-about-trumps-higher-ed-compact>.
 2. For the original text, please see the Washington Examiner’s republished copy of the compact: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Compact-for-Academic-Excellence-in-Higher-Education-10.1.pdf>
 3. Alan Binder, “All but 2 Universities Decline a Trump Offer of Preferential Funding,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/20/us/politics/universities-funding-compact.html>.

PART V

APPENDICES

This section offers three appendices filled with practical tools for academics doing rapid research, particularly related to election rumors. The first appendix is a checklist for academics when they get media requests. The second is a sample query for monitoring election rumors on social media. The third is a training tool to describe the scope of election rumor research.

18.

APPENDIX 1: "SO A JOURNALIST REACHED OUT..." AN ACADEMIC'S CHECKLIST FOR MEDIA REQUESTS

For many academics, getting a media request from a journalist can be a panic-inducing experience. Oftentimes, media training is not part of the curriculum for becoming a research professional or teacher. This guide is a quick checklist for experts, academics, and researchers who get urgent media requests for their expertise—whether during rapid research or breaking news. Much like a journalist, we lay this out in classic journalism questions: *Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?* Consider printing it out and putting it near your desk.

Who is the journalist?

- Who sent you this inquiry? The journalist or a communications professional from your institution's department, school, college or central news office, if applicable?
- Do you know the journalist and the outlet they represent?
- Are they a beat reporter or do they cover a broader area of general breaking news?
- What is their posture towards your work? Do they have a track record of using adversarial, sensational or clickbait angles in their reporting that may provide clues around their intent?
- Are they an opinion writer or columnist who may use your interview to build a partisan or ideological argument or frame in their article?

Where is this being published?

- Where will this be published? TV? Radio? Print and digital?
- Will the interview be conducted over the phone? Is it live for radio or television or pre-recorded where an edited portion is used in a broadcast segment? A podcast episode featuring extended interview commentary?
- Is the content distributed via a larger news network or newswire service, the Associated Press, Reuters, or the USA Today network of local and regional newspapers?

What is the ask?

- What is the journalist's beat? Is it consistent or is this a one-off story? (For instance: Does the reporter typically write about politics but is writing a tech-focused story?)
- What are their questions? Are they specific to something you wrote, or seeking more general information?
- Where are they in the process of reporting? Is it near the start of a fact-finding mission for a journalist new to reporting on your area of expertise? Or is this a journalist toward the end of their reporting and looking for expert quotes to validate their own findings?
- Are they looking for a fact-check, or a framing of a larger phenomenon they don't understand?
- Are they looking for a full interview to publish, or just a few quotes?

When do they need it and what are the terms?

- When do they want to speak? How urgent is it? What is their deadline?
- How long will this take? (A reporter who only needs to speak for 10-15 minutes may be simply looking for a quote vs a reporter who may need 30-45 minutes to better understand the research and context.)
- What are the terms of the interview? Is it all on-the-record? Off-the-record? Or "On background," where information can be used in reporting, but direct attributable quotes cannot be published?

Why should you do this?

- Do you have a professional interest in helping this journalist or sharing your knowledge?
- Is it important to you to share academic knowledge with the public?
- Do you have something you've been meaning to share, even beyond the specific ask of the journalist that may inform their current work or future reporting?
- Do you have a certain framing of a breaking news phenomenon? A fact to share? Something to debunk or clarify?
- Is there someone else you think is better positioned to answer the journalist's questions?

How can your university help?

- Do you have a departmental communications professional or university public information officer who can assist you in managing the request?
- Is that communications professional or public information officer aware of the request?
- Is that communications professional in a position to speak with the reporter to gather additional details about their reporting and inquiry? Can they provide background information that may help the

reporter ask better questions you're in a position to answer?

Pro-Tips

- **Ask to go “on background” first.** With many print journalists, you can ask to begin a conversation “on-background” and offer to follow-up on e-mail with written quotes for pieces that intrigued the journalist. Going on-background can be a great way to explain your expertise to a journalist without the pressure of feeling like your precise spoken words will be printed. It's an opportunity to define your area of expertise so the reporter is less tempted to ask questions you're not in a position to answer. This may be a great way to speak freely and educate a journalist you trust is coming in good faith.
- **Once asked, get agreement from the reporter to go “on background” or “off the record.”** As with requests to go “off-the-record,” the reporter must verbally agree to the terms of going “on-background.” Also note that once something is said on-record, you as the interviewee cannot simply declare something off-the-record or on-background after the fact. You can ask, of course, to scratch something said on-record that you wish you hadn't said. But that request may not be respected.
- **Don't say anything you don't want printed.** That said, when speaking to any journalist, be careful to not say things you wouldn't want the possibility of being public. When agreeing to go “on-background,” a journalist may push you to go “on-the-record” if what you said was that good.
- **Do what feels comfortable and call the shots.** If you don't enjoy doing phone interviews, offer to send written responses to questions. (Different publications may have different practices around how written responses are cited, including specifying that the comments were sent “via email” or “in a written response.” If you're uneasy with a TV interview, don't do it! If you are doing a recorded video or audio, ask for more takes if you didn't like what you did.
- **Say what you think should be known, not what they want you to say.** Sometimes journalists can ask leading questions. You don't have to answer the question directly; you can say what you think should be published. Go into an interview with a few key points or insights you think are important and find ways to revisit those ideas in other questions. The more a reporter hears you stress or repeat a certain detail or insights, the more likely it will be quoted or cited.
- **Say no.** If it doesn't feel right, don't feel obligated to agree to speak to or even respond to a journalist.
- **But your emails!** If you work in a public institution, your emails may be subject to public records requests. Be mindful of what you communicate to the press via email.
- **Know your own risks.** If you are studying something that carries political, social, or legal risk and you have not done press before, consider talking to trusted peers and/or communications professionals before sharing certain information with journalists.

19.

APPENDIX 2: QUERY EXAMPLE

The following is an example of one of the queries we used for monitoring ongoing rumors on X (using Brandwatch) and Bluesky. The list was compiled over several elections since 2020 to monitor common terms and tropes in election rumors. When necessary, other queries were set up for specific events or emergent rumors our team discovered. We offer this list as a tool for other election rumor researchers as a starting point for developing their own queries.

“voter fraud” OR “election fraud” OR voterfraud OR electionfraud OR “electoral fraud” OR ((rigged OR rigging) AND (election OR elections)) OR riggedelection OR riggedelections OR electioneering OR ((cheat OR cheats OR cheater OR cheating OR cheaters OR cheated) AND (democrat OR democrats OR democratic OR dems OR liberals OR republican OR republicans OR reps OR GOP OR GOPers OR “Trump Supporters” OR “MAGA”)) OR (voter AND (disenfranchise OR disenfranchised OR suppress OR suppressed)) OR (voters AND (disenfranchise OR disenfranchises OR disenfranchised OR suppress OR suppressed)) OR votersuppression OR votesuppression OR stopthesteal OR “stop the steal” OR (election AND (steal OR steals OR stolen OR stole OR stealing OR coup)) OR (“chain of custody” AND election) OR ballot OR ballots OR “voting machine” OR “voting machines” OR pollbook OR pollbooks OR polling OR epoll OR “poll book” OR “poll books” OR pollwatcher OR pollwatchers OR pollworker OR pollworkers OR “poll worker” OR “poll workers” OR “election worker” OR “election workers” OR “election official” OR “election officials” OR “election director” OR “election board” OR “poll location” OR “poll locations” OR “polling location” OR “polling locations” OR “polling place” OR “polling places” OR “poll place” OR “poll places” OR glitch OR glitches OR “vote dump” OR “vote dumps” OR “votedump” OR “votedumps” OR “red mirage” OR “blue mirage” OR “white van” OR “white vans” OR “mail-in” OR “mail in” OR mailin OR mailinballot OR mailinballots OR “vote by mail” OR “drop box” OR “drop boxes” OR dropboxes OR (dropbox AND (ballot OR ballots OR vote OR voting OR votes OR location OR locations)) OR (vote AND absentee) OR (votes AND absentee) OR (voted AND absentee) OR (voter AND absentee) OR (voters AND absentee) OR (voting AND absentee) OR (election AND (“USPS” OR “post office” OR postal OR postoffice)) OR overvote OR undervote OR tabulator OR tabulators OR (smartmatic AND (machine OR machines)) OR (dominion AND (machine OR machines)) OR (dominion AND voting) OR (smartmatic AND voting) OR ((“non-citizen” OR “non-citizens” OR “non citizen” OR “non citizens” OR noncitizen OR noncitizens OR immigrant OR immigrants OR illegal OR illegals OR migrant OR migrants) AND (vote OR votes OR voting OR voted OR voter OR voters OR ballot OR ballots)) OR ((registration OR registrations) AND (vote OR votes OR voting OR voted OR voter OR voters OR ballot OR ballots)) OR

decertification OR decertify OR decertifies OR decertified OR decertifying OR (certify AND election) OR (certifies AND election) OR (certified AND election) OR (certifying AND election) OR paperballot OR paperballots OR “paper ballot” OR “paper ballots” OR ((dead OR phantom OR ghost) NEAR/5 (voter OR voters)) OR ((Konnech OR “Eugene Yu”) AND (vote OR voter OR machine OR machines OR software)) OR (“Carter Center” AND (election OR vote OR voter OR voters)) OR ((touchscreen OR touchscreens) AND (machine OR machines OR voter OR voters OR voting OR vote))

20.

APPENDIX 3: SCOPE GUIDELINES

The following is an example of some of the scoping guidelines we offered to new research assistants on our “discovery” shifts. Scoping is both an art and a science. Each research assistant had a graduate research analyst, as well as principal investigators to reach out to whenever there was a question about what to include in our research database.

We record emerging narratives, rumors and content for rapid research and future research. To surface these narratives and rumors, we use a discovery process that surfaces a wide variety of social media content. Subsequent analysis stages select for content that is new or newly viral; annotate that content in ways helpful to future research, analyze significant rumor incidents; and communicate these findings to the public.

Categories of Election Integrity Content

Borrowing from guidelines published by the 2022 Election Integrity Partnership research consortium, the 2024 UW CIP election rumor research team focused on five types of election-related content when defining the scope of its research.¹

1. **Procedural interference.** Misleading or uncorroborated content about election procedures, such as when and how to vote (e.g., “your ballot won’t be counted unless you include a photograph of yourself” or “in-person voting is canceled this year”).
2. **Participation interference.** Misleading or uncorroborated content that could serve to intimidate or dissuade people from participating in the election. Related to voter intimidation or suppression of a person’s desire to vote (e.g., “lines are too long to make it worth it,” “cops are at the polling station,” “they are collecting government debts at the polls”).
3. **Solicitation of fraud or other election-related misconduct.** Content encouraging people to misrepresent themselves to affect the electoral process, illegally cast or destroy ballots, or participate in

1. These guidelines are republished from: Frances Schroeder, Christopher Giles, Dan Bateyko, Emma Lurie, Ilari Papa, John Perrino, Mishaela Robison, Emily Tianshi, Charles Simon and Sukrit Venkatagiri, “Platform Policy Analysis 2022,” Election Integrity Partnership. October 27, 2022, <https://www.cip.uw.edu/2022/10/27/platform-policy-analysis-2022/>

illegal forms of election interference (offering to buy or sell votes, encouraging people to forge signatures, voter intimidation, “unplugging the voting machines”).

4. **Delegitimization.** Misleading or uncorroborated about the election process² (e.g., “The election is being stolen, look at this [manipulated media]”) that undermines confidence in the integrity of the election or the accuracy of results.
5. **Threats to (or harassment of) election personnel.** Explicit or implied threats to election personnel. Includes both direct threats and language that encourages threats or harassment.

We also considered content specific to diasporic, cultural, or ethnic communities within the U.S. This often required a different kind of scoping approach under the guidance of a scholar or community organization versed within that particular ethnic, demographic, or cultural group. For instance, alleged election fraud in the 2024 Venezuelan elections could have impacted how U.S. Latinos perceive U.S. elections.

2. For the purposes of the project, we look only at election period processes—we do not consider larger issues of fairness around gerrymandering, allocation of election resources, campaign finance, or unfair laws or procedures already in place at the start of the election period.