Tracking public opinion about unsupported narratives in the 2020 Presidential election

Wave 2, Sep 9-26, 2020

Observatory on
Social Media (OSoMe)
Indiana University-Bloomington

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Indiana University's Observatory on Social Media (OSoMe) continues to track widely circulated but unsupported narratives throughout the 2020 presidential election season, with the goal to assess the public's awareness of them, the extent to which they are believed, and whether political leanings and media use are associated with vulnerability to these narratives.

This is a report on our second wave of data, collected from 9 to 26 September 2020. The report from Wave 1 can be found at http://osome.iu.edu/research/survey/.

Narratives

We showed respondents five screenshots from social media that represented trending but unsupported narratives, and asked them if they have encountered the narratives, or similar ones, on social media or the internet. In addition to asking whether respondents had encountered each narrative we also asked to what extent they believed the narratives.

In Wave 2, we tracked two narratives that were also assessed in Wave 1. These were:

> Joe Biden is not mentally fit to be President. [1]
> Mail-in ballots cause election fraud. [2]
> According to the Department of Homeland Security, Russian operatives are amplifying both these narratives on social media in an attempt to interfere in the upcoming Presidential election in the US.

We also added two additional narratives in Wave 2:

> President Trump went to the hospital last year because he suffered a stroke. [3]
> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) manipulated the death toll of COVID-19 to exaggerate the impact on Americans. [4]

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[1] https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/05/politics/joe-biden-donald-trump-jr-cognitive-test-fact-check/index.html

https://www.factcheck.org/2020/08/biden-video-deceptively-edited-to-make-him-appear-lost/

https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/02/politics/dhs-bulletin-russia-joe-biden

[2] https://www.factcheck.org/2020/08/trump-campaign-exaggerates-potential-for-mail-in-voting-fraud-after-election/https://

www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/apr/09/donald-trump/donald-trumps-dubious-claim-thousands-are-conspiri/

[3] https://www.logically.ai/factchecks/library/77bff320

[4] https://www.factcheck.org/2020/09/cdc-did-not-admit-only-6-of-recorded-deaths-from-covid-19/

Results

Figure 1 shows stable results for two narratives (Biden's mental state and mail-in voting) that were tracked across Waves 1 and 2. Both narratives are widely seen (≈ 43% for the Biden story; ≈ 55% for the mail-in voting narrative) and believed (≈ 47% for Biden, ≈ 46.5% for mail-in ballots).

Figure 1 *Responses to unsupported narratives tracked in Wave 1 and 2*
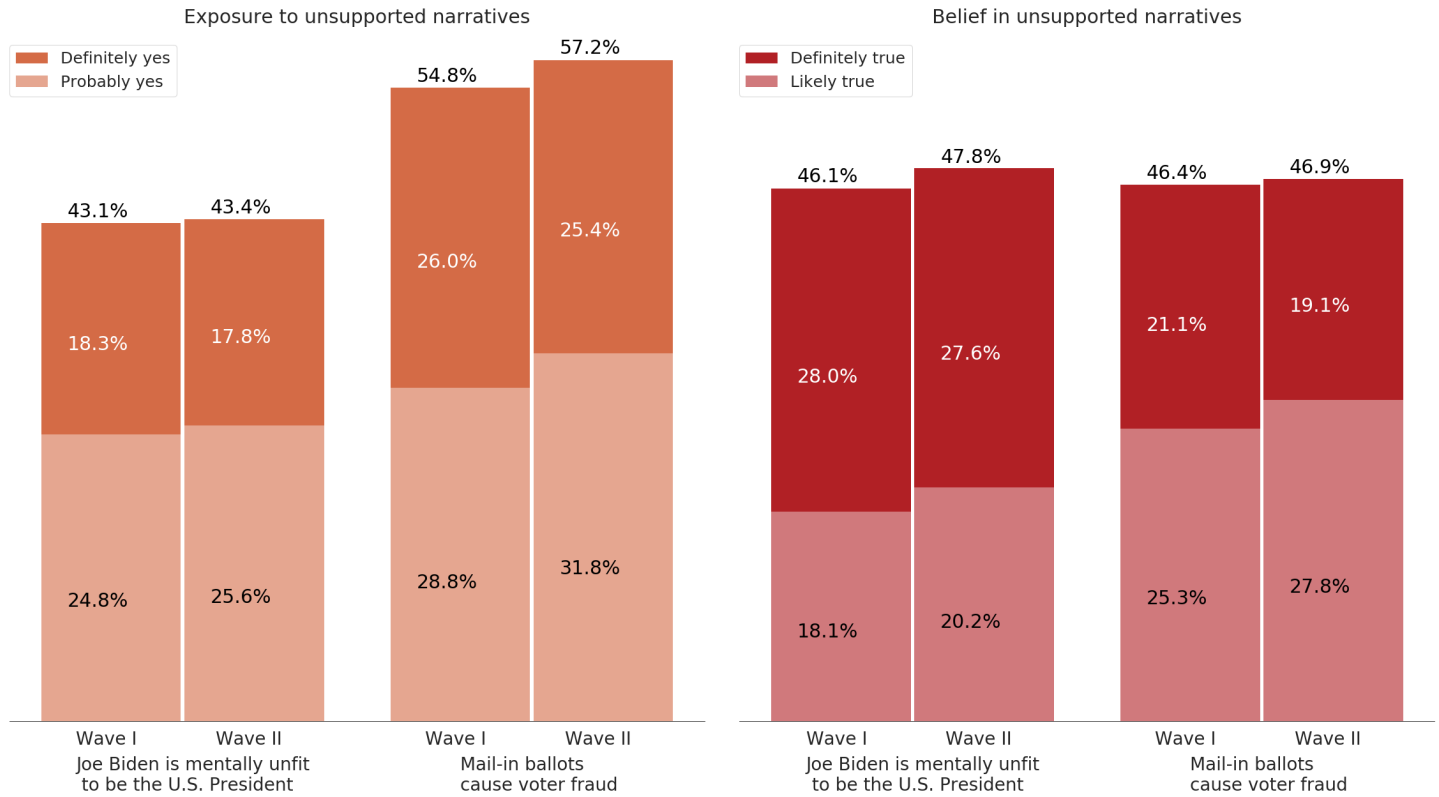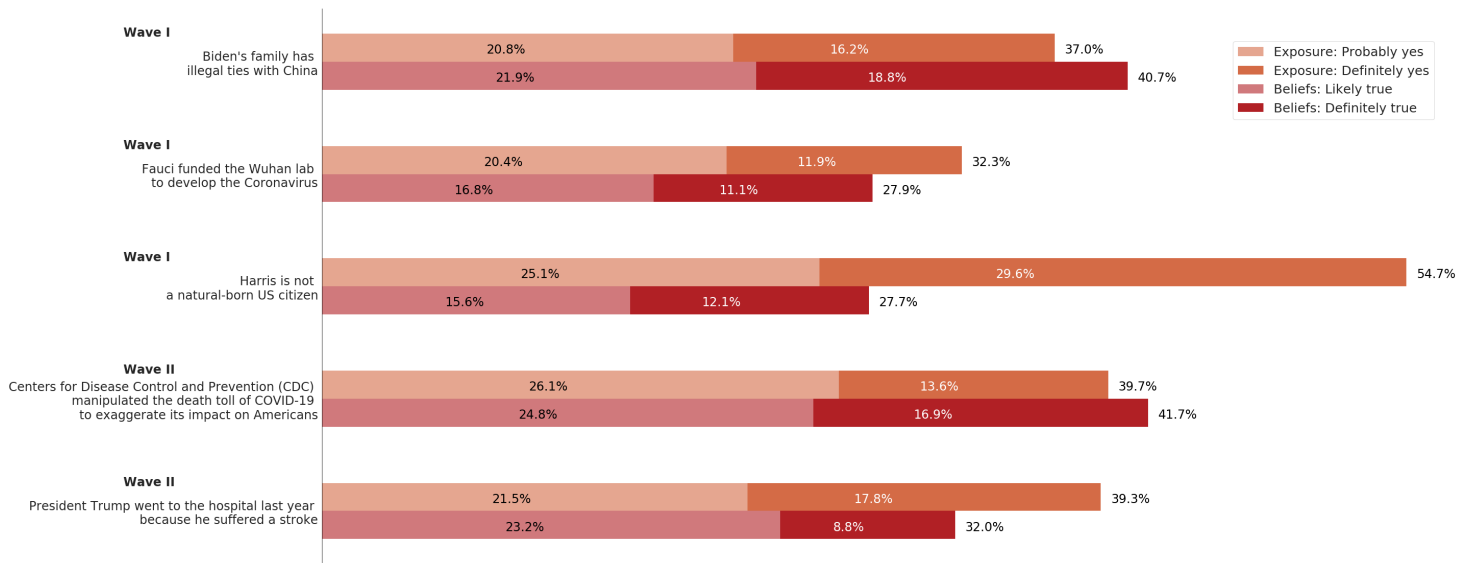

Figure 2 shows results related to narratives tested in either Wave 1 or 2. About 32% believed that President Trump had experienced a stroke in late 2019. More than 40% thought that the CDC had been manipulating statistics to exaggerate the Covid-19 death toll. Results from Wave 1 are discussed in our earlier report.

Figure 2 *Responses to unsupported narratives in Wave 1 or Wave 2*

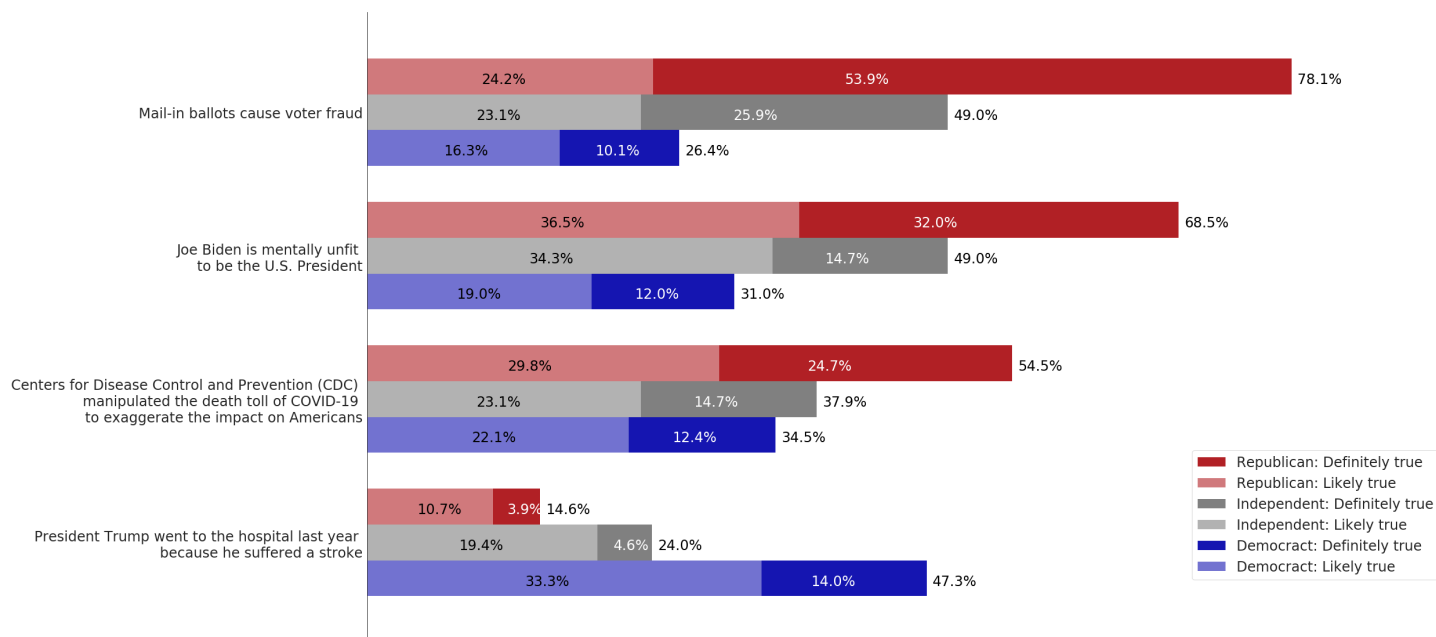## Comparison by political party affiliation

A number of studies have shown that widely diffused but unsupported narratives appear to originate more often from right- than left-of-center sources (see examples in Grinberg et al, 2019[5], Luceri et al., 2019[6], and Lewis & Marwick, 2017[7]). It may be that right-of-center partisans are more connected or active, thereby driving the diffusion of unsupported narratives that originate among them. Most of the narratives that we identified and tested in this study, consistent with previous research, come from right-of-center sources on social media. In Wave 1, Republicans believed most of the narratives at a higher rate than Democrats. In wave 2, though, Democrats were more likely than Republicans to endorse the idea that President Trump had a stroke, showing that unsupported narratives can have appeal on both sides of the political aisle. Interestingly, on all narratives Independents scored somewhere between Republicans and Democrats in terms of how much they believe the unsupported stories.

[5]Grinberg, N., Joseph, K., Friedland, L., Swire-Thompson, B., & Lazer, D. (2019). Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election.

Science, 363(6425), 374-37

[6]Luceri, L., Deb, A., Badawy, A., & Ferrara, E. (2019, May). Red bots do it better: Comparative analysis of social bot partisan behavior. In Companion Proceedings of the 2019 World Wide Web Conference (pp. 1007-1012).

[7]Lewis, R., & Marwick, A. (2017). Taking the red pill: Ideological motivations for spreading online disinformation. Understanding and addressing the disinformation system. Retrieved from
https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Disinformation-Ecosystem-20180207-v2.pdf.

Figure 3 *Belief in the truth-value of narratives by political party*
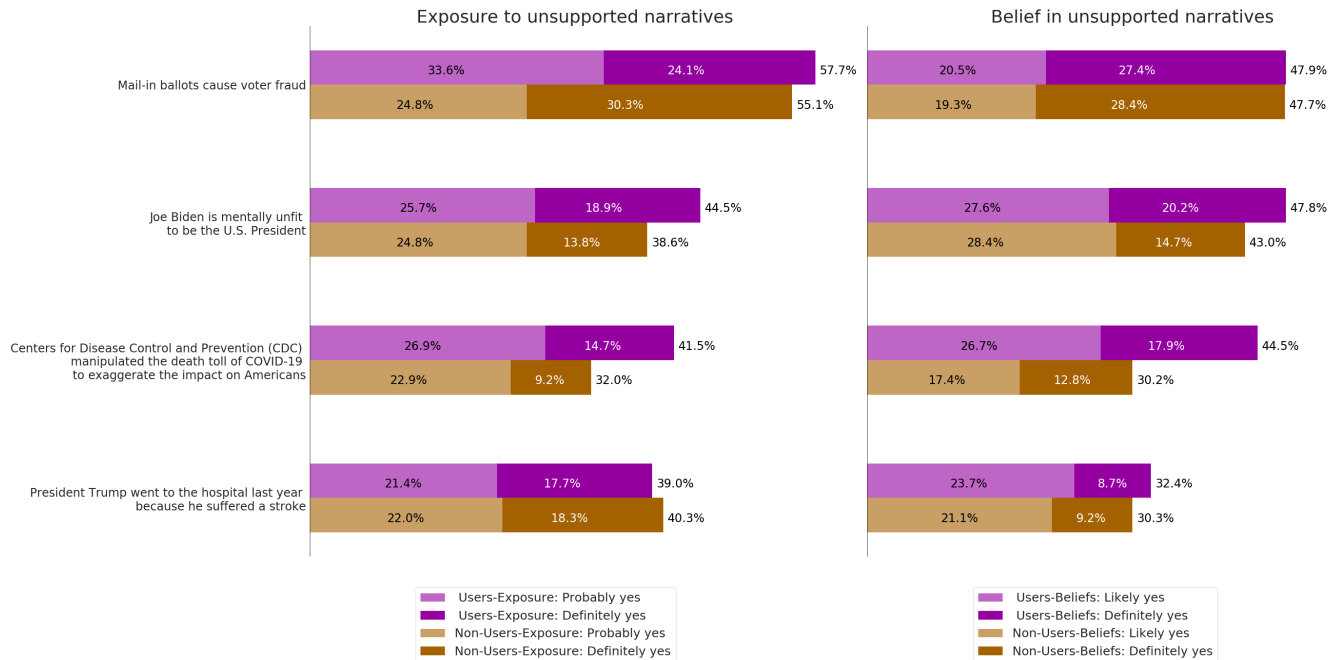

Unsupported narratives and social media use

Social media are often pointed to as platforms of concern for the dissemination of dis- or mis-information. Our data show that in most cases social media users are more likely than non-users to have heard about and believe unsupported narratives. Moreover, our data revealed that the more time one spends on social media, the more one is aware of and likely to believe unsupported information[8]. Of the four most popular social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter), it appears that more frequently visiting YouTube is most significantly associated with vulnerability to unsupported narratives[9].

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[8]We use generalized linear mixed models (GLMMs) controlling for partisanship, education level, and age. The results showed that self-reported social media use contributes to a 14.16 % probability increase of awareness and 25.4% probability increase of belief (p < .05).

[9]A GLMM controlling for similar factors showed a significant increase in probability of believing unsupported narratives (14.1%) when participants report spending more time on YouTube.

Figure 4 *Responses to narratives among social media users vs. non-users*

Methodology

This is the second of a six-part series of reports tracking the diffusion of misinformation in the 2020 U.S. presidential election campaign period. Data in this wave were collected from an online panel of American adults, recruited by Qualtrics. Data were collected from 9-26 September, 2020. The sample size was 544 (margin of error ≈ 4%). Forty five percent of participants were female. The average age was 48.2 (SD = 17), with a range of 18 to 88. The sample was 56.8% Caucasian, 14% African American, and 9% Latinx.

OSoMe

The Observatory on Social Media is a joint project of the Network Science Institute (IUNI), the Center for Complex Networks and Systems Research (CNetS) at the Luddy School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering, and the Media School at Indiana University.

For more information:

http://osome.iu.edu/research/survey/files/W2_data_for_public_v2.pdf