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election 2020

Disinformation agents were watching and waiting to exploit an error like Antrim County's

BY Kaye Lafond klafond@record-eagle.com
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Antrim County Clerk Sheryl Guy poses for a portrait outside of the Antrim County Building in Bellaire.

Record-Eagle/Mike Krebs

TRAVERSE CITY – In early October, Antrim County Clerk Sheryl Guy learned she had to reorder the ballots for one of the precincts she oversees. A candidate for trustee in the Village of Mancelona needed to be added to the ticket before the upcoming election.

"We put his name on the ballot, corrected them, and reordered," Guy said.

She then updated election software for the Mancelona precinct so it would account for the new candidate.

That, according to Guy, was the start of the problem.

"We just figured we reburn Mancelona, it fits in, we're good," she said. "No, that's not so."

She thought everything was fine, until the morning after Election Day. High turnout meant she and her staff stayed up all night to get votes counted.

"We were scurrying," Guy said. "It was, you know, 4 a.m. ... I think we left here probably about a quarter to five."

But just a few hours after reporting Antrim County's results, Guy received email letting her know the results seemed "skewed".

People quickly noticed Joe Biden was the reported winner of the Presidential race in a county that, historically, had been firmly Republican.

It seemed far fetched, because it was: those initial vote tallies turned out to be incorrect.

An incomplete update

What Guy hadn't realized when she updated the Mancelona precinct's election software weeks earlier was that she needed to update it for all 16 precincts in the county.

"We didn't expect it," she said. "So we weren't looking for anything, because you know, we had had three other elections this year without it without any problem."

As a result of the incomplete update, a few thousand votes cast and tallied for Donald Trump were misreported as Biden votes.

"What was missed, you know, is on us," Guy said. "That's a very hard lesson to learn. But this will never happen in Antrim County again."

Even though Guy, an elected Republican, worked quickly to correct the error, the story of a traditionally red county turning unusually blue was given a life of its own.

Conspiracy theories about voting software being broadly unreliable or favoring Democrats were retweeted by high-profile Twitter accounts, like Donald Trump Jr.'s.

Laura Cox, chair of the Michigan GOP, alleged (without evidence) that other counties across the state could be susceptible to a software malfunction.

By three days after the election, the Republican National Committee was using Antrim County to undermine the integrity of the election.

If not Antrim County, somewhere else

"This was just catnip for the people who were waiting for something like this in order to spread it around," said Emily Dreyfuss, a senior editor and researcher with Harvard's Shorenstein on Media, Politics and Public Policy.

According to Dreyfuss, it was inevitable that Guy's error would be used by disinformation agents in this way.

Media manipulation researchers were on high alert for weeks before the elections, knowing that some good-faith errors would happen, as they always do, but that they presented a particular risk this year.

"These are the things that will be exploited by people who are looking for evidence to verify and further the agenda that they've already set up," she said.

Dreyfuss points out that if it wasn't Antrim County, it would have been somewhere else.

"It is following up on the groundwork that Trump and the GOP have been laying to sow doubt in election integrity and in voting integrity for months," she said. "It's all part of this much larger campaign."

An uphill battle

To try to deal with the confusion, the Michigan Secretary of State's office released a statement corroborating Sheryl Guy's account of a user-error.

The statement said it was an isolated incident, and pointed out that even a widespread error would be caught during county canvasses.

But none of that seemed to make a difference to those who had made up their minds about election software, which, according to Dreyfuss, is kind of the point of disinformation campaigns.

"The vote is secure," she said. "But it's almost irrelevant to the people who will now never believe that it was secure."

Researchers say a lack of knowledge (for example, about polling procedures) does leave people more vulnerable to disinformation in the first place.

But it's hard to counter disinformation with knowledge after the disinformation is already out there.

Guy knows this first-hand: in the days since the election, even after she fixed and explained the error, she received messages insinuating that she and her staff are frauds or crooks.

"People don't know or don't care how you explain things," she said. "They're trying to find something deeper."

Victoria Rubin, who researches deceptive media at the University of Western Ontario, points out the phenomenon of "cascading logic", a strategy conspiracy theorists often use to counter the facts.

It basically means dismissing any new evidence debunking the conspiracy theory as "part of the cover-up".

"The more revealing evidence comes ... the easier it is to just dismiss it by claiming that more people were involved in this grand conspiracy," Rubin said. "And then people self-insulate themselves, they're very resistant to questioning."

Rubin said confirmation bias, or the tendency of the human mind to interpret new information as confirmation of existing beliefs, also plays a big role here.

"People are rushing to conclusions," she said. "And what do they have to rely on? They usually start thinking, 'Well, what do I know to be true?'"

And, she said, if people's untrue beliefs are associated with an emotion, that makes them hard to unseat with new information.

Inertia of beliefs

Ian Kennedy, a Ph.D. student researching disinformation at the University of Washington, has been following the Antrim County conspiracy theory since the election, tracking tweets and articles.

He speculates that people's feelings about the election are making them more susceptible to disinformation.

"I can kind of empathetically understand the yearning to have the results be different than they are," Kennedy said. "And the only way that can be true is if there's a systemic problem, which there isn't."

The days since the election have been difficult for the Antrim County Clerk's Office.

"We did get some messages that one of my staff members wanted the sheriff to listen to," Guy said. "I never did listen to those."

She said she takes full responsibility for the incident, and is upset election officials are facing so much scrutiny.

"I'm friends with all of these clerks," she said. "And I really feel bad that they're being put under a microscope when they were perfectly fine."

Guy said she's also disappointed in Donald Trump's role in post-election doubts as a leader.

"You have good losers and bad losers," she said. "And you have people who just won't accept, you know, the numbers and are trying to make havoc and claim fraud in our process."

She said she hopes people will eventually accept that Antrim County has nothing to hide.

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