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mercilessly

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It's not just activists: Just yesterday, we learned of [a business-commissioned poll](#) that found that a majority of Seattleites support a 50% defunding of the SPD.

Given all of that, what happened on Friday afternoon at the City Council Budget Committee was absolutely mind-boggling.

That's when the political establishment finally unveiled their proposed changes to the 2020 Seattle Police Department (SPD) budget. Out of the remaining \$170 million left in this year's SPD budget, they would cut only about \$2.6 million.

Yes, that's right - \$2.6 million. Only a tiny fraction of the bloated SPD budget.

Our proposal, on the other hand, would defund SPD by \$69 million, on top of the \$16 million in SPD cuts that the Mayor has already conceded, for a total of \$85 million to Defund SPD.

Right about now you might be asking, "What the heck is going on here? Didn't 7 out of the 9 Councilmembers commit to defund the SPD by 50%, and reallocate the money to Black and Brown community needs?"

[Yes, they publicly promised to defund the SPD budget by 50 percent.](#)

And now they are backtracking.

According to an email sent by Councilmember Kshama Sawant and posted to twitter, Seattle City Council plans to betray their public promise to defund the Seattle Police Department by 50%, instead proposing a vote on a \$2.6 million budget cut. The current police budget is \$170 million.

<https://twitter.com/cmkshama/status/1289613617780813829>

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telegra.ph/Millie-Bobby-Brown-to-play-bisexual-con-artist-in-new-Netflix-drama-08-04

Telegraph

Millie Bobby Brown to play bisexual con artist in new Netflix drama
Stranger Things star Millie Bobby Brown is set to produce and star in forthcoming Netflix film The Girls I've Been, portraying a bisexual con artist. The streaming platform is adapting a young adult book of the same name, which will be published by Penguin...

telegra.ph/The-Uncle-Roger-controversy-Why-people-are-outraged-by-a-video-about-cooking-rice-08-04-2

Telegraph

The Uncle Roger controversy: Why people are outraged by a video about cooking rice

(CNN) — On July 8, Malaysian comedian Nigel Ng uploaded to YouTube a video titled "DISGUSTED by this Egg Fried Rice Video," under his comedic persona "Uncle Roger." In the video, Ng slammed BBC Food presenter Hersha Patel's unconventional way of cooking Chinese...

regular reminder that the idea of “black on black crime” as a unique form of violence is an attempt to pathologize the general fact that violent crime happens between people in close proximity to each other, which in a segregated society means most violent crime is intra-racial. [source](#)

telegra.ph/Darin-Zanyar-one-of-Swedens-biggest-pop-sensations-comes-out-as-

[gay-08-04](#)

Telegraph

Darin Zanyar, one of Sweden's biggest pop sensations, comes out as gay
Darin Zanyar, the heartthrob who became the king of pop in Sweden aged just 16, has come out as gay. In an endearing Instagram post uploaded Monday (3 August), the 33-year-old, born in Sweden of Kurdish parents, told his 110,000 followers that he is “proud...

Portland’s newest statue is quite something. [source](#)

[note] Federal Officers Use Unmarked Vehicles To Grab People In Portland, DHS Confirms [news](#)

[telegra.ph/Lush-warns-customers-dont-enter-with-signs-of-transphobia-08-04](#)

Telegraph

Lush warns customers 'don't enter with signs of transphobia'
A Lush store in Edinburgh has warned customers not to enter if they are showing symptoms of “COVID-19, racism, homophobia, sexism or transphobia” after it was targeted with anti-trans hate. As retailers around the UK desperately try to keep coronavirus out...

<https://telegra.ph/Inside-the-Hong-Kong-Newsroom-at-the-Edge-of-Autocracy-08-04>

Telegraph

Inside the Hong Kong Newsroom at the Edge of Autocracy
The South China Morning Post is arguably the world’s most important newspaper—for what it tells us about media freedoms as China’s power grows.

[telegra.ph/Katy-Perry-faces-backlash-after-leaping-to-the-defence-of-Ellen-DeGeneres-08-04](#)

Telegraph

Katy Perry faces backlash after leaping to the defence of Ellen DeGeneres
Katy Perry fielded criticism from fans after throwing her support to Ellen DeGeneres, the daytime talk show abraded by accusations of racism and bullying. In a two-part tweet on Tuesday (4 August), the Smile singer came to the defence of her “friend” DeGeneres...

[telegra.ph/Spanish-language-COVID-fact-checking-spun-for-political-purposes-08-04](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/Spanish-language-COVID-fact-checking-spun-for-political-purposes-08-04)

Telegraph

Spanish-language COVID fact-checking spun for political purposes
In the wake of COVID-19, several independent fact-checking initiatives have emerged to verify content specifically for Spanish-speaking audiences. Two of the most prominent, @covidmx and @esp_covid19, were created in mid-March 2020. They focus on providing...

[telegra.ph/British-Vogue-editor-Edward-Enninful-says-racial-profiling-wasn't-isolated-08-04](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/British-Vogue-editor-Edward-Enninful-says-racial-profiling-wasn't-isolated-08-04)

Telegraph

British Vogue editor Edward Enninful says racial profiling wasn't isolated
British Vogue editor Edward Enninful has confirmed that a recent encounter which saw him racially profiled by security staff at the magazine's offices wasn't "an isolated incident". Enninful, the first gay Black and male editor-in-chief in British Vogue's...

[telegra.ph/16-and-17-year-olds-just-secured-the-right-to-vote-in-Wales--Electoral-Reform-Society-08-04 | source](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/16-and-17-year-olds-just-secured-the-right-to-vote-in-Wales--Electoral-Reform-Society-08-04)

Telegraph

16 and 17 year olds just secured the right to vote in Wales – Electoral Reform Society

16 and 17 year olds can now officially vote in Wales for Senedd elections. Votes at 16 & 17 come into force on Monday, as part of the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act 2020. Next year's Senedd elections will be the first in which 16 and

17 year olds and legally...

<https://telegra.ph/Thoughts-about-transphobia-TERFs-and-TUMFs-08-04>

Telegraph

Thoughts about transphobia, TERFs, and TUMFs

For many decades now, transgender communities have used the term “transphobic” as a catch-all adjective to describe language, actions, attitudes, and/or people that delegitimize or disparage us. The word certainly serves an important purpose, as it allows...

telegra.ph/Trans-Black-Lives-Matter-protester-suffers-shattered-jaw-after-thugs-beat-him-mercilessly-08-04

Telegraph

Trans Black Lives Matter protester suffers shattered jaw after thugs beat him mercilessly

In the latest flare-up amid the Black Lives Matter protests continuing to seize major US cities, a Black trans man was left with his jaw and eye socket shattered after two men brutally beat him up. Samson Tequir, 30, who helps organise demonstrations in Rochester...

Pretty nauseating how easily Congress rubber stamped a \$4 trillion dark slush fund for Wall St as “COVID relief,” yet somehow \$600 for workers in pandemic is controversial.

Up close it’s staggering how much resistance there is in Washington to actually helping people directly. [source](#)

I just got pulled over and for the first time i watched a white women record my whole traffic stop . [source](#)

telegra.ph/Uighur-model-sends-rare-video-from-Chinese-detention-08-05

Telegraph

Uighur model sends rare video from Chinese detention

Merdan Ghappar was used to posing for the camera. As a model for the massive Chinese online retailer Taobao, the 31-year-old was well paid to flaunt his good looks in slick promotional videos for clothing brands. But one video of Mr Ghappar is different....

“There absolutely are examples of ugly political correctness from the U.S. “left,” whatever that means in a country that, by historical standards, doesn’t have a left. But the vast, vast majority of political correctness in America is conservative. Conservative PC is so powerful in the U.S. that much of it is adopted by both political parties and all of the corporate media. Indeed, right-wing political correctness is so dominant that it’s politically incorrect to refer to it as political correctness. Instead, we call it things like “patriotism,” or simply don’t notice its existence.

A full examination of America’s conservative PC culture would take the rest of your life to read. So let’s limit this to four areas where the right’s PC causes some of the most harm: religion, foreign policy, the Republican Party, and police.

... All of that is just a few waves in America’s never-ending flood of right-wing political correctness. Can the surgeon general suggest that drug legalization should be studied, and perhaps children should be taught about masturbation? Nope. Can you work for the Department of Agriculture and deliver an honest speech about your life without the right misrepresenting it and getting you fired? No. Can CBS broadcast a miniseries about Ronald Reagan that lightly fictionalizes the grotesque response of his administration to AIDS? Sorry; that has to be moved to a much smaller audience on Showtime. Can you tell the truth as you see it? No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No.

But even the endless concrete examples of conservative PC are not the end of the problem. Right-wing political correctness so hobbles our political imagination that we don’t even dream of having debates on the deepest, most important problems of our lives. Imagine politicians or New York Times op-ed columnists

or corporate TV hosts asking simple questions like:

If we followed the law, would the most powerful people in America, including Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and most Wall Street CEOs be in jail?

Is advertising all lies that are warping our humanity? If so, should we get rid of it?

Is there any way to heal the wounds of 500 years of European colonialism?

Can we wind down the American empire without destroying the whole world in the process?

Even if we slow down the effects of the climate crisis, will capitalism still destroy the biosphere on which all human civilization depends?

There aren't any easy answers here, but let's at least be honest about the problem. If we're going to talk about political correctness, let's start with the truth about the kind of PC that matters most: the political correctness that is literally killing us."

telegra.ph/Political-Correctness-Is-Destroying-America-Just-Not-How-You-Think-08-05 | source

Telegraph

Political Correctness Is Destroying America! (Just Not How You Think.)
AMERICA TODAY faces a terrifying danger: political correctness. It is an existential threat not just to the United States, but all of human civilization. By this, obviously, I mean right-wing political correctness. Maybe you're surprised to hear this. In the...

telegra.ph/Gender-reveals-should-be-mocked-but-dont-ignore-abuse-of-gender-non-conforming-kids-08-05

Telegraph

Gender reveals should be mocked, but don't ignore abuse of gender non-conforming kids

Last week, England football captain Harry Kane shared the news that his wife Katie is expecting a baby boy. He did so by kicking a ball at a balloon containing blue — as opposed to pink — powder. Blue for boys! How sexist, right? What a way to reinforce stereotypes!...

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16 and 17 year olds just secured the right to vote in Wales – Electoral Reform Society

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16 and 17 year olds can now officially vote in Wales for Senedd elections.

Votes at 16 & 17 come into force on Monday, as part of the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act 2020.

Next year's Senedd elections will be the first in which 16 and 17 year olds and legally resident foreign nationals are allowed to vote in Wales, in a major expansion of the franchise. Around 65,000 16/17s are expected to benefit.

The move is a victory for young people, following campaigning from ERS Cymru and a coalition of youth and civil society campaigners.

Westminster now looks increasingly isolated for barring the UK's nearly-1.5m

16 and 17 year olds from picking their MP. 16 and 17 year olds can already vote in Scotland for all non-Westminster elections.

A survey commissioned by the Electoral Commission following the Scottish independence referendum (in which 16 and 17-year-olds were entitled to vote) found that 75% had taken part.

The move in Wales means 16 and 17 year olds will now rightly have a say over critical issues that affect their future, such as health, education and the economy.

As we've already seen in Scotland, this is a boost for our democracy as a whole – strengthening citizenship and boosting political engagement.

Over the past few years ERS Cymru spoke to hundreds of young people across Wales – the first set of young people that will be voting in 2021 – and they can't wait to vote for the first time and truly have their voices heard.

Sadly, England now looks increasingly isolated on this, and it's a constitutional injustice that 16/17 year olds there will continue to be denied the vote. It's time for the government to get behind this win-win policy.

Extending the franchise for Westminster elections is now a question of 'when', not 'if'. Will parties get on with it?

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British Vogue editor Edward Enninful says racial profiling wasn't isolated

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View this post on Instagram For the September 2020 issue of @BritishVogue, I'm so honoured to introduce our special fold-out cover of 20 boundary-breaking activists – beginning with international footballer and child poverty campaigner @MarcusRashford and model and mental health activist @AdwoaAboah, along with 18 more inspirational faces. From spearhead campaigners for the Black Lives Matter movement, such as #PatrisseCullors; leading young feminists and social justice activists, such as #TamikaMallory; the supermodel and anti-racism campaigner #JoanSmalls; as well as legends such as Professor #AngelaDavis, activism now is not a lone figure nor a small pocket of society, but a wealth of faces making themselves heard. Swipe to see the full cover and see the full portfolio in the new issue, on newsstands and available for digital download Friday 7 August.

#VogueHope Featuring: @MarcusRashford @AdwoaAboah
@Meenals_World @TamikaDMallory @RizAhmed @JanetMock
Professor Angela Davis Jane Elliott Alice Wong
@Disability_Visibility @IJesseWilliams @JoanSmalls
@ReniEddoLodge Yvette Williams @OfficialJ4G
@IAmPatrickHutchinson @OsopePatrisse @ClaraAmfo
@BerniceAKing @JanayaTheFuture @FDwyer1980 Brittany Packnett Cunningham @MsPackyetti #MarcusRashford wearing @R13,
@AColdWall & @Churchs and #AdwoaAboah wearing @Fenty,
@Martine_Rose, @LockHatters, @Osoi_Official & @SLJLondonand, photographed by @MisanHarriman and styled by @ItsDWallace, with hair by @EarlSimms2 and make-up by @CeliaBurtonMakeUp. With additional cover photography by @PhilipDanielDucasse, @KingTexas, @ChriseanRose, @EddieH__ and @KidNoble
A post shared by Edward Enninful, OBE (@edward_enninful) on Aug 3, 2020 at 9:00am PDT

British Vogue editor Edward Enninful has confirmed that a recent encounter which saw him racially profiled by security staff at the magazine's offices wasn't "an isolated incident".

Enninful, the first gay Black and male editor-in-chief in *British Vogue*'s 100-year history, revealed in July that he'd been refused entry to the magazine's headquarters, and was asked to instead use a loading bay.

"It just goes to show that sometimes it doesn't matter what you've achieved in the course of your life: the first thing that some people will judge you on is the colour of your skin," he wrote on Instagram, confirming the offending security guard had been promptly dismissed.

Speaking to CNN on Monday (August 3), Enninful admitted that this wasn't the first time he had been subjected to racism during his two-year tenure.

"As a Black man it's not the first time I've been profiled and it certainly won't be the last," he said. "But also it wasn't an isolated incident."

Pressed on whether he meant he had been profiled while at Vogue's offices, he repeated: "Yes, it wasn't an isolated incident."

He said that had he been younger, "I might have been so upset I wouldn't be

able to say anything, but now I can talk about it”.

“I’ve got the platform to speak about it and I don’t want this to happen to the next generation, to think it’s OK, that kind of behaviour,” he added.

Edward Enninful talks *British Vogue*’s boundary-breaking September issue.

Enninful appeared on CNN to mark the release of *British Vogue*’s September issue – the most important of the year.

Traditionally a showcase for the forthcoming autumn/winter season, this year Enninful has used the cover of the September issue to profile 20 activists, led by footballer and anti-poverty campaigner Marcus Rashford and model and mental health activist Adwoa Aboah. The cover is the first in *British Vogue* history to be shot by a Black man, Misan Harriman, who worked with a majority Black crew.

Pose director Janet Mock is one of the faces featured in the pull-out cover, alongside civil rights activist and radical educator Angela Davis, Women’s March organiser Tamika D. Mallory and Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors.

Enninful, whose *Vogue* is markedly more diverse both behind and in front of the camera than its predecessor, told CNN he wants the magazine to reflect the current global reckoning on topics such as racism, unemployment and climate change.

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Darin Zanyar, one of Sweden's biggest pop sensations, comes out as gay

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View this post on Instagram Everyone in the world should be able to be proud and accepted for who they are. I know how difficult it can be. Took me a while, but I am proud to be gay. Happy pride!
A post shared by D A R I N (@darinofficial) on Aug 3, 2020 at 3:58am PDT

Darin Zanyar, the heartthrob who became the king of pop in Sweden aged just 16, has come out as gay.

In an endearing Instagram post uploaded Monday (3 August), the 33-year-old, born in Sweden of Kurdish parents, told his 110,000 followers that he is “proud to be gay”.

Zanyar torpedoed to fame in Sweden after becoming the runner-up in the first season of *Idol*, a talent show, in 2004. He rose to become one of the country's best-selling artists, with seven number one albums.

Darin Zanyar: ‘Took me a while, but I am proud to be gay.’

“Everyone in the world should be able to be proud and accepted for who they are,” he wrote in the caption.

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Gender reveals should be mocked, but don't ignore abuse of gender non-conforming kids

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When Bailey comes down with a fever, Mary Anne rushes her to the hospital, where two doctors misgender her. Mary Anne firmly corrects them.

Misgendering is traumatic. This is one of the baseline ways cisgender people can show up for the trans people in their life
pic.twitter.com/EyrenC5QDK
— Netflix (@netflix) July 23, 2020

Last week, England football captain Harry Kane shared the news that his wife Katie is expecting a baby boy. He did so by kicking a ball at a balloon containing blue — as opposed to pink — powder.

Blue for boys! How sexist, right? What a way to reinforce stereotypes! And so the ritual mocking of the gender reveal started up once more.

“It’s 2020 — are we really still doing this?” harrumphed *Grazia* magazine. After all, “gender reveal parties perpetuate dangerous stereotypes: the idea that ‘girl’ equals pink princess and ‘boy’ equals blue Action Man is so outdated it’s almost too obvious to state.” How could Kane have been so foolish? Typical footballer — you can bet he won’t have read any Judith Butler.

Had this taken place a decade ago, I too would have joined in with the derision. Back then I was raising two boys (I now have three) and was heartily sick of being advised to read neurosexist classics such as Steve Biddulph’s *Raising Boys*, Simon Baron-Cohen’s *The Essential Difference* or Sexist McIncel’s *Why Pink Makes Boys’ Penises Fall Off*. “You must read them,” I was told, “because science has proven feminists wrong. Boys really are different, due to cavemen and neurons and stuff.” By which it was meant, boys are born to like the colour blue, playing with trucks, earning more and beating the crap out of other people.

I simply didn't buy it, and thankfully wasn't the only one.

The early 2010s were an interesting time to be trying to raise children the non-sexist way. The early 2000s had been dominated by a slew of books repackaging standard sexism as cutting-edge science, most of them authored by men who, as Cordelia Fine put it, "like to position themselves as courageous knights of truth, who brave the stifling ideology of political correctness." To challenge this new sexism was risky: one risked being told one's over-emotional female brain just wasn't up to understanding the science. Towards the end of the noughties, however, a tipping point seemed to have been reached.

This came in part through the painstaking debunking work of academics such as Fine and Deborah Cameron, but there was also grassroots activism — not least through Mumsnet, where pressure groups such as Let Toys Be Toys started to form. As a mother who let her boys wear pink, grow their hair and play with dolls' houses, I knew which side I was on. And I thought my side was finally winning. Now I'm not so sure.

By the time my middle son was wearing his first dress to a school disco, I thought the stereotype monster might be in its death throes, overwhelmed by its own ridiculousness. Surely the patriarchy could not survive being reduced to kicking footballs at powder-filled balloons and insisting on his-and-hers toy globes. The fragility on show was just too blatant, right? Alas, I was wrong. What I — and many others like me — had not counted on was the repackaging of conservative beliefs about gender as their exact opposite. Bye bye, old gender stereotyping; say hello to the new, faith-based, drug-and-surgeons-knife-powered version.

We feminists might have won the argument that it makes zero sense to predict a child's likes, dislikes, desires, presentation, and most intimate beliefs on the basis of his or her sex. As for the argument that it makes zero sense to determine a child's sex on the basis of his or her likes, dislikes, desires, presentation and most intimate beliefs? That, apparently, is totally different and anyone who proposes this is a raging bigot in need of some serious re-education.

Take, for example, a recent episode of Netflix's television reboot of *The Babysitter's Club*, in which one of the young sitters, Mary Anne, takes care of a trans child named Bailey. There's much to say about the rampant stereotyping that runs through the whole storyline, but one particularly egregious scene

occurs when Bailey has a temperature and is taken to hospital. The doctor and nurse, on seeing Bailey's medical records, assume that the child is a boy and use male pronouns, in spite of Bailey's long blonde hair and a glittery butterfly top. This is good, right? Because boys can have long hair and wear butterfly tops, right? Apparently not. By failing to realize that a boy couldn't possibly look the way Bailey does, the medical staff reveal themselves to be ignorant bastards, whom Mary Anne must take to task.

"I know you guys are busy," our righteous sitter says to the doctor and nurse, "but, as you would see, if you look at her and not her chart, Bailey is not a boy. And by treating her like one, you are completely ignoring who she is."

The doctor and nurse nod solemnly, duly chastened. That's the last time they'll be using medical records to determine biological sex rather than glitter and pink stuff. As the mother of a boy who looks not unlike young Bailey, I guess I should be delighted?

But I've been told countless times that this is not my problem: having a trans child is not the same as having a gender non-conforming child. Why should I compare my son to Bailey, or his real-life counterpart: nine-year-old transgender actor Kai Shappley? Well, there's the fact that gender stereotypes affect all children, and if you demand that people determine whether someone is a girl or a boy in accordance with how you situate them on that great continuum between Barbie and GI Joe, you are, as the *Grazia* piece argues with reference to Harry Kane, encouraging children to assume "there is only one direction for them in life — that a boy should be everything that comes with being 'blue,' which is to be 'macho' [...] and [that girls] have to be everything the colour 'pink' represents: pretty, a princess, feminine." It is entirely incoherent to see the conflation of femaleness with femininity, and maleness with masculinity as harmful in some instances, but benign in others, when we are dealing with one economy of human relationships, in which everyone is defined in relation to others.

If you squint a bit and work very hard at not thinking, you could represent the rise in children claimed to have been "born in the wrong bodies" as a yet another rejection of traditional stereotypes (as though having a sexed body is itself a stereotype). Then again, if you listen to an interview with Kai Shappley's mother, a different picture emerges:

"I remember even thinking before Kai was three, I think this kid might be gay, and I thought that that could not happen, that would not happen. We started praying fervently. Prayers turned into googling conversion therapy and how can we implement these techniques at home to make Kai not be like this. Putting her on time out for acting like a girl, putting her on time out for stealing girl toys, spanking her, really spanking her, every time she would say 'you know I'm a girl.'"

This is a description of a parent terrorizing and abusing a child for failing to conform to gender norms — a parent using violence to teach their child what girls and boys are permitted to do and be, a parent utterly horrified at the slightest possibility her child might be gay. It is appalling and once you have heard this woman speak, it's impossible to look at the way Kai plays Bailey, who cowers in fear at the prospect of having to wear a blue gown instead of the pink one, in the same way. Of course that child can portray the horror of not getting it right, of fearing something terrible might happen if declared sex and presentation "don't match." That child really *knows*.

Those who mock gender reveals rarely dare raise their voices to protest gender stereotyping and homophobia when they are found in the stories of parents of transgender children. Susie Green, CEO of Mermaids, a charity and lobby group for "trans kids," wouldn't allow her child, pre-transition, to play with the "wrong" toys. One former employee of the Tavistock Clinic in London claims seeing "so many families who would talk about not wanting their daughters to be lesbian." The impact of this kind of parental bullying and shaming on children is unclear, but the absence of criticism — when it's open season on those who throw gender reveals — is remarkable. Hit a child, take away their toys, shame them for having a crush on someone of the same sex: silence. Throw a jokey party with pink balloons and you are responsible for "closed doors, forbidden opportunities, stifled dreams."

It's safe to say Harry Kane and his ilk won't be welcomed into woke fold any time soon. The gender reveal harks back to a traditionalism which anyone armed with a gender studies degree can mock as ignorant and foolish. The entire concept of gender identity — and indeed, pretty much everything Judith Butler has ever written — might be incoherent, but it's precisely the kind of incoherence that can make those grappling with it feel they must nod in agreement, just in case something important is going over their head. The hypocrisy of those who criticize Kane, but not the mother of children like Kai

Shapley, is fuelled by both fear and intellectual insecurity.

Judith Herman notes that, in the presence of abuse, “it is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing.” Fifteen years ago no one wanted to be called a flat-earther for rejecting the “boys are different” narrative; now no one wants to be called a bigot for questioning the idea that some children’s bodies don’t match their true selves. Call out gender reveal parties all you want (you should — they are ridiculous), but know that this won’t cover your back or compensate for the abuses you ignore. A balloon is just a balloon; a terrorized child is something else.

Victoria Smith is a UK-based writer and editor. Her work has appeared in the New Statesman, the Independent, the Guardian and elsewhere.



Guest Writer

One of Feminist Current's amazing guest writers.

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Inside the Hong Kong Newsroom at the Edge of Autocracy

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The *South China Morning Post* is arguably the world's most important newspaper—for what it tells us about media freedoms as China's power grows.



Chien-Chi Chang / Magnum

On the night of August 31, 2019, police officers rushed into a Hong Kong subway station, swinging their batons and chasing suspected anti-government protesters into the narrow carriageways of a parked train as an emergency warning blared overhead.

Like many pivotal moments of the city's protest movement, the scenes were captured in photographs and live-streams by journalists and bystanders. The most enduring image from the incident shows a small group of people huddled by the subway door. Among them is a man crouching on the floor, holding his hand up toward the police in anguish and fear as he is doused by a thick stream of pepper spray.

Hong Kong's protest movement was nearly three months old by then, and the police action marked a significant turning point. Reporters across the city tried to make sense of what they were seeing, and to properly explain the enormity of the moment: A subway station, once considered a safe space for commuters, had been breached; and the police, who just months earlier had been seen as trusted members of the community, had assaulted civilians despite no clear evidence of a major security threat.

At the *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong's largest English-language newspaper, the now-familiar breaking news scramble that would last until early the next morning was under way. How the paper handled that story has since become a source of tension among its journalists, sparking a controversy that is

emblematic, many of them told me, of the broader conflicts over media freedoms in the territory as it faces an uncertain future. When I asked the paper’s executive editor about the episode, and more general questions about its protest coverage, he voraciously defended the outlet. Critics, he said, had tried to intimidate and bully *SCMP* journalists to “condition” the newspaper’s narrative to their own liking. “Should we bend to this kind of pressure?” he asked.

The *SCMP* is not as well read as the international outlets that it would like to compete with, but because of its unique position—as the main English-language outlet in a strategically important city—its coverage plays an outsize role in shaping international understanding of events not just in Hong Kong but across the border in China, as well.

An early draft of an initial story about the incident, according to a version that was read to me, had an opening that detailed “chaotic and shocking scenes” as officers went after “cowering commuters.” That was not the account that was eventually published, though. The *SCMP*’s edited story (which was subsequently updated) instead recounted how “elite Hong Kong police” had chased “radical protesters” wearing “masks” into the subway station.

The incident at the paper, recounted by two people with knowledge of the event, both of whom spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid retribution, exemplified the type of heavy-handed, slanted editing that became common in the *SCMP* newsroom as the demonstrations carried on. Journalists who spent hours, sometimes in a haze of tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets, saw their work drastically altered by editors before running in print and online. The police were typically portrayed as heroes, and the protesters as villains, with little explanation or context of each side’s motives and grievances. “That was frustrating,” one current reporter involved in coverage of the demonstrations told me. (This journalist, like others I spoke to, did not want to be identified, fearing a backlash from the *SCMP*.) With these stories appearing on the front page of the paper, the reporter said, “they’ve given an impression that *SCMP* is anti protesters. As journalists, we should never be pro or against protesters.”

Hong Kong has a long legacy of an aggressive and boisterous media, in both the dominant Cantonese language and English. Newspapers are widely read, and they often carry sharp critiques of government and police failures. Those freedoms have been a hallmark of the “one country, two systems” framework that has set the city apart from mainland China, where journalism is heavily

censored and far less free.

Yet even before the recent enactment of a far-reaching national-security law in Hong Kong, the city's media were under strain. Numerous mainstream outlets have been bought by China-backed figures or pro-establishment businesses, shrinking the diversity of voices. In recent years, vigilantes have carried out attacks against senior editors and Beijing has harassed officials from Cantonese newspapers. And since protests began last summer, the government in Hong Kong has also sought to curb journalists' freedoms. Dissatisfied with honest accounts of official malfeasance, the authorities have sought to stifle some of the city's most cutting voices. Radio Television Hong Kong, the government-funded broadcaster that operates akin to the BBC, drew an official rebuke when a reporter pressed a World Health Organization adviser over the contentious issue of Taiwan's inclusion in the global body and after its long-running satirical program took aim at the Hong Kong police. That program, Headliner, has since been suspended. Top newsroom executives have stepped down, and the broadcaster is now under government review. Police continue to harass journalists reporting on protests, which have shrunk dramatically in size and frequency due to a combination of the pandemic, new police tactics, and the national security law.

The new law has worsened the climate further. Reporters and editors in Hong Kong have been left wondering what journalistic activity may now constitute a crime, and they have received few assurances from the city's leaders. A number of local newspaper columnists have resigned from their positions, fearing that they may fall afoul of the national-security law. This month, The New York Times announced that it would move a portion of its staff to South Korea, a decision that is likely to be followed by other foreign outlets; at least three major Western news organizations, including the *Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, are facing delays in securing new visas or visa renewals for their staff, according to people familiar with the details who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation. "The purpose of the law is precisely to manufacture a climate of fear among all the governed here," Kwai-Chueng Lo, the head of the writing program at Hong Kong Baptist University who has researched Hong Kong's media, told me.

The *SCMP* sits at the center of many of these tensions. Founded in 1903, when Hong Kong was a British colony, the newspaper has long been the broadsheet of

the city's elites, "the paper to be gripped while riding the bus or to be seen on one's doorstep in the morning," the veteran journalist Yuen-ying Chan wrote in an academic article examining Hong Kong's English-language media. Even beyond China, the *SCMP* has stood apart, operating free from the onerous press restrictions enforced in other Asian countries such as Singapore. Today, it is arguably the city's most important title internationally, a position gained from a combination of both its size and its ownership (it is controlled by Jack Ma's Alibaba Group, one of China's most successful tech companies).

But last year's protests tested the paper, as the global media spotlight shifted to Hong Kong, and the *SCMP*'s reporters found themselves butting up against senior editors who often appeared to be overly deferential to authorities and largely unquestioning of police narratives, even as evidence of misconduct mounted.

Largely due to its association with Hong Kong's establishment, and that establishment's growing reliance on business dealings with mainland China, the *SCMP* has always been a more staid outlet than its Cantonese counterparts. Through the late 1980s and into the mid-2000s, the paper was owned by the media tycoon Rupert Murdoch and then the Malaysian billionaire Robert Kuok, and while *SCMP* veterans often speak of a bygone golden era in which the paper was more critical, there have in fact long been instances that gave rise to questions about its editorial stance and censorship.

When Alibaba purchased the paper in 2015, the company brought an infusion of much-needed cash. The *SCMP* hired additional staff, moved into new offices (complete with an on-site pub), and expanded editorial offerings, including the tech-focused Abacus and Goldthread, a video-heavy vertical that reports on Chinese culture. The paper—long a must-read for English-language China watchers, its coverage being far more credible than any mainland outlet—expanded its ambitions, courting a global readership hungry for news from China by dropping its paywall and eventually beefing up its team of China-based reporters to around 50. In 2018, it announced a tie-up with Politico that Gary Liu, the *SCMP*'s CEO, said in an internal email was a sign of the newspaper's "growing credibility and authority." (The *SCMP* has approached *The Atlantic* about coproducing events in the U.S. and Hong Kong, according to a spokeswoman for *The Atlantic*, but the partnership has never materialized. In recent years, the *SCMP* has also spoken to *The Washington Post*, according to a person familiar with the matter. A spokesperson for the *Post* did not respond to

request for comment.)

Thanks to those factors, as well as drastically increased interest in China, where, of course, the coronavirus pandemic began, the *SCMP* has seen a sharp rise in readership. Though its daily print circulation is relatively limited, at just over 100,000, it averages more than 50 million monthly active users—a tenfold increase over the past three years—and nearly 200 million pageviews a month. Around a third of that audience is in the United States, Liu said in a podcast interview with *Digiday*. Yet despite the largesse of its ownership, *SCMP* remains at the whim of the media market: The newspaper is unprofitable, Liu said during a *Recode* podcast, and its reliance on advertising has “set off alarm bells.” Staff were recently forced to take unpaid leave for three weeks, and management pay was cut. The *SCMP* is hoping to open up other revenue streams and will soon reintroduce its paywall.

Over the course of its history, the *SCMP* has largely fought off English-language challengers, both in Hong Kong and elsewhere in the region. Today, its position atop Hong Kong’s English media scene is largely unrivaled, but its ambitious goals—and its new ownership—have brought greater scrutiny, which the paper does not always seem comfortable with. In particular, there are questions about whether the 117-year-old institution could someday resemble the propaganda outlets trumpeting the party line over the border in China. Liu, who joined the paper in 2017 from the tech company Digg, has consistently pushed back against these concerns. “There is an immediate assumption that because Alibaba is a Chinese company that they are going to meddle in editorial,” he said in the *Digiday* podcast. “That has never been the case.” Yet Liu has acknowledged how tenuous the paper’s editorial independence is. “If the laws of this city and the judiciary that protects those laws change to the point where there is no longer press freedoms in this city, the *South China Morning Post* will change,” he told *Digiday*. (The owners have spoken about how they think coverage should be driven: “A lot of journalists working with these Western media organisations may not agree with the system of governance in China, and that taints their view of coverage,” Joe Tsai, chairman of the *SCMP*’s board of directors and Alibaba’s executive vice chairman, said shortly after the sale was completed. “We see things differently, we believe things should be presented as they are.”)

Concerns have been raised over the newspaper’s ethics, and its willingness to cooperate with Beijing since the sale. In 2018, the *SCMP* faced backlash when it

conducted a government-arranged interview of Gui Minhai—a Hong Kong bookseller and Swedish citizen who disappeared in 2015 and then reappeared in Chinese custody a year later—in a detention facility while guards loomed over him. Liu has stood behind the interview and article, arguing that the *SCMP* agreed to the interview after discussions with editors, that there were no strings attached, and that the newspaper made a point of highlighting that Gui was accompanied by security personnel. But Angela Gui, the bookseller’s daughter, told me she was unhappy with the paper’s decision and its continued defense of the interview, which she says Beijing orchestrated to advance its own misleading narrative about her father’s situation. “My father was, after years of illegal detention and torture, subjected to public humiliation by the Chinese government, and the *SCMP* was complicit by disseminating and legitimizing it as a ‘news story,’” she said.

When it comes to China, the *SCMP*’s overall coverage remains far from Communist Party mouthpieces such as *China Daily* or *Global Times*. Indeed, its website—like that of *The Atlantic* and other major Western publications, including the *Times*, the *Journal*, and others—is blocked on mainland China.

More illustrative has been its coverage of the Hong Kong protests, which proved to be an unexpected test for the paper. Liu told *Recode* that the newspaper strove to remove emotion from the reporting and editing of stories on the crisis. Those views were welcome on the opinion pages, Liu said, but not in the news section. “That separation for us is sacrament.”

However, nine current and former *SCMP* employees told me that the lines were often far less clear. Nearly all pointed to Yonden Lhatoo, the *SCMP*’s chief news editor—and among those responsible for editing the subway story—as an example. Lhatoo, a former TV journalist who was described by current and former colleagues as an abrasive and mercurial presence prone to angry outbursts and frequent shouting, is part of a trio of senior editors seen as contributing to a sometimes caustic newsroom environment. Lhatoo also writes a regular opinion column and news stories as well. His editing of various articles that recapped days of protest grated on some journalists, particularly those reporting from the street. The tone was not missed by close readers of the newspaper. “There are choices of language and vocabulary that are in themselves a reflection of bias,” said Louisa Lim, a former Beijing correspondent for NPR who is now a senior lecturer at the Center for Advancing Journalism at the University of Melbourne, pointing to the use of terms like *riot*

and *rampage* that often made it into the final versions of stories recounting protests.

Members of the newsroom were particularly unhappy with a story Lhatoo wrote in October that ran in the news section of the paper, pushing a theory popular among pro-Beijing figures that there was a “silent majority” in Hong Kong that was against the protests but had been scared into silence. They were concerned enough to request a meeting with senior editors after the story’s publication to discuss their concerns over Lhatoo and editing more broadly. Chow Chung Yan, the executive editor, and Zuraidah Ibrahim, the deputy executive editor, met with disgruntled staff, but “there was no attempt to try and reconcile anybody,” one person present at the meeting told me. “It was just, ‘This is the situation; if you don’t like it, there is the door.’” Over the course of the protests and in the months that followed, a number of journalists central to coverage did leave the newspaper, and at least one other editor is expected to depart shortly, according to people familiar with the matter. More recently, Lhatoo, in a May 16 column, urged Carrie Lam, Hong Kong’s chief executive, to take a page from Donald Trump’s book and strike back at “malicious journalists” by labeling them “fake news” and a “disgrace.” One former reporter likened it to “asking for an attack on press freedom itself.”

Liu did not respond to a message seeking comment. The paper’s spokesman, Elgen Kua, sent a statement in response to a list of questions this month and suggested a visit to the outlet’s newsroom once Hong Kong is past its latest wave of COVID-19 cases. In a follow-up call, Kua said, despite not having seen the comments themselves, that remarks made by current and former *SCMP* employees to me were “quite libelous” and that Lhatoo had become the target of a “hate campaign,” something Lhatoo has addressed in his column. Shortly before this story was due to publish, and weeks after multiple interview requests were submitted, the *SCMP* made Chow available for an interview. Chow told me he believed *The Atlantic* was biased against the *SCMP* and in a combative interview, which lasted nearly 40 minutes, challenged the sourcing of this story, the timeline of when *The Atlantic* contacted the *SCMP* for comment, and defended the paper’s protest coverage as well as its editorial standards and newsroom culture. “I think actually, from the beginning, you already set your mind about the story angle,” he said. “From your line of questioning I have this worry that I don’t think the *SCMP* will get fair coverage and I also think some of your story is maybe based on incomplete information.”

“We occupy the middle ground; that means some people are bound to feel like their views are not the dominant views and they feel resentful for that,” he said of the paper’s position. When asked about the Gui story, Chow compared the editorial decision to ones news organizations make when they are invited on government-organized tours of Xinjiang, where China has carried out a brutal crackdown. Regarding the story recapping the subway incident, he said the article was updated numerous times to reflect the chaotic situation on the ground and the end result was a balanced recount of the events of the day.

Concerns over bias in favor of the authorities, particularly the Hong Kong Police Force, exist in the newsroom: In one case, a reporter who has landed numerous scoops for the newspaper on police actions, and has conducted a series of high-profile interviews, was ousted from a group chat with other journalists over concerns that she was possibly leaking information to the force, according to people familiar with the matter. (It was unclear if this ever occurred.) In another case, a story in June marking the anniversary of the protest movement featured a police officer who was injured by demonstrators when he was covered with unknown chemicals. The piece was similar to a report that ran in a recent issue of *OffBeat*, the police force’s official magazine, featuring the same officer. Another article was an interview with a British police officer serving in Hong Kong that some in the newsroom felt gave him a free pass for police actions during the protests and played down his role in a property scandal unearthed by another outlet. “It’s not critical at all,” one current reporter told me of the interview. (Chow said that while he believed Hong Kong’s police had room for improvement, they had become demonized by the public and the voice of the force was often missing from media coverage of the protests. “If you draw the comparison between the Hong Kong police and the police in the U.S. and U.K. and any other part of the world,” he said “I would say they are not particularly bad.” Chow added that *The Atlantic* was “in a sense joining the bullying gang,” by singling out the *SCMP*’s police coverage because of the difficulties faced by reporters who wrote positively about the force.)

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Katy Perry faces backlash after leaping to the defence of Ellen DeGeneres

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Katy Perry fielded criticism from fans after throwing her support to Ellen DeGeneres, the daytime talk show abraded by accusations of racism and bullying.

In a two-part tweet on Tuesday (4 August), the *Smile* singer came to the defence of her “friend” DeGeneres, who is currently experiencing a downward spiral as a dizzying array of former staff members accuse her and senior-level employees of fermenting a toxic workplace environment.

The Ellen DeGeneres Show has long been a beloved syndicated program, but spikes have been thrown by not only former staffers, but celebrities who have appeared on the show itself and an internal investigation launched by

WarnerMedia.

DeGeneres has, indeed, appeared pricked by these accusations, with rumours heaving that she is considering quitting her eponymous show of 17 years.

Katy Perry: ‘I have only ever had positive takeaways from my time with Ellen.’

Perry, 35, wrote: “I know I can’t speak for anyone else’s experience besides my own but I want to acknowledge that I have only ever had positive takeaways from my time with Ellen and on *The Ellen Show*.

1/2 I know I can’t speak for anyone else’s experience besides my own but I want to acknowledge that I have only ever had positive takeaways from my time with Ellen & on the @theellenshow. I think we all have witnessed the light & continual fight for equality that she has brought

— KATY PERRY (@katyperry) August 4, 2020

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Lush warns customers 'don't enter with signs of transphobia'

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A Lush store in Edinburgh has warned customers not to enter if they are showing symptoms of “COVID-19, racism, homophobia, sexism or transphobia” after it was targeted with anti-trans hate.

As retailers around the UK desperately try to keep coronavirus out of their stores, cosmetics chain Lush has issued advice on some of society’s other ills.

Lush Edinburgh hung a sign in its window Monday (August 3) warning: “Please do not enter our store with signs of COVID-19, racism, homophobia, sexism or transphobia”.

The Scottish branch explained on Facebook that the message was installed after its storefront was “targeted by a transphobic group”.

Reports on social media suggest that Lush's window was stickered with a "keep prisons single sex" message. Representatives for the company did not immediately respond to a request for clarification.

Lush added on Facebook: "Our store is a space for compassion and respect for all, and we will not condone or support acts of hate."

"If you are showing signs of COVID-19 please follow government guidelines to isolate and get tested, if you are showing signs of any of racism, homophobia, sexism or transphobia, we recommend you isolate and educate yourself."

Lush and Body Shop compete for biggest trans ally.

Lush has previous form when it comes to defending the trans community.

In recent months it has hung its anti-transphobia sign in branches around the country, to the delight of the queer community.

Prior to that, in 2018, it launched a "Trans Rights Are Human Rights" campaign across its US operation, handing customers booklets written by trans and non-binary employees on how to be an ally.

To mark the campaign it also released one of its signature bath products in the pink and blue of the trans flag, with all proceeds donated to trans advocacy groups, and launched an online portal with resources for trans people and allies.

Lush's latest act follows a similar intervention by rival The Body Shop, which was applauded in June when it confronted JK Rowling on Twitter over her views on trans people.

After the author criticised trans-inclusive language around periods in a series of tweets foreshadowing her now-infamous "TERF Wars" essay, The Body Shop offered to send her "a vegan bath bomb and a copy of 'Trans Rights' by Paisley Currah... to read in the bath".

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Millie Bobby Brown to play bisexual con artist in new Netflix drama

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Stranger Things star Millie Bobby Brown is set to produce and star in forthcoming Netflix film *The Girls I've Been*, portraying a bisexual con artist.

The streaming platform is adapting a young adult book of the same name, which will be published by Penguin Random House in January, 2021.

Millie Bobby Brown, 16, will produce the film, alongside Michael Costigan and Jason Bateman, and the *Stranger Things* star will play Nora O'Malley, the bisexual daughter of a con artist.

According to the book's blurb: "Nora O'Malley is a lot of things. A sister. An ex. A secret girlfriend. Kind of crooked, but reformed... somewhat."

“Nora O’Malley’s been a lot of girls. As the daughter of a con-artist who targets criminal men, she grew up her mother’s protégée. But when mom fell for the mark instead of conning him, Nora pulled the ultimate con: escape.

“For five years she’s been playing at normal. But she needs to dust off the skills she ditched because she has three problems:

“One: her ex walked in on her with her girlfriend. Even though they’ve all been inseparable for months, Wes didn’t know about her and Iris.

“Two: The morning after, they all have to meet to deposit the fundraiser money they raised together. It’s a nightmare that goes from awkward to deadly.

“Because three: right after they get in the bank, two guys start robbing it.

“But they have no idea who they’re really holding hostage. The robbers are trouble. Nora’s something else entirely.”

A release date for the film adaptation of *The Girls I’ve Been*, which Netflix describes as a “twisty, exhilarating thriller”, has not yet been announced.

Brown also recently starred in and produced the Netflix film *Enola Holmes*, which is set to hit screens via the streaming platform later this year and revolves around Sherlock’s teen sister, a talented detective in her own right.

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Political Correctness Is Destroying America! (Just Not How You Think.)

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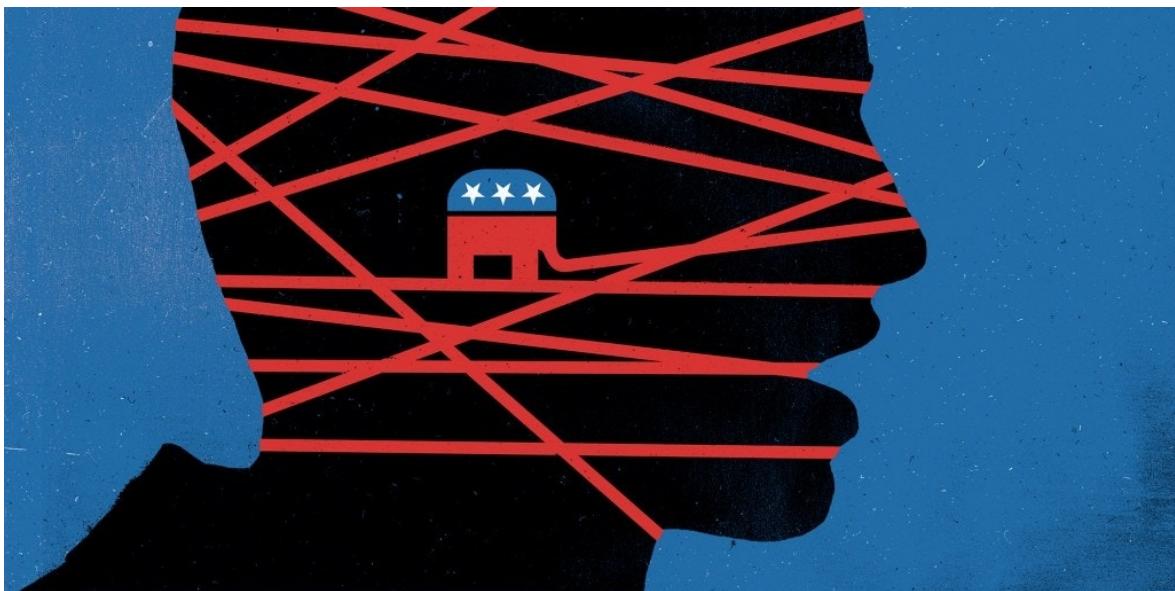


Illustration: Rob Dobi for The Intercept

AMERICA TODAY faces a terrifying danger: political correctness. It is an existential threat not just to the United States, but all of human civilization. By this, obviously, I mean right-wing political correctness.

Maybe you're surprised to hear this. In the U.S. media, there's no shortage of lamentations about political correctness and how it chills debate — but they're almost always about the threat of left-wing PC.

In reality, political correctness, or cancel culture, or whatever it's called, is not a phenomenon of the left, right, or center. It's a phenomenon of human nature. All humanity's infinite tribes are prone to groupthink and punishing heretics. That's why the principle of free thought has to be defended: It is, unfortunately, a weird and unnatural fit for humans.

There absolutely are examples of ugly political correctness from the U.S. "left," whatever that means in a country that, by historical standards, doesn't have a

left. But the vast, vast majority of political correctness in America is conservative. Conservative PC is so powerful in the U.S. that much of it is adopted by both political parties and all of the corporate media. Indeed, right-wing political correctness is so dominant that it's politically incorrect to refer to it as political correctness. Instead, we call it things like "patriotism," or simply don't notice its existence.

A full examination of America's conservative PC culture would take the rest of your life to read. So let's limit this to four areas where the right's PC causes some of the most harm: religion, foreign policy, the Republican Party, and police.

Religion

It probably doesn't surprise you that exactly zero U.S. presidents have been open atheists. But since Congress first convened in 1789, it's only had one openly atheist member: Pete Stark of California. Stark retired in 2013, so there are currently none.

According to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey, 23 percent of Americans identify as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular." This means, Pew says, that "by far the largest difference between the U.S. public and Congress is in the share who are unaffiliated with a religious group."

So there are likely many members of Congress right now who are "in the closet" when it comes to not believing in God. The only explanation? They're all too cowed by PC to come out.

This isn't surprising, since the U.S. still demonstrates informal and formal discrimination against atheists. A recent poll found that 96 percent of Americans said they'd vote for a Black candidate for president; 95 percent for a Catholic; and 66 percent for a Muslim. Only 60 percent said they'd vote for an atheist. While it's unenforceable, the constitutions of eight states actually prohibit atheists from holding office. This includes Maryland, one of the most liberal states, whose constitution also declares that "it is the duty of every man to worship God." (Maryland women are seemingly free to putter around ignoring the Almighty.)

Pro-religion PC is practiced on both sides of the aisle. In one of the hacked

Democratic National Committee emails published by WikiLeaks in 2016, the DNC chief financial officer suggested forcing Bernie Sanders to go on the record about whether he believes in God. “He had skated on saying he has a Jewish heritage,” the CFO argued. “My Southern Baptist peeps would draw a big difference between a Jew and an atheist.”

Even if, someday, a few national politicians screw up enough courage to admit that they’re atheists, it’s impossible to imagine any announcing that they’re actively *anti-theistic*. No member of the House is going to go on the CBS morning show and say, “I think all religion is pernicious, it’s a gross form of brainwashing children, and every religious leader is a con artist, including the Pope.”

No one on this plane of existence can say whether or not atheism is correct. What we can be sure of is right-wing PC has sharply limited free political speech in this area, and that’s made us less skeptical and more prone to authoritarianism.

Foreign Policy

America’s ironclad political correctness on religion plays into another aspect of our PC: The ferocious conservative restrictions on discussions of U.S. foreign policy. Since 9/11, many powerful Americans have demonstrated openness, perhaps even eagerness, for war between Christianity and Islam. Before the invasion of Iraq, then-President George W. Bush told French President Jacques Chirac that he saw “Gog and Magog at work” in the Middle East. President Donald Trump’s former adviser Steve Bannon has spoken about “the long history of the Judeo-Christian West struggle against Islam.” When the Christian Broadcasting Network asked Secretary of State Mike Pompeo whether God sent Trump “just like Queen Esther to help save the Jewish people from the Iranian menace,” Pompeo responded, “I certainly believe that’s possible.” The right’s yearning to mix religion and violence is incredibly dangerous, yet is a staple of our daily political diet. Few politicians or powerful figures notice, much less attack this.

But our conservative PC on foreign policy goes much further. Everyone in the foreign policy establishment is aware that 9/11 and almost all Islamist terrorism is direct blowback from U.S. actions overseas. As a Defense Department report explained, “Muslims do not ‘hate our freedom’” — i.e., what

Bush claimed in front of Congress on September 20, 2001 — “but rather, they hate our policies.” The problem from the establishment’s perspective is that *they* like those policies, and don’t want to change them just because they get Americans killed. Top members of the military apparently say in private that our deaths are “a small price to pay for being a superpower.”

Yet perhaps the only national-level politician who’s spoken clearly and openly about this is former Rep. Ron Paul of Texas. In 2004, a senior Bush administration official was willing to say that without U.S. actions in the Middle East, “bin Laden might still be redecorating mosques and boring friends with stories of his mujahideen days in the Khyber Pass” — but without his or her name attached. The 9/11 Commission’s report makes glancing reference to reality, but as one member later wrote, “The commissioners believed that American foreign policy was too controversial to be discussed except in recommendations written in the future tense. Here we compromised our commitment to set forth the full story.”

As with the conservative PC about God, Democrats also obey the conservative political correctness about foreign policy. For instance, in then-President Barack Obama’s famous 2009 speech in Cairo, he was too PC to tell the truth. Instead, he mumbled that “tension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims,” whatever that means exactly. In 2010, when Obama’s then-counterterrorism adviser John Brennan was asked why Al Qaeda was so determined to attack the U.S., he responded, “I think this is a, uh, long issue.” He did not elaborate.

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The PC line on foreign policy extends far beyond terrorism. Israel is one of the most powerful examples. Every American politician who cares to know is aware that of Israel’s dozen or so wars, it was clearly the aggressor in all but two — the 1948 War of Independence and the 1973 Yom Kippur War — and even those are arguable. They also understand that Israel has rejected numerous offers to create a just, two-state solution with the Palestinians. In private, U.S. officials say that Israel has constructed “apartheid” in the West Bank. While a minor glasnost on

this subject is currently in progress, this clear reality remains inexpressible by U.S. politicians.

And what about the media, that hotbed of freethinking radicalism? Even rich, famous TV hosts who deviate from the right's PC line must issue groveling apologies or get canceled, literally. Sometimes they issue groveling apologies *and* get canceled. After Bush called the 9/11 hijackers "cowards," Bill Maher took issue on his old ABC show "Politically Incorrect." "We have been the cowards," Maher said, "lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away." Maher immediately said he was sorry, but it was too late: His show lost big advertisers and was taken off the air the next year. In other words, the moment "Politically Incorrect" was *genuinely* politically incorrect, Maher was yanked off-stage.

Next, in February 2003 just before the invasion of Iraq, Phil Donohue's MSNBC show got the ax. It had the highest ratings on the network, but as executives fretted in an internal memo, it could become "a home for the liberal antiwar agenda at the same time that our competitors are waving the flag at every opportunity." In other words, since all of the rest of American TV was ultra-PC, and they had to be too. The same channel soon signed Jesse Ventura to a three-year contract for a new show but then found out he was anti-war and so paid him to do nothing.

Other TV figures made sure not to suffer similar fates. "I remember," Katie Couric later said, "this inevitable march towards war and kind of feeling like, 'Will anybody put the brakes on this? And is this really being properly challenged by the right people? ... Anyone who questioned the administration was considered unpatriotic and it was a very difficult position to be in.'" At the time, when it actually mattered, Couric chirped on "The Today Show" that "Navy SEALS rock!"

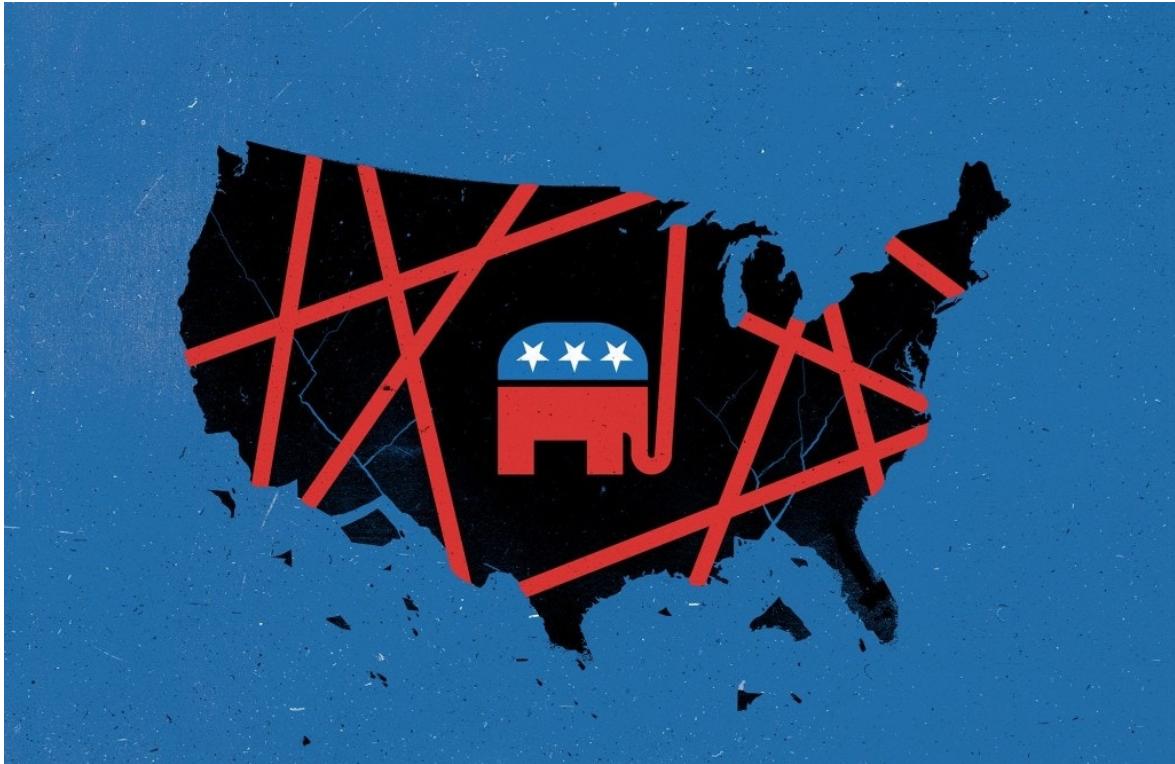
Then there's Chris Hayes, another MSNBC host. In a broadcast just before Memorial Day 2012, Hayes expressed exactly the kind of sentiment you'd expect to hear in an honest debate on war: "It is, I think, very difficult to talk about the war dead and the fallen without invoking valor. ... I feel uncomfortable about the word 'hero' because it seems to me that it is so rhetorically proximate to justifications for more war. And I obviously don't want to desecrate or disrespect the memory of anyone that's fallen. ... But it seems to me that we marshal this word in a way that is problematic." The freakout from

the right was so intense that Hayes immediately said he was “deeply sorry” because “it’s very easy for me, a TV host, to opine about people who fight our wars, having never dodged a bullet or guarded a post or walked a mile in their boots.”

Even opinions on events from a lifetime ago must be politically correct. After Jon Stewart said on “The Daily Show” that he believed Harry Truman was a “war criminal” for using atomic weapons on Japan, he came under immediate attack, and quickly came crawling for forgiveness. “I walk that back because it was in my estimation a stupid thing to say,” Stewart pleaded in a tone recognizable from any of history’s struggle sessions. “You ever do that, where you’re saying something, and as it’s coming out you’re like, ‘What the fuck?’ And it just sat in there for a couple of days, just sitting going, ‘No, no, [Truman] wasn’t, and you should really say that out loud on the show.’”

With no critiques about specifics permissible, a broad discussion about U.S. foreign policy is light years away. There won’t be any politicians or TV hosts anytime soon who’ll consistently emphasize Martin Luther King Jr.’s position that America is “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.”

No one knows what foreign policy Americans would choose after an open debate. But it’s manifestly true that the current one, shaped overwhelmingly by right-wing PC, has caused gigantic damage to the U.S. and the world.



Illustration

The Republican Party

Today's GOP often enforces internal ideological purity more strictly than the Chinese Communist Party. This matters because the U.S. political system is so sclerotic it requires some buy-in from the opposition party for almost anything to change. So as long as Republicans stay in lockstep with each other, nothing will happen.

The GOP's PC has been particularly disastrous with the climate crisis. The Republican president of the United States constantly calls it a "hoax." For a decade, GOP politicians and the party's apparatus have almost all refused to acknowledge that it even exists. Newt Gingrich said in 2008 that "our country must take action to address climate change" — but when GOP PC changed, so did he. When Gingrich ran for president in 2012, Rush Limbaugh horrified listeners by telling them of a rumored chapter in a forthcoming Gingrich book that addressed global warming honestly. Gingrich obediently cut it. Then he began posting pictures on Instagram with captions like "More evidence of global warming, the Potomac iced over last night."

Things are slowly shifting now as younger Republicans begin to understand the

frightening future staring them in the face. Currently the party's split between a faction that wants to continue denying reality, and one which wants to stop denying reality while doing nothing effective about it.

The GOP's political correctness on climate change flows from a broader rejection of Enlightenment methods of figuring out reality. Limbaugh, whom Trump recently awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, has famously proclaimed that science is one of the "corners of deceit" used by liberals to create "The Universe of Lies." No prominent Republican politician has ever disavowed Limbaugh's view.

Beyond this is further rigid GOP political correctness on almost all issues. A Republican politician must publicly profess belief in American exceptionalism. Cutting taxes causes government revenue to go up. Any increase in taxes on the rich and corporations will cause economic devastation. Evolution is a lie. Abortion is a titanic moral evil. Trump is a super-duper president. They have a great idea for bringing low-cost, high-quality health care to every citizen but don't want to mention it right now and ruin the secret.

But facts don't care about conservatives' feelings. Our Republican-led coronavirus carnage is a preview of what's coming with the climate crisis.

Police

With millions of people turning out in demonstrations against police brutality, there are some obvious questions we should be asking ourselves: Why are cops acting this way? Why are the so-called bad apples never removed? No politicians or TV hosts are providing the simple answer: political correctness.

Police officers will almost never report another officer mistreating a civilian. This is understandable, since the best case for these "snitches" is usually having their careers destroyed. Some, such as the NYPD's Adrian Schoolcraft, fare even worse. In 2009, after Schoolcraft found that his supervisors were manipulating crime statistics, his fellow cops broke into his apartment, abducted him, and committed him to a psychiatric hospital. Whatever you want to say about Oberlin's student council, they're not doing that.

Police department PC has been enabled by another layer of conservative political correctness on top of it. Until recently, the idea that police routinely engage in

unjustifiable violence, and then lie about it, was generally unutterable for an American politician. Then there was even higher-level layer of PC on top of that in U.S. culture: Reality shows have continually glorified cops engaging in barbarity, and in scripted shows, there's no greater cliché than hero cops.

For 100 years, various commissions charged with police reform have come and gone. Most often any gains are minor and prone to backsliding. The only way to change reality is to face reality, not live in a comfortable fantasy concocted by right-wing PC.

And So Much More

All of that is just a few waves in America's never-ending flood of right-wing political correctness. Can the surgeon general suggest that drug legalization should be studied, and perhaps children should be taught about masturbation? Nope. Can you work for the Department of Agriculture and deliver an honest speech about your life without the right misrepresenting it and getting you fired? No. Can CBS broadcast a miniseries about Ronald Reagan that lightly fictionalizes the grotesque response of his administration to AIDS? Sorry; that has to be moved to a much smaller audience on Showtime. Can you tell the truth as you see it? No. No. No. No. No. No. No.

But even the endless concrete examples of conservative PC are not the end of the problem. Right-wing political correctness so hobbles our political imagination that we don't even dream of having debates on the deepest, most important problems of our lives. Imagine politicians or New York Times op-ed columnists or corporate TV hosts asking simple questions like:

- If we followed the law, would the most powerful people in America, including Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and most Wall Street CEOs be in jail?
- Is advertising all lies that are warping our humanity? If so, should we get rid of it?
- Is there any way to heal the wounds of 500 years of European colonialism?
- Can we wind down the American empire without destroying the whole world in the process?
- Even if we slow down the effects of the climate crisis, will capitalism still destroy the biosphere on which all human civilization depends?

There aren't any easy answers here, but let's at least be honest about the problem. If we're going to talk about political correctness, let's start with the truth about the kind of PC that matters most: the political correctness that is literally killing us.

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Spanish-language COVID fact-checking spun for political purposes

[返回目录](#)



(Source: @saiphcita/UNAM Civic Innovation Lab)

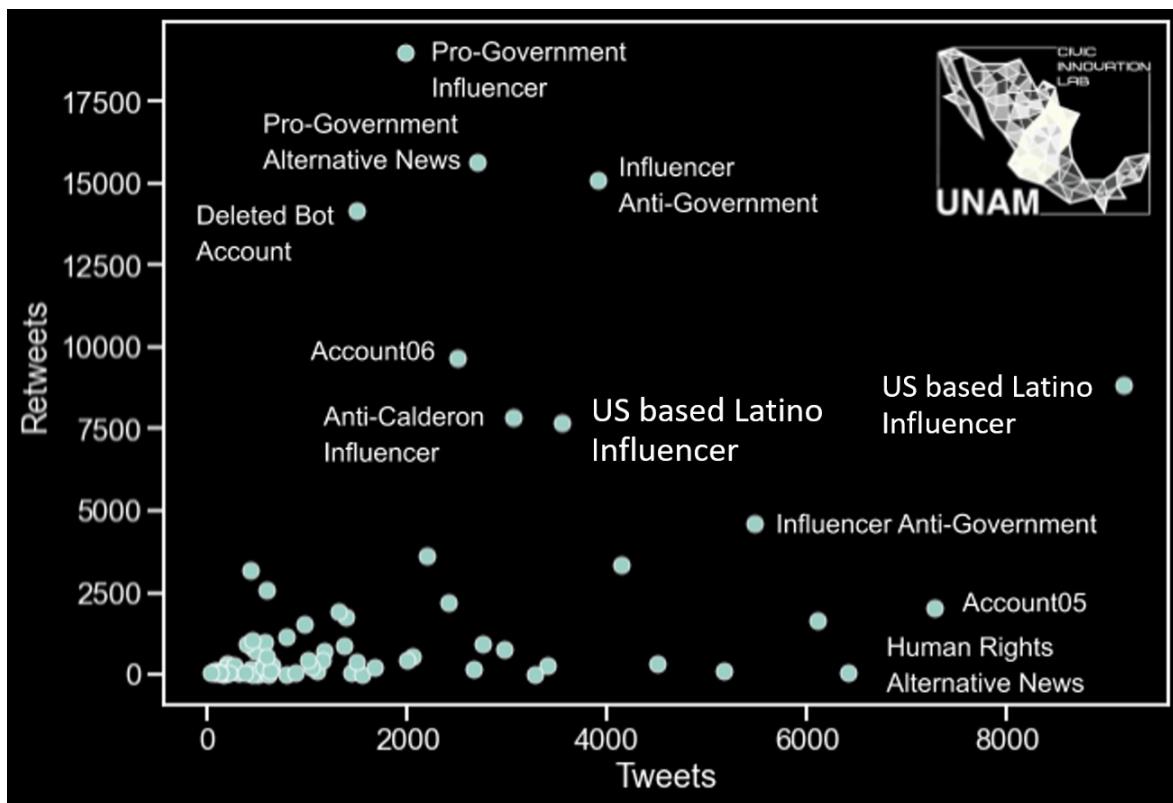
In the wake of COVID-19, several independent fact-checking initiatives have emerged to verify content specifically for Spanish-speaking audiences. Two of the most prominent, @covidmx and @esp_covid19, were created in mid-March 2020. They focus on providing timely and authoritative COVID-19 information to Latino communities, primarily in the United States and Mexico, and have amassed a sizable audience.

Little is currently known, however, about who these audiences are and how they are engaging with the content — and potentially exploiting it for political purposes — of these fact-checking organizations during the pandemic. The UNAM Civic Innovation Lab joined forces with the DFRLab to understand more about these audiences. The investigation found political influencers in Mexico, including former presidents and political news reporters, who have selectively cited the work of these initiatives when it suited their political agendas, causing others to question the validity and neutrality of their fact-checking despite the consistent quality of their work.

Understanding the audience

The investigation collected all of the tweets from @esp_covid19 and @covidmx, as well as the timelines of all of the accounts that either mentioned the organizations in their tweets, replied to them, quoted them, or retweeted them. These accounts will be referred to as the fact-checking organizations' primary online "audience" throughout this report. Based on this data, both fact-checking efforts had nearly 21,000 audience members combined on Twitter (i.e., around 20,869 individual accounts that engaged at least once with the organizations' tweets between March 13 and June 25, 2020).

To understand what kinds of accounts engaged with the two fact-checking organizations on social media, the researchers plotted the total number of tweets each audience member generated on their timelines against the total number of retweets they amassed.

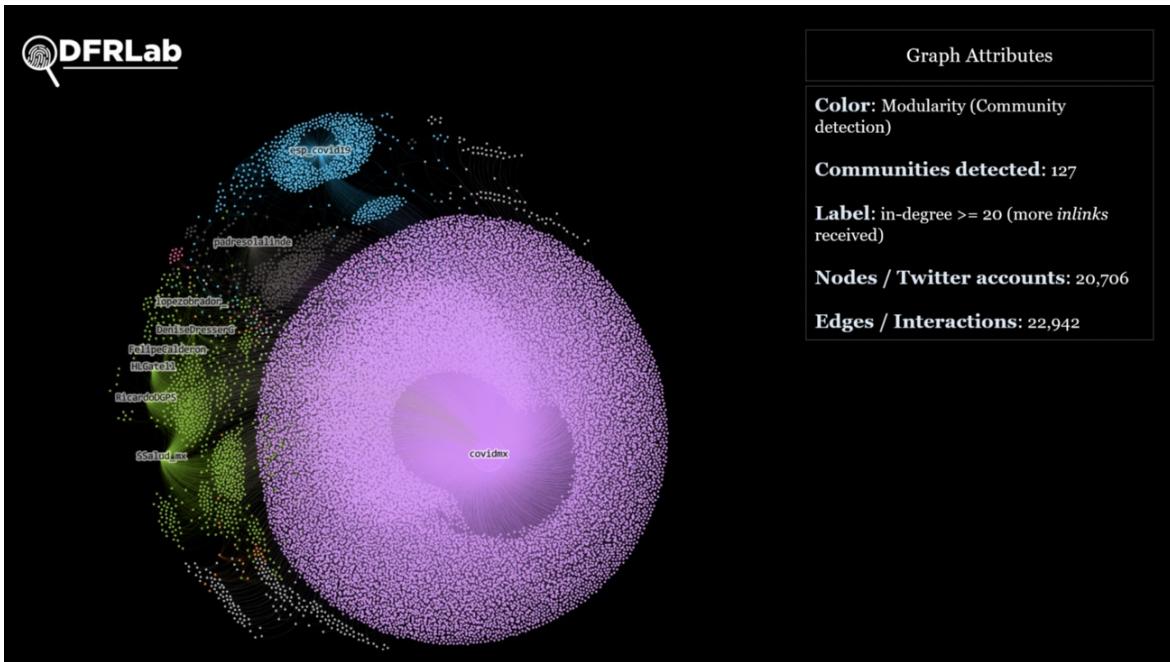


The graph shows several different data points. Each point represents an account that engaged with one of the two fact-checking organizations on Twitter. The X-axis shows the total number of original tweets that a given account created on its timeline, and the Y-axis represents the number of retweets that the content from the audience member received. (Source: @saviaga/UNAM Civic Innovation Lab)

The outliers in the plot represent influencers (accounts that received a large number of retweets) as well as accounts that were highly active (generated a large number of tweets). The outliers were primarily bot-like accounts (initially identified via Botometer, then qualitatively investigated), political influencers, and news accounts. Although the fact checkers focused on verifying information about the pandemic, none of the most active influencer accounts that engaged with them belonged to health institutions or were health officials. The most active accounts also did not belong to any current government official. Notice that this does not mean that government officials or healthcare officials did not interact with the fact-checking organizations. They were simply just not among the most active online accounts that we identified.

A social network analysis of both fact-checking organizations' audiences — again, those accounts that directly interacted with the fact checkers — revealed that @covidmx had a much wider audience than @esp_covid19. The former's audience size was likely because @covidmx is a spinoff of @VerificadoMX, a Mexico-based initiative comprising NGOs, news outlets, and academics best known for fact-checking information around natural disasters in Mexico as well as the 2018 Mexican presidential elections.

The graph below shows a user-to-user network of tweet mentions, retweets, quotes, and replies (i.e., audience interactions), posted between March 13 and June 25, 2020, involving @covidmx and @esp_covid19. Each node in the network represents an account that was also included in the tweets the audience generated about these two fact-checking organizations. The directed edges indicate the flow of information. An edge from one node another indicates that the former has retweeted, quoted, mentioned, or replied to the latter.



Graph showing the connections that emerged from tweets engaging with the two fact-checking organizations. The nodes' labels are based on in-degree scores. The audience of @covidmx was also much larger, with 19,796 members vs. 626 for @esp_covid19. (Source: @estebanpd़/DFRLab)

The audience of @covidmx was not only larger but also well-connected to a range of actors and institutions. Many of those who interacted with the organization's tweets were also connected to high-profile healthcare accounts such as @HLGatell (Mexico's main spokesperson on the COVID-19 pandemic), @SSalud_mx (Mexico's Health Ministry), and @RicardoDGPS (the Mexican government's director of health promotion). This is somewhat expected, given that @covidmx focuses on fighting health misinformation.

@covidmx's audience also connected to political figures, including current Mexican president @lopezobrador_ and former president @FelipeCalderon, journalists such as @DeniseDresserG and religious figures such as Catholic priest Alejandro Solalinde (@padresolalinde). @covidmx had previously debunked Solalinde's public COVID-19-related health advice. Notice that while the audience connected to certain political actors, such as Mexico's current president, it does not mean that the Mexican president directly interacted with the fact-checking organizations, which the investigation did not find evidence of such interactions.

[←](#) **Twittear**



Covidmx

@covidmx

▼

La información del tuit del [@padresolalinde](#) es FALSA:

- La combinación de té de manzanilla, té verde y té de diente de león no cura, ni previene el coronavirus
- No hay evidencia de que el diente de león contenga Interferón
- El Interferón tampoco previene ni cura el [#Covid_19](#)

A screenshot of a Twitter post from the account @covidmx. The post is a reply to a tweet from Alejandro Solalinde (@padresolalinde) dated March 28, 2020, at 11:22 AM. The original tweet contains a large red watermark reading "FALSO". The text of the tweet is as follows:

Un buen tipo contra el Covit en la combinación de tres tes: manzanilla, te verde y diente de león (el de la flor amarilla que cuando se le pone agua se deshonda y vuela) el último, contiene interferón alcance tuerte que protege contra el virus. Tomar 3 veces al día, sin azucar.

The @covidmx reply includes a yellow graphic of a coronavirus and the word "verificovid.mx" at the bottom.

1:39 p. m. · 28 mar. 2020 · [Twitter Web App](#)

4,6 mil Retweets y comentarios **8,5 mil** Me gusta



Screengrab of @covidmx fact-checked content. The image shows the organization debunking a tweet from priest Alejandro Solalinde, a religious leader in Mexico. (Source: @covidmx/archive)

The audience tended to mention political actors and journalists together to call for news reporters to use their positions to tell the Mexican government how they should handle the pandemic.

The screenshot shows a Twitter post from the account @covidmx. The tweet reads: "Hoy* se reporta un nuevo máximo de casos confirmados por @SSalud_mx en las últimas 24 horas. Seguimos en la etapa más alta de transmisión. Quédate en casa. Conoce el desglose por estado en nuestro sitio [verificovid.mx](#)". Below the tweet is a yellow graphic titled "VERIFICOVID" with the hashtag "#QuédateEnCasa". The graphic displays the following data:

FECHA DE CORTE:	SÁBADO 23 DE MAYO 13:00 hrs	3,329	190
Recuperaciones estimadas	44,919	Casos nuevos	Decesos nuevos
Decesos confirmados acumulados	7,179	Casos positivos confirmados acumulados	65,856
Casos confirmados activos*	14,253		

*Caso confirmado positivo con fecha de inicio de síntoma en los últimos 14 días / FUENTE: Base Datos Afortios - Dirección General de Epidemiología

The graphic also includes the text "Vacúinate contra la desinformación." and the URL "verificovid.mx". Below the graphic are engagement counts: 11 replies, 217 retweets, and 288 likes.

On the right side of the image, there is another Twitter post from the account @pechugo66. The post reads: "Díganle al presidente que se calle, cada vez que habla que vamos muy bien, hay repuntes en contagios y muertos". It is a reply to @covidmx, @DeniseDresserG, and @SSalud_mx. The timestamp is 12:09 a.m. - 24 may. 2020 - Twitter Web App.

Screengrab of an account that mentions political actors and journalists.
(Source: @pechugo66/archive)

Political actors and @covidmx were surprisingly also mentioned together in what appeared to be political attacks. Some audience members accused @covidmx of working for ex-President Calderón, who opposes the current Mexican government.

The screenshot shows a Twitter post from the account @jelosantana. The tweet reads: "@covidmx No #&*, según ustedes verifican las cifras del COVID19, emitidas por la SS; pero no dicen nada de las mentiras del comandante borolas, @FelipeCalderon y de otros mal paridos. Seguro está cuenta fue creada por el o afines a él, casualmente, en poco tiempo miles de seguidores". The post was made at 5:43 p.m. on April 23, 2020, via Twitter for Android. The interface includes a search bar at the top right, a sidebar titled "Personas relevantes" with profiles for @jelosantana, @covidmx, and @FelipeCalderon, and standard Twitter interaction icons (comment, retweet, like, share) below the tweet.

Screengrab showing a post from a Twitter account, mentioning @covidmx and Mexico's former president, Felipe Calderón. (Source: @jelosantana/archive)

At one point, Calderón selectively decided to cite a tweet by @covidmx, marshalling it as evidence that the current government was underreporting the number of COVID-19 deaths in the country.

[←](#) **Twittear**



Felipe Calderón

@FelipeCalderon

Más evidencias de subregistro de casos reales, ahora de defunciones, incluyendo reducciones en el número de fallecimientos por COVID respecto de lo reportado previamente en las propias cifras oficiales. Muy grave

Covidmx @covidmx · 20 abr.

Decidimos no compartir los datos de #COVID_19 que publica diariamente la @SSalud_mx pues hallamos grandes inconsistencias en cifras presentadas entre ayer y hoy: por ejemplo 17 muertes menos en la CDMX. Pedimos a las autoridades que aclaren estas irregularidades. Abrimos hilo.

[Mostrar este hilo](#)

LISTA COMPLETA DE INCONSISTENCIAS QUE DETECTAMOS EN LOS CASOS CONFIRMADOS Y DECESOS REPORTADOS HOY (20/ABR/2020):

- 268 casos positivos menos reportados en la CDMX (ayer 2,591 / hoy 2,323)
- 14 casos positivos menos reportados en Campeche (ayer 57 / hoy 43)
- 3 casos positivos menos reportados en Tlaxcala (ayer 76 / hoy 73)
- 17 decesos menos reportados en la CDMX (ayer 183 / hoy 166)
- 1 deceso menos reportado en Baja California (ayer 75 / hoy 74)
- 1 deceso menos reportado en Campeche (ayer 4 / hoy 3)
- 1 deceso menos reportado en Chihuahua (ayer 32 / hoy 31)
- 1 deceso menos reportado en Nuevo León (ayer 6 / hoy 5)

Fuentes:

• Comunicado Técnico Diario SSA, Mapa de la plataforma SISVE, Plataforma oficial de datos del CONACYT



Vacúinate contra la desinformación.

verificovid.mx

/verificovid

@covidmx

55 3905 0269



10:43 a. m. · 21 abr. 2020 · [Twitter Web App](#)

1,6 mil Retweets y comentarios **3,4 mil** Me gusta



Screengrab from Mexico's former president Calderón quoting a tweet from @covidmx. Here ex-President Calderón says that @covidmx is showing that the Mexican government is not accurately reporting the

COVID-19 death toll in the country. (Source:
@FelipeCalderon/archive)

One could argue that the account of @FelipeCalderon acted selectively as the Mexican Federal Government acknowledged hours earlier to his tweet the mistake they made in their data collection and explained why they had erroneous numbers in their death toll. Yet, the ex-president did not mention the clarification. Additionally, Calderon's tweets used language such as "muy grave" [very serious] to give a negative connotation to how the Mexican government is handling the pandemic.



Ricardo Cortes Alcalá
@RicardoDGPS

Replying to @covidmx

Apreciables colegas @covidmx ayer hubo discrepancia en el trabajo de los equipos que por separado preparan los datos que se presentan en vespertina vs tablero de coronavirus.gob.mx/datos/. Se eligieron dos variables distintas para el mismo análisis. Se solucionó gracias a ustedes.

Translate Tweet

COVID-19 Tablero México
Sistema de seguimiento y monitoreo de COVID-19 en México
coronavirus.gob.mx

5:51 AM · Apr 21, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

Screengrab from @RicardoDGPS, the Mexican government's director of health promotion. Here, the government official is thanking @covidmx for reporting that the government had discrepancies in the number of death tolls they reported. It mentions as well that the organization helped them to detect and correct the error. The tweet came out hours before President Calderon's tweet. (Source:

@RicardoDGPS/archive)

Some political influencers also selectively tagged @covidmx in tweets in which they attacked the current Mexican government.

[← Twittear](#)

 **Fernando Belaunzarán** 
@ferbelaunzaran

Vean por dónde se debe empezar a combatir Fake News (paparruchas) 

cc [@genarolozano](#) [@covidmx](#)

 **Human Rights Watch**  @hrw · 26 mar.
Mexico: López Obrador Misinforms Public on the Health Risks of the Pandemic
trib.al/QPUL6dU



5:47 p. m. · 26 mar. 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

37 Retweets y comentarios **81** Me gusta

Screengrab from political influencer and former Mexican federal

deputy Fernando Belaunzaran who is tagging @covidmx in a tweet where he is attacking the current Mexican president (Source: @ferbelaunzaran/archive)

Political influencers engaging with the fact-checking organizations appeared to hurt the organizations' credibility in the eyes of some users, even when the organizations did not reciprocate that engagement.

[←](#) **Twittear**

 **SoleyGM**
@sg_perro

Vean, esa cuenta que cita como fuente Felipin, tiene poco +de 1 mes de creación, tiene miles de seguidores, está certificada por Twitter, dice ser independiente y para identificar información falsa, curiosamente solo desmiente información oficial y de las fakes NO DICE NADA

reducciones, incluyendo reducciones en el número de fallecimientos por COVID respecto de lo reportado previamente en las propias cifras oficiales. Muy grave

 **Covidmx**  @covid... · 1d
Decidimos no compartir los datos de #COVID_19 que publica diariamente la @SSalud_mx pues hallamos grandes inconsistencias e...
[Mostrar este hilo](#)

LISTA COMPLETA DE INCOSISTENCIAS QUE DETECTAMOS EN LOS CASOS CONFIRMADOS Y DECESOS REPORTADOS HOY (25/ABR/2020):
+ 268 casos positivos menores reportados en la CDMX (ayer 3,816 / hoy 3,835)
+ 16 casos positivos menores reportados en Coahuila (ayer 57 / hoy 43)
+ 9 casos positivos menores reportados en Morelos (ayer 98 / hoy 79)

 **verifiCOVID**
Covidmx  @covidmx
verifiCOVID: Vacúunate contra la desinformación sobre el coronavirus y #Covid_19

[Seguir](#)

[Tweets](#) [Tweets y respuestas](#) [Multimedia](#)

 **Covidmx**  @covidmx · 22h
Con ese afán seguiremos verificando información médica y estadística hasta donde nos sea posible.
Esperamos que las

8:56 a. m. · 22 abr. 2020 · Twitter for Android

182 Retweets y comentarios 255 Me gusta

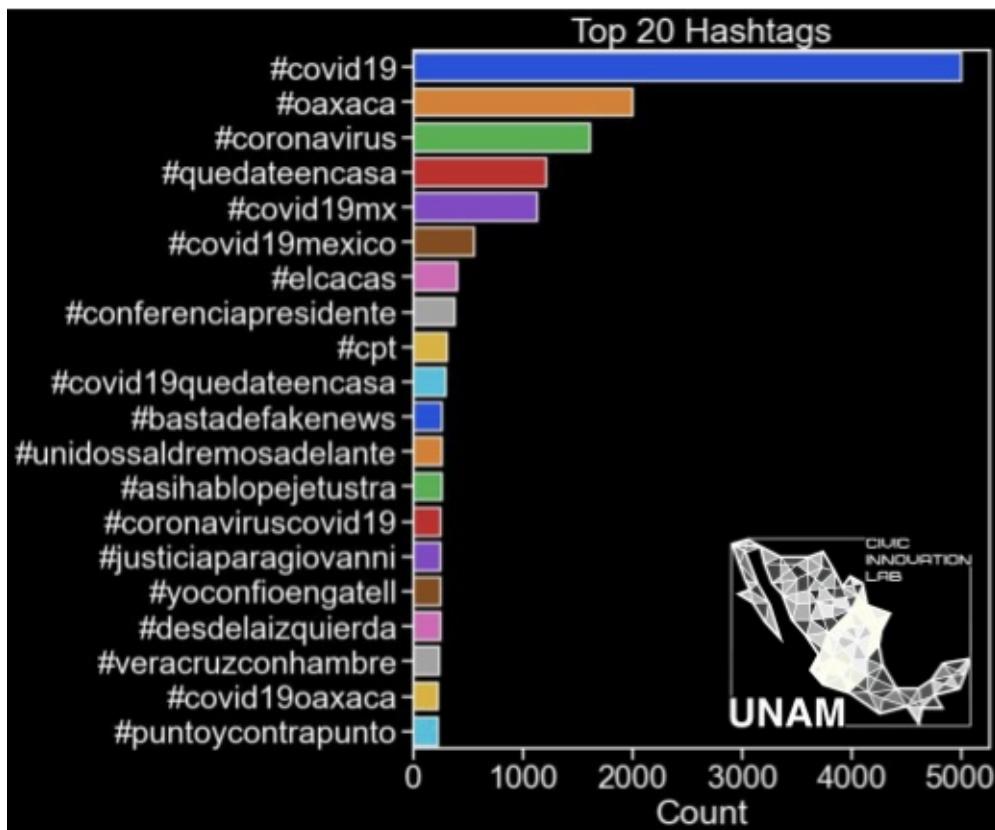
Screengrab from an account that is questioning the political neutrality of @covidMX after the Mexican ex-president decided to quote them (Source: @sg_perro/archive)

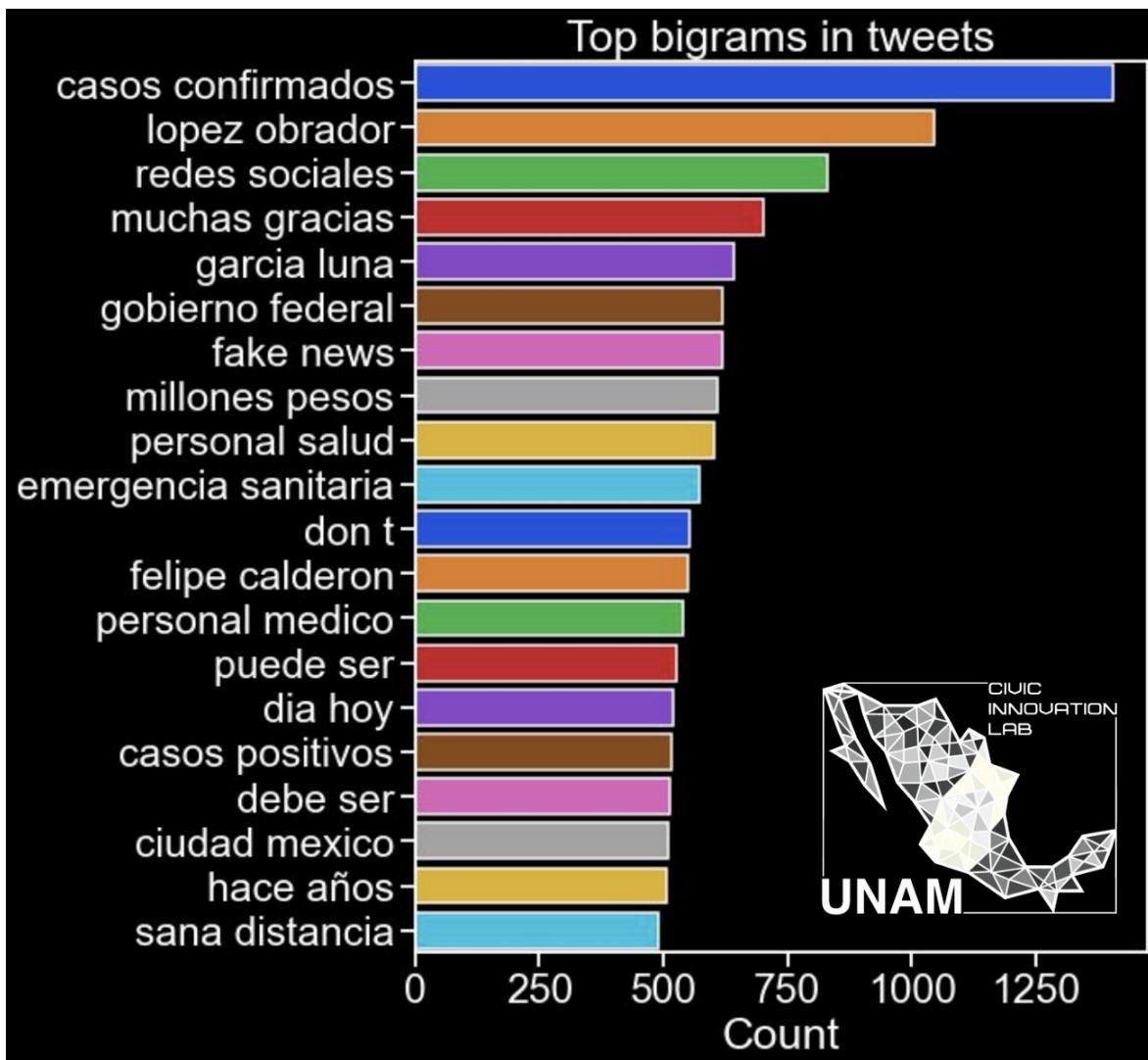
Understanding the audience's content

Researchers also identified the most common hashtags and “bigrams” used in audience tweets. Bigrams are pair of words — e.g., “fake news” — that tend to appear together in the text corpus.

The most frequent hashtags that the audience used included #COVID-19, #Coronavirus, #QuedateEnCasa (“stay home”), #YoConfioEnGatell (“I trust Gatell,” the main health spokesperson in Mexico), #JuntosSomosMasFuertes (“We are stronger together”), and #BastaDeFakeNews (“Enough of fake news”).

The audience also tended to employ more overtly political hashtags such as #ElCacas (a pejorative nickname used for current Mexican President Obrador) or #AsíHablóPejetustra (a phrase used to mock anything that President Obrador says). Another popular hashtag that the audience used was #JusticiaParaGiovanni, which related to social justice and police brutality after the Mexican police killed a man who had refused to wear a mask.





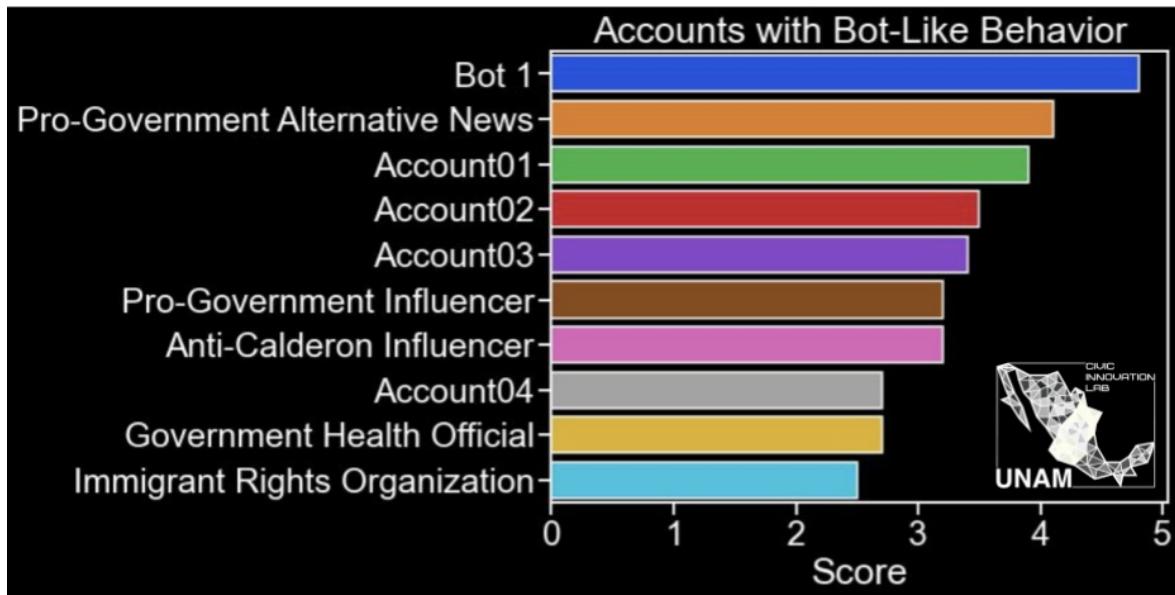
Most-used hashtags and bigrams the audience used when discussing the fact checking organizations. (Source: @saviaga/UNAM Civic Innovation Lab)

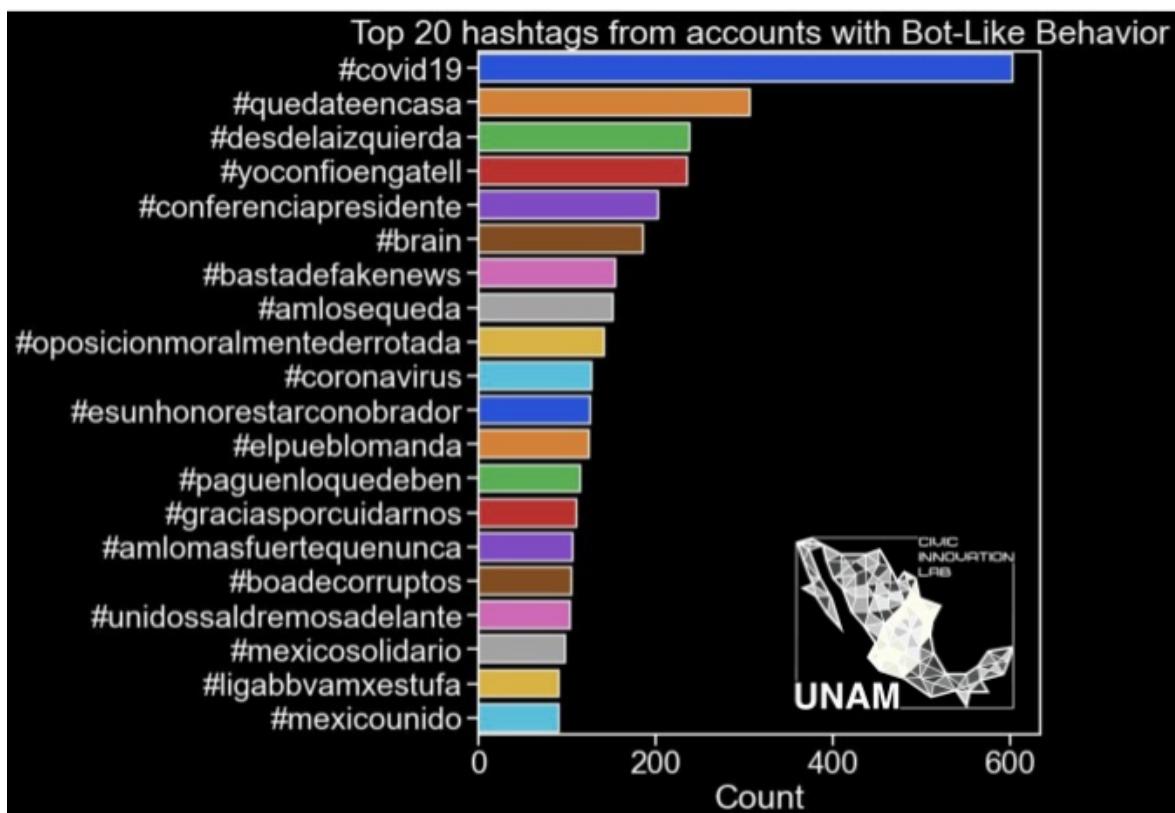
The most-used bigrams were also about COVID-19 and fact-checking, e.g., “casos confirmados” (“confirmed cases”) and “personal salud,” (“healthcare workers”). However, there were also bigrams focused on political actors, including Calderón and Garcia Luna, a former secretary of public security during Calderón’s administration who is currently under arrest in the United States for crimes involving connections to Mexican drug cartels. People questioned why @covidmx did not discuss the arrest of Garcia Luna, again questioning whether @covidMX was a politically neutral fact-checking organization

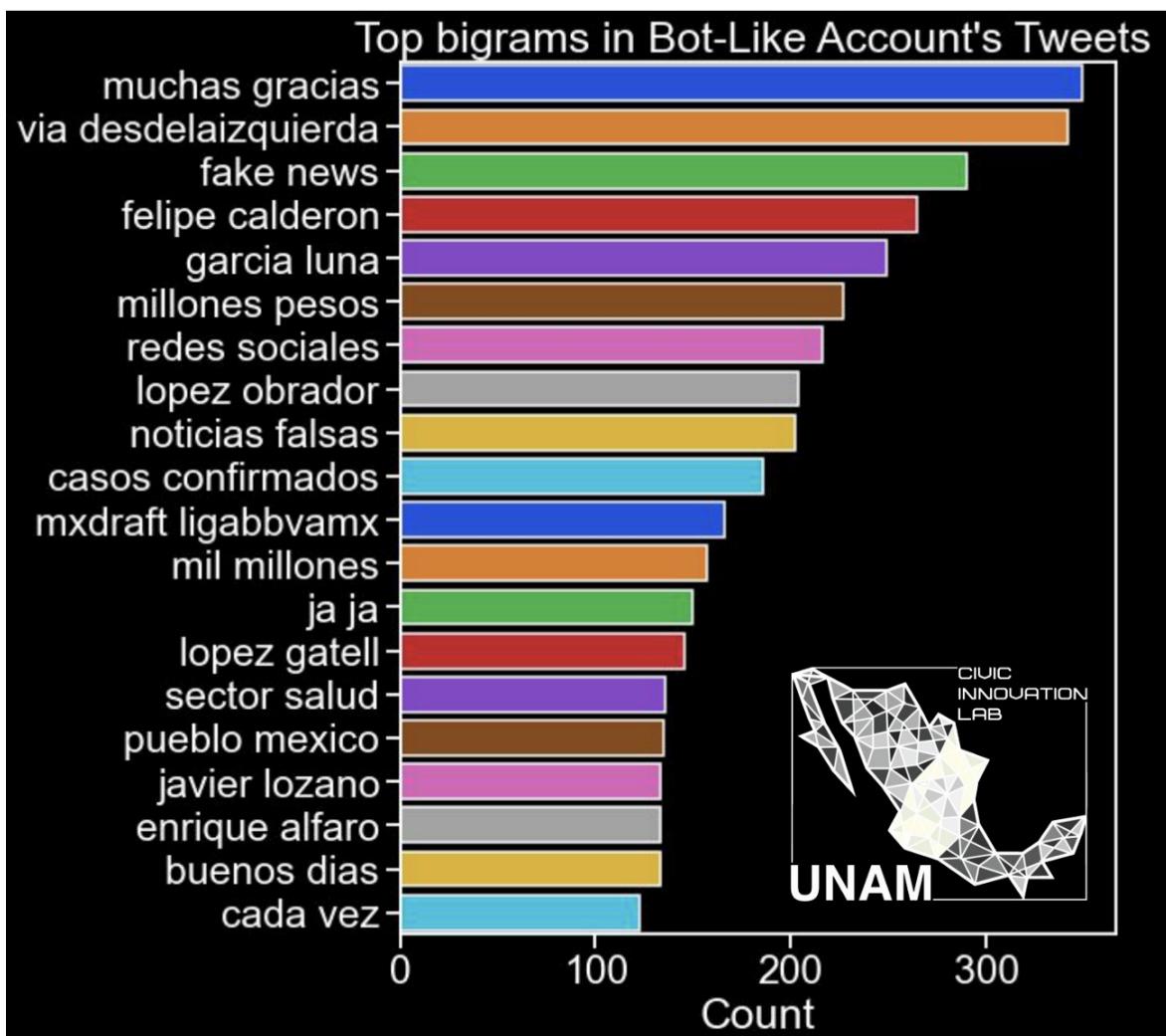
Audiences with bot-like behavior

To further understand whether the fact-checking organizations had audience members displaying bot-like activity, this investigation used scores based on the Botometer platform, which gives each account a rating between zero and five based on the likelihood of whether an account is automated. While Botometer is not conclusive, it can serve as a starting point for further analysis.

The charts below shows audience accounts with Botometer scores that were greater or equal to 2.5, denoting that they might display some behaviors that appear to be more automated than human. Based on the profiles and tweets made by these audience members, at least four main types of audience members likely employed some form of automation: (1) journalist influencers; (2) political influencers; (3) nongovernmental organizations; and (4) “everyday citizens.” None of these audience members openly stated they were bots.







Overview of the accounts with a high Botometer score and the hashtags and bigrams they used. These bot-like accounts mostly posted about healthcare but also diverged into politics at times. (Source: @saviaga/UNAM Civic Innovation Lab)

In the case of the journalists and NGOs, they likely used automation to ease some of the labor from their volunteers and human operators. The UNAM Civic Innovation Lab has studied in the past how bots can be used for social good to help NGOs and journalists.

The top hashtags and bigrams used by these bot-like audience members were again related to health issues and combatting health-related misinformation, such as the use of the phrase “fake news.” In other instances, the accounts used hashtags and bigrams related to jokes, games, and winning raffles, such as #ligabbvamxestufa, and “ja ja” (a common interjection expressing laughter).

This behavior resembles some of the tactics political trolls use to keep themselves and their audience entertained.

Implications

The analysis uncovered that both fact-checking organizations, @covidmx and @esp_covid19, had an audience engaging with their content, but @covidmx was much more frequently connected to a broader set of actors. However, these connections were not always positive: the main influencers who engaged with @covidmx were not related to public health but, rather, political influencers with their own agenda.

These accounts occasionally marshaled content from @covidmx to attack their political enemies. Former Mexican President Felipe Calderón, for example, cited tweets from @covidmx as the basis for his claims that the current Mexican government was underreporting the actual death toll from COVID-19. Calderón's tweets were then used by other Twitter accounts to discredit @covidmx's work and call into question the organization's objectivity.

Initiatives to combat disinformation and misinformation, including fact-checking, sometimes have unintended second-order effects. In this case, an impartial fact-checking effort was at times exploited to advance political objectives. Those tweets and posts started to sow doubt about the trustworthiness and objectivity of, in this case, two fact-checking organizations that were providing timely, authoritative health information.

Saiph Savage is the co-director of the UNAM Civic Innovation Lab and HCI Lab at WVU.

Claudia Flores Saviaga is a researcher at the HCI lab at WVU and Facebook Research Fellow.

Rafael Morales is a researcher at the UNAM Civic Innovation Lab.

Esteban Ponce de León is a Research Assistant, Latin America, with the Digital Forensic Research Lab.

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The Uncle Roger controversy: Why people are outraged by a video about cooking rice

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(CNN) — On July 8, Malaysian comedian Nigel Ng uploaded to YouTube a video titled "DISGUSTED by this Egg Fried Rice Video," under his comedic persona "Uncle Roger."

In the video, Ng slammed BBC Food presenter Hersha Patel's unconventional way of cooking Chinese-style egg-fried rice, which included draining the rice through a strainer after boiling.

"What she doing? Oh my god. You're killing me, woman. Drain the -- she's draining rice with colander! How can you drain rice with colander? This is not pasta!" he exclaimed.

Shortly afterward, he groaned, "You're ruining the rice," as Patel used tap water to wash it of starch.

What Ng intended to be a comedic video sparked a firestorm of dismay and disbelief as it ricocheted around the internet, gaining more than 7 million views on YouTube and nearly 40 million on Twitter.

Many viewers, including Asian-American celebrities such as writer Jenny Yang, derided Patel's methods for departing from how Chinese egg-fried rice is traditionally made. Patel hadn't washed the rice before boiling it. She had added too much water. She should have used day-old rice. The scrambled egg was overcooked instead of runny.

"THIS RICE COOKING IS A HATE CRIME," Yang joked on Twitter.

Ng, who is based in London, tried to defuse the situation by filming a short clip with Patel announcing they are planning a collaboration. "While this guy's blown up like nobody's business, I've been trolled," Patel said in the video, claiming she had been simply presenting the BBC's recipe and that "I know how to cook rice."

The BBC has not publicly commented on Ng's or Patel's remarks.

Rice is a staple ingredient in Asia, and has been adopted by cuisines globally since it was first domesticated in China more than 9,400 years ago, according to Chinese researchers. There are countless ways to prepare rice -- you can steam it, fry it, simmer it slowly in broth like Italian risotto or scorch it to develop a crispy crust like Iranian tahdig.

But the issue at hand goes beyond a difference in opinion on the varying methods of cooking rice.

The controversy over the BBC Food clip, and the reaction it provoked within certain Asian communities, speaks to a broader, long-standing debate about the intersection of food, ethnicity and culture -- the fundamental question of who is allowed to cook what food.

Appropriating and whitewashing food

Countless White chefs in recent years have been accused of cultural appropriation by creating food from other ethnic groups using methods and phrases that are deemed "unauthentic," disrespectful, and sometimes outright racist.

Last year, for instance, an Asian food critic accused celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay of tokenism, after he launched a restaurant described in promotional material as "an authentic Asian eating house."

The restaurant didn't differentiate between wildly different and unique types of Asian cuisines, lumping them all together as generically Asian. And at the time of the opening, it did not appear to have any Asian chefs.

"Japanese? Chinese? It's all Asian, who cares," wrote the critic, Angela Hui, in a

scathing Instagram story.

CNN reached out to Ramsay's restaurant group for comment after the initial controversy.

Tokenism is when racial, ethnic, or cultural diversity is emphasized only on a symbolic level, without much substantial effort to understand that culture -- in Ramsay's case, labeling a restaurant "Asian" without taking the time to differentiate between these individual nuanced cuisines.

Food is not just sustenance, it carries history and heritage, which is why many people are deeply offended when these traditional methods of cooking are cast aside.

Sometimes chefs don't just change up cooking methods, they blatantly insult the cuisine and culture of origin.

One notorious example is the Chinese-inspired restaurant Lucky Lee's in New York. When it opened in 2019, the White owner said it would serve "clean" food that wouldn't make people feel "bloated and icky" afterwards -- the implication being that regular Chinese food was somehow unhealthy. That sparked uproar and the restaurant closed eight months later.

And then there are chefs who fail to acknowledge a dish's ethnic origins at all -- the equivalent of whitewashing food.

The New York Times food columnist Alison Roman, also a White woman, gained internet fame for her recipe for a "Spiced Chickpea Stew with Coconut and Turmeric" -- which sounds an awful lot like an Indian or Jamaican curry. But in an interview with Jezebel, she said: "I'm like y'all, this is not a curry ... I've never made a curry." Roman's refusal to call it a curry and her denial of its ethnic background prompted critic Roxana Hadadi to call it "colonialism as cuisine."

In response to the backlash, NYT eventually added a line in Roman's recipe on their website, saying it "evokes stews found in South India and parts of the Caribbean."

But some people have pushed back against the idea of cultural appropriation.

Gatekeeping food prevents innovation, some say: for instance, fusion foods are born from chefs experimenting with different cuisines. Many also point out that food is meant to be shared, and its power is often directly tied to the communal eating experience.

Setting boundaries around food -- for example, saying only Chinese people can cook Chinese food, or Chinese food can only be cooked a certain way, as those reacting to Ng's video posit -- seems like the antithesis of this sharing spirit in our globalized world.

But sharing is different from appropriating without respect, especially when the chefs who do it profit from portraying those foods.

A reckoning in food media

The Uncle Roger video is the latest in a string of incidents that have drawn attention to issues surrounding food and culture. This summer has seen the reckoning on race and racism, embodied by the Black Lives Matter movement, spread from the streets to newsrooms and companies.

Within food media, Bon Appetit -- owned by Conde Nast -- is the best-known example. Current staffers, including assistant food editor Sohla El-Waylly, accused the company of underpaying and exploiting employees of color, and viewers called out the brand for numerous instances of food appropriation.

For instance, irate viewers pointed to the time Bon Appetit had a White chef demonstrate how to cook Vietnamese pho, with the title "PSA: This Is How You Should Be Eating Pho." There was also the time they "reinvented" the Filipino dessert Halo-halo by stuffing it with gummy bears and popcorn, spurring scorn from readers.

Each time, the brand would issue an apology and a promise to do better -- but it has been happening for years.

After this summer's explosive allegations, the company released a statement in June, acknowledging that "BA's recipes for Vietnamese pho, mumbo sauce, flaky bread, and White-guy kimchi all erased these recipes' origins or, worse, lampooned them."

"In all these cases and more, BA has been called out for appropriation, for decontextualizing recipes from non-White cultures, and for knighting 'experts' without considering if that person should, in fact, claim mastery of a cuisine that isn't theirs," wrote Joey Hernandez, BA's research director, in the statement.

The Bon Appetit debacle also prompted other questions about biases within established institutions. Who chooses what dishes get more coverage? Why do publications continue to use language that frames "ethnic" food as occasionally bizarre and often incomprehensible -- for example, Bloomberg calling tofu a "white, chewy and bland" food people are "learning to love?" Bloomberg eventually removed these phrases from their article after international backlash.

And why are "ethnic" chefs -- a euphemism for non-Whites -- often paid less? Bon Appetit fans were further outraged when Somali chef Hawa Hassan revealed last month that she was only paid \$400 per video, and El-Waylly blasted Bon Appetit for only paying her \$50,000 to "assist mostly white editors with significantly less experience than me."

These themes sound abstract at times -- but they're linked to and help perpetuate broader real-life inequalities such as workplace discrimination, pay inequity, power imbalances and prevailing Whiteness in the food world.

Ng and Patel may not have intended for their respective videos, and upcoming collaboration, to raise these questions.

But viewers' frustrations are inherently tied to the idea that there is an authentic way to cook fried rice, and that Patel's errors are made worse by the fact she is a non-Chinese chef presenting herself as an authority on the dish.

"FOR ANYONE WHO IS TRYING TO SAY THERE ARE MULTIPLE WAYS OF COOKING RICE, WELL OF COURSE THERE ARE. AND I LOVE THEM ALL," tweeted Yang, the Asian American writer. "BUT THIS IS *NOT* HOW YOU MAKE DELICIOUS FRIED RICE, THE DISH OF MY PEOPLES, THE SUBJECT OF THIS VIDEO."



Thoughts about transphobia, TERFs, and TUMFs

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photo by FreeImages.com/Patrick Moore

For many decades now, transgender communities have used the term “transphobic” as a catch-all adjective to describe language, actions, attitudes, and/or people that delegitimize or disparage us. The word certainly serves an important purpose, as it allows us to identify the many things out there that undermine or injure us. But much like other analogous terms (e.g., misogynistic, racist, homophobic, etc.), it seems to create a one-size-fits-all category that includes everything from inadvertent and relatively minor infractions, to intentional and serious attempts to dehumanize and disappear us. From a trans perspective, such a category makes some sense, as we are hurt by all of these things, whether big or small, purposeful or unintentional. But there are contexts in which such differences may be quite relevant — e.g., when considering what the appropriate activist response to a specific instance of transphobia should be.

Upon considering this, as I was writing the essay *Detransition, Desistance, and Disinformation: A Guide for Understanding Transgender Children Debates*, I used three different terms to differentiate between underlying sentiments or motives that often drive expressions of transphobia. I have found them useful on

subsequent occasions, so I recently added these terms to my online trans, gender, sexuality, & activism glossary. That new entry reads as follows:

Trans-antagonistic, Trans-suspicious, Trans-unaware: terms I have increasingly used since the mid-'10s (e.g., see here) to make distinctions between various types of anti-transgender attitudes or positions. Some expressions of transphobia stem from people simply being “trans-unaware” — i.e., uninformed (or under-informed) about transgender people and experiences. Other individuals may be downright “trans-antagonistic,” in that they are fundamentally opposed to transgender people for specific moral, political, and/or theoretical reasons. From an activist standpoint, this distinction is quite pertinent: Trans-unaware individuals tend to be “passively transphobic” (e.g., only expressing such attitudes when they come across a trans person, or when the subject is raised), and may be open to relinquishing those attitudes upon learning more about transgender lives and issues. In contrast, trans-antagonistic individuals often actively promote anti-trans agendas (e.g., policies, laws, misinformation campaigns) and are highly unlikely to be moved by outreach or education (unless, of course, they undergo a more comprehensive philosophical transformation). The “trans-suspicious” position acknowledges that transgender people exist and should be tolerated (to some degree), but routinely questions (and sometimes actively works to undermine) transgender perspectives and politics. For example, a trans-suspicious individual might treat me respectfully and refrain from misgendering me, yet simultaneously express doubt about whether certain other people are “really trans” or should be allowed to transition. While they often consider themselves to be “pro-trans” (on the basis that they tolerate us to some degree), their strong cisnormative and cissexist biases lead them to spread much of the same misinformation, and push for many of the same anti-trans policies, as their trans-antagonistic counterparts (e.g., see here). In a world where trans-antagonistic and trans-unaware attitudes are pervasive, trans-suspicious arguments tend to strike the average cisgender person as relatively “objective” or “reasonable” by comparison (although trans people readily see through this veneer).

The distinction between the trans-antagonistic and trans-suspicious positions was central to my “Detransition, Desistance, and Disinformation” essay, as I was attempting to articulate (to a largely trans-unaware audience) why trans-suspicious views from the likes of Jesse Singal and Alice Dreger (both discussed in that essay) are so invalidating from a trans perspective. While these writers tolerate trans people to some extent (e.g., they are not calling for us to be entirely

excluded from society), they clearly value cisgender identities, bodies, and perspectives over transgender ones, and they are inherently suspicious of anything transgender people say about our own lives (unless, of course, it aligns with their cisnormative presumptions). Hence, they push for many of the same policies (e.g., pro-gender-reparative therapies and anti-gender-affirming approaches to healthcare) and spread much of the same misinformation (e.g., psychological theories that have been rejected by most trans health professionals) as their trans-antagonistic counterparts, despite the fact that they seem relatively benign to outsiders.

While I did not address it in that essay, I believe that considering the distinction between trans-antagonistic and trans-unaware transphobia can also be fruitful. On the surface, these occurrences may resemble one another — they both might involve individuals misgendering me, or using certain slurs, or suggesting that I'm not a "real woman." All of these acts may feel equally invalidating to me. But from an activist perspective, it matters whether these individuals might possibly change their ways (e.g., upon learning more about transgender people and perspectives), or whether they subscribe to some overarching ideology (e.g., religious fundamentalism, TERF) that precludes transgender people and perspectives, and thus are unlikely to ever change their ways (unless they first reject the ideology in question).

This latter distinction, and its relevance to trans activism, has led me to share some recent thoughts I've had about TERFs. For those unfamiliar with that term, here is my entry on it from the aforementioned glossary:

TERFs: *an acronym for "Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists," a subgroup of radical feminists (who sometimes self-identify as "gender critical" feminists) that are strongly opposed to transgender identities, experiences, and rights. Unlike mainstream expressions of transphobia (which tend to cite religious convictions or biological determinism to support their case), TERFs typically justify their views via the following reasoning: 1) gender is merely a man-made class system designed to oppress women, and which therefore must be eliminated, 2) transgender people "buy into" and thus "reinforce" this class system, thereby undermining women and feminism, and 3) trans women constitute a specific threat because (in their eyes) we are oppressive "men" who are infiltrating women's spaces and/or appropriating women's identities and circumstances. Trans activists (including myself) have critiqued TERF positions by pointing out that they are essentialist, ignore intersectionality, and forward*

arguments that are inherently anti-feminist in other ways (see Whipping Girl, pp. 47–52, 233–245, and Outspoken, pp. 106–116; see also here). Furthermore, in Excluded (pp. 110–137), I demonstrate that their central argument — i.e., that TERFs are trying to bring an “end to gender” whereas trans people supposedly “reinforce gender” — is completely arbitrary, and exacerbates sexism rather than reducing it (as I explain here). While the label “TERF” highlights this group’s anti-trans ideology (which often manifests in harassment, doxxing, and actively fighting against trans rights), their faulty “end of gender”-versus-“reinforcing gender” logic leads them to routinely disparage other groups, including feminine women, sex-positive feminists, and sex workers (which is why TERFs are also sometimes described as SWERFs, aka Sex Worker-Exclusive Radical Feminists). Some TERFs have claimed that the word “TERF” is a slur — this ignores the fact that the acronym was created by cis radical feminists who intended it to be a neutral term, one that simply differentiates between trans-exclusive and trans-inclusive radical feminists. If the term has since accrued negative connotations, it’s simply because most contemporary feminists view trans-exclusion as invalid, and TERF rhetoric as unnecessarily disparaging.

While I am not at all sympathetic to the “TERF is a slur” accusation, I do have some concerns about how broadly this term is sometimes used today.

Specifically, I have seen it used to describe virtually any feminist (and occasionally even non-feminists) who expresses transphobia and/or attempts to exclude trans women from the category of “women.” As a trans woman, I can attest to the fact that trans woman-exclusion is invalidating and often causes real material harm to trans women (especially in institutionalized settings). But from a trans activist perspective, I don’t believe that it is in our best interest to use the term in this manner.

For one thing, when more mainstream feminists such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or Rose McGowan make comments to the effect that “trans women are not women,” it is not because they adhere to a unilateral radical feminist perspective that asserts that the goal of feminism is to bring an “end to gender,” and that trans women (as well as sex workers, feminine women, sex-positive feminists, etc.) are “reinforcing gender.” I mean, virtually nobody outside of radical feminism (and a few other radical ideologies) views trans women as “reinforcing gender.” In fact, the main reason why people in the mainstream dislike or are disturbed by trans people is because they view us as undermining (not reinforcing) binary gender norms!

Sure, if we created a Venn diagram of things radical feminists say, and things that mainstream feminists (like Adichie, McGowan, etc.) say, there would be *some* overlap. And this overlap would most certainly include sound-bites like: “women have experiences that someone like Caitlyn Jenner has never had.” (btw, if you find that justification for trans-exclusion compelling, I encourage you to read this essay.) But just because they sometimes cite similar talking points, that doesn’t make these mainstream feminists “TERFs.” I get that, for some people, “TERF” may serve as a convenient shorthand for “trans-exclusive.” But as someone who is often immersed in discussions about feminism and its various strands, I’d rather not see a fairly specific term like TERF (denoting a distinct ideology) be used as a stand-in for the far more prevalent phenomenon of trans-exclusion.

More to the point, while trans-antagonistic groups such as TERFs actively work to undermine transgender acceptance and rights in society, many of these mainstream feminists seem to be predominantly trans-unaware, and are not actively working to promote trans-exclusion. In fact, both Adichie’s and McGowan’s recent comments (which can be found via earlier links) occurred in response to a trans-specific interview question and a thoughtless public comment by Jenner, respectively — in other words, it’s the sort of “passive transphobia” that is only expressed when the subject of trans people comes up. This does not excuse their responses. After all, they could have previously educated themselves about trans feminism and the diversity of trans experiences. Or they could have admitted that they do not understand trans people and perspectives enough to weigh in on this complex subject. Indeed, many people who are trans-unaware never resort to transphobic or trans-exclusive comments, perhaps because they understand that they are not knowledgeable about trans issues and/or are reserving judgment.

Most importantly, while I cannot speak on behalf of Adichie or McGowan (as I do not know them personally), I believe that some of these other mainstream feminists will eventually come around and concur with trans-inclusion upon learning more about transgender people and experiences. In fact, ever since my Debunking “Trans Women Are Not Women” Arguments essay came out last summer (addressing many common claims, TERF or otherwise), I’ve had several women write to tell me that they appreciated the piece, and that it addressed many of their initial concerns regarding transgender people and women’s spaces.

It is hard to be a woman in this world. It is also quite difficult to be transgender. And it's easy to imagine these two groups as being comprised of entirely different sets of people. And it's easier still to caricature trans women (and trans people more generally) as being clueless about the realities of moving through the world as female, and experiencing sexism. It shouldn't fall on trans people (and us alone) to flesh out these nuances, and to painstakingly plead our case to others. But at the same time, in my experience, fleshing out all these nuances, and painstakingly explaining them, does sometimes win people over to our cause. In some cases, it may even turn people who had previously been trans-unaware into trans allies or advocates.

In the title of this essay, I forwarded a new acronym: TUMF. It stands for “Trans-Unaware Mainstream Feminists,” which I believe more accurately describes many women who make trans-exclusive comments. I don’t expect the term to catch on. And I don’t expect the “TERF is a slur” crowd to like TUMF any better. (In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if they find TUMF to be even less aesthetically pleasing than TERF!) But I very much wanted to put this general idea out into the universe. Unlike TERFs (who are fairly rare, transphobic to the core, and frankly not worth spending the energy trying to convince), there are a lot of TUMFs out there, many of whom are uninformed and acting on a “gut level.” Many of them may be swayable. Perhaps if we start thinking about the distinction between trans-antagonistic and trans-unaware transphobia, and between TERFs and TUMFs, we can win some of the latter people over.

Note added 10–12–19: In a follow up piece entitled Putting the “Transgender Activists Versus Feminists” Debate to Rest, I discuss a more recent and related trend, namely, social conservatives who increasingly appropriate TERF talking points and rhetoric in order to make their extreme trans-antagonistic views appear more palatable to the general public.

This essay was made possible by my Patreon supporters — if you liked this piece and want to see more like it, please consider supporting me there. You can learn more about my writings and activism at juliasherano.com.

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Trans Black Lives Matter protester suffers shattered jaw after thugs beat him mercilessly

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In the latest flare-up amid the Black Lives Matter protests continuing to seize major US cities, a Black trans man was left with his jaw and eye socket shattered after two men brutally beat him up.

Samson Tequir, 30, who helps organise demonstrations in Rochester, New York, was assailed last Friday afternoon (July 31), law enforcement said.

Surveillance footage from a nearby storefront captured the rattling moment when two males hurl anti-LGBT+ slurs at Tequir outside Big Town Grocery at Denver Street and Parsells Avenue on the city's east side, then, while walking home with bags of groceries, everything went dark.

He was unconscious. Medics said he was likely struck more than once. Tequir awoke to the sounds of his friend yelling, the dialling of police.

Tequir, now wearing a black eyepatch in his home, told Democrat & Chronicle that, following the attack, he now needs titanium plates inserted to repair a broken eye socket and suffered multiple fractures to his cheekbone.

Male 2: Wearing a white tank top, dark shorts, and a white shirt on his head.

If you know the males, please call **CrimeStoppers** 423-9300.

CASH REWARD @CrimeStoppersK9 @SPECNewsROC
@news10nbc @13WHAM @WHAM1180 @News_8
pic.twitter.com/jD1lSCVDRh

— Patrol_Section_Investigations_RPD (@RPD_PSI) August 1, 2020

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Uighur model sends rare video from Chinese detention

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An image sent by Merden Ghappar appears to show him handcuffed in a cell

Merdan Ghappar was used to posing for the camera.

As a model for the massive Chinese online retailer Taobao, the 31-year-old was well paid to flaunt his good looks in slick promotional videos for clothing brands.

But one video of Mr Ghappar is different. Instead of a glitzy studio or fashionable city street, the backdrop is a bare room with grubby walls and steel mesh on the window. And in place of the posing, Mr Ghappar sits silently with

an anxious expression on his face.

Holding the camera with his right hand, he reveals his dirty clothes, his swollen ankles, and a set of handcuffs fixing his left wrist to the metal frame of the bed - the only piece of furniture in the room.



The video Uighur model Mergan Ghappar filmed inside China's detention system.

The video of Mr Ghappar, along with a number of accompanying text messages also passed to the BBC, together provide a chilling and extremely rare first-hand account of China's highly secure and secretive detention system - sent directly from the inside.

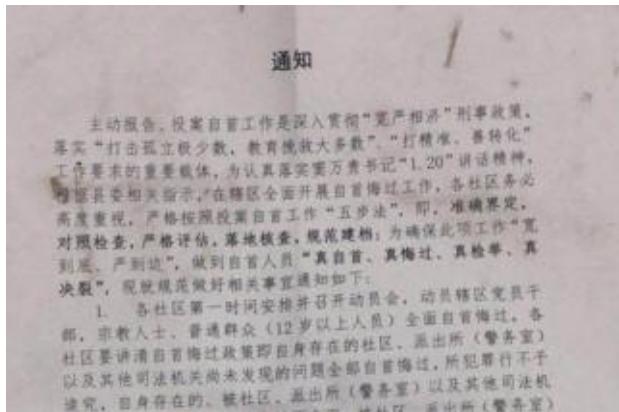
The material adds to the body of evidence documenting the impact of China's fight against what it calls the "three evil forces" of separatism, terrorism, and extremism in the country's far western region of Xinjiang.

Over the past few years, credible estimates suggest, more than one million Uighurs and other minorities have been forced into a network of highly secure camps in Xinjiang that China has insisted are voluntary schools for anti-extremism training.

Thousands of children have been separated from their parents and, recent research shows, women have been forcibly subjected to methods of birth control.

In addition to the clear allegations of torture and abuse, Mr Ghappar's account appears to provide evidence that, despite China's insistence that most re-education camps have been closed, Uighurs are still being detained in significant numbers and held without charge.

It also contains new details about the huge psychological pressure placed on Uighur communities, including a document he photographed which calls on children as young as 13 to "repent and surrender".



Part of a document sent by Merdan Ghappar calling on children to 'repent and surrender'

And with Xinjiang currently experiencing a spike in the number of coronavirus infections, the dirty and crowded conditions he describes highlight the serious risk of contagion posed by this kind of mass detention during a global pandemic.

The BBC sent detailed requests for comment to the Chinese Foreign Ministry and Xinjiang authorities but neither responded.

Mr Ghappar's family, who have not heard from him since the messages stopped five months ago, are aware that the release of the four minute, thirty-eight second video of him in his cell might increase the pressure and punishment he faces.

But they say it is their last hope, both to highlight his case and the plight of the

Uighurs in general.

His uncle, Abdulhakim Ghappar, who now lives in the Netherlands, believes the video could galvanise public opinion in the same way that footage of the police treatment of George Floyd became a powerful symbol of racial discrimination in the US.

"They have both faced brutality for their race," he says.

"But while in America people are raising their voices, in our case there is silence."

In 2009, Merdan Ghappar - like many Uighurs at that time - left Xinjiang to seek opportunity in China's wealthier cities in the east.

Having studied dance at Xinjiang Arts University, he found work first as a dancer and then, a few years later, as a model in the southern Chinese city of Foshan. Friends say Mr Ghappar could earn up to 10,000 Rmb (£1,000) per day.

His story reads like an advert for the country's dynamic, booming economy and President Xi Jinping's "China Dream". But the Uighurs, with their Turkic language, Islamic faith and ethnic ties to the peoples and cultures of central Asia, have long been viewed as an object of suspicion by Chinese rulers and faced discrimination in wider society.

Mr Ghappar's relatives say that Mr Ghappar was told it would be best for his modelling career to downplay his Uighur identity and refer to his facial features as "half-European".



Merden Chappar moved from Xinjiang in 2009 to pursue a modelling career

And although he had earned enough money to buy a sizeable apartment, they say he was unable to register it in his own name, instead having to use the name of a Han Chinese friend.

But those injustices now seem mild by comparison with what was to come.

Ever since two brutal attacks targeting pedestrians and commuters in Beijing in 2013 and the city of Kunming in 2014 - blamed by China on Uighur separatists - the state has begun to view Uighur culture as not only suspicious but seditious.

By 2018, when the state had come up with its answer - the sprawling system of camps and jails built rapidly and extensively across Xinjiang - Mr Ghappar was still living in Foshan, where his life was about to take an abrupt turn for the worse.

In August that year, he was arrested and sentenced to 16 months in prison for selling cannabis, a charge his friends insist was trumped up.

Whether truly guilty or not, there was little chance of an acquittal, with statistics showing that more than 99% of defendants brought before Chinese criminal courts are convicted.



Up to a million Muslims are thought to have been detained in prison camps across Xinjiang

But, upon his release in November 2019, any relief he felt at having served his time was short lived. Little more than a month later, police knocked on his door, telling him he needed to return to Xinjiang to complete a routine registration procedure.

The BBC has seen evidence that appears to show he was not suspected of any further offence, with authorities simply stating that "he may need to do a few days of education at his local community" - a euphemism for the camps.

On 15 January this year, his friends and family were allowed to bring warm clothes and his phone to the airport, before he was put on a flight from Foshan and escorted by two officers back to his home city of Kucha in Xinjiang.

There is evidence of other Uighurs being forced to return home, either from elsewhere in China or from abroad, and Mr Ghappar's family were convinced that he had disappeared into the re-education camps.

But more than a month later they received some extraordinary news.

Somehow, he had managed to get access to his phone and was using it to communicate with the outside world.

Merdan Ghappar's text messages, said to have been sent from the same room as his self-shot video, paint an even more terrifying picture of his experience after arriving in Xinjiang.

Written via the Chinese social media app WeChat, he explains that he was first kept in a police jail in Kucha.

"I saw 50 to 60 people detained in a small room no bigger than 50 square metres, men on the right, women on the left," he writes.

"Everyone was wearing a so-called 'four-piece-suit', a black head sack, handcuffs, leg shackles and an iron chain connecting the cuffs to the shackles."

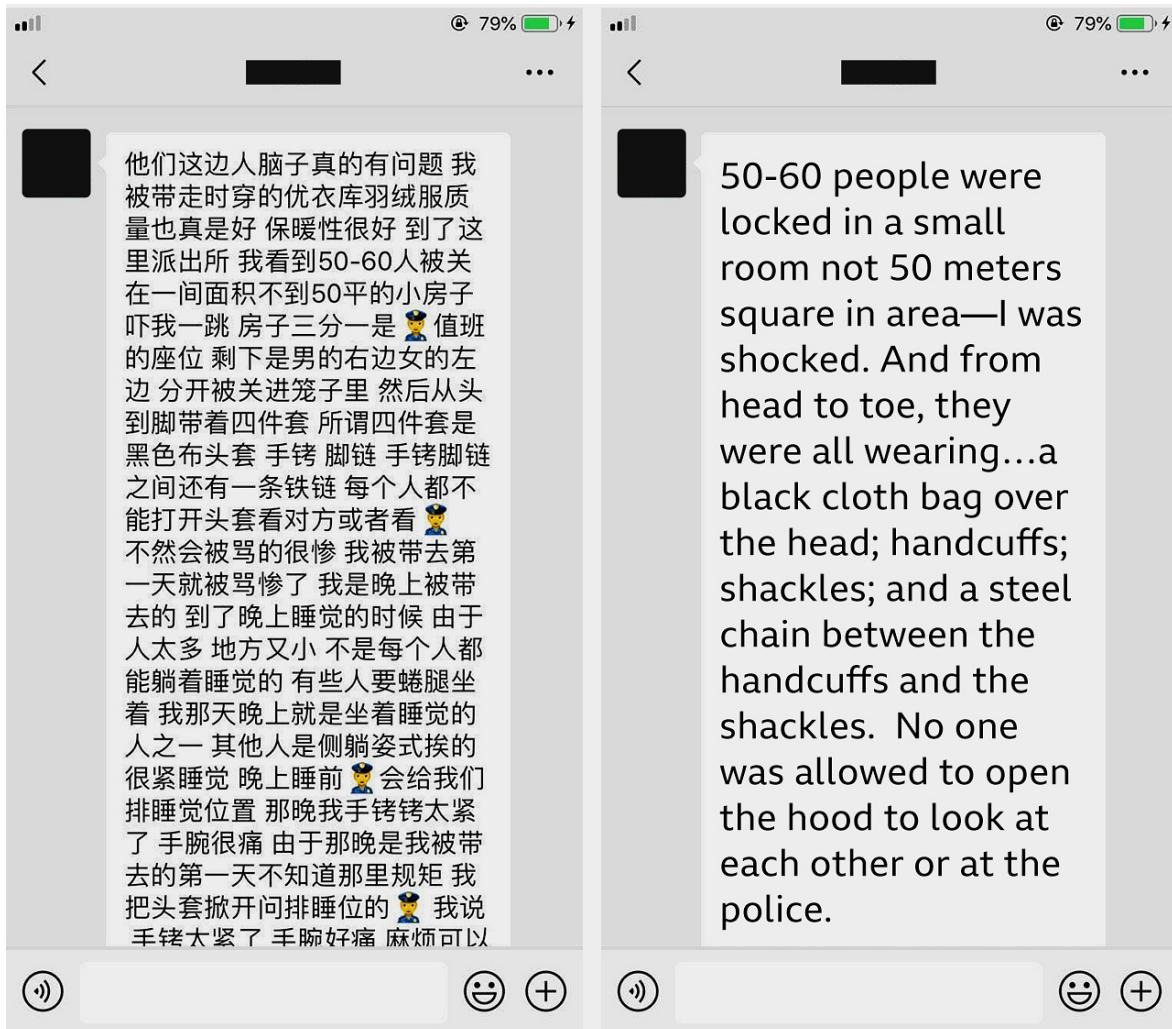
China's use of these combined hand and leg cuffs has been criticised in the past by human rights groups.

Mr Ghappar was made to wear the device and, joining his fellow inmates in a caged-off area covering around two-thirds of the cell, he found there was no room to lie down and sleep.

"I lifted the sack on my head and told the police officer that the handcuffs were so tight they hurt my wrists," he writes in one of the text messages.

"He shouted fiercely at me, saying 'If you remove your hood again, I will beat you to death'. And after that I dared not to talk," he adds.

"Dying here is the last thing I want."



He writes about the constant sound of screaming, coming from elsewhere in the jail. "Interrogation rooms," he suggested.

And he describes squalid and unsanitary conditions - inmates suffering from lice while sharing just a handful of plastic bowls and spoons between them all.

"Before eating, the police would ask people with infectious diseases to put their hands up and they'd be the last to eat," he writes.

"But if you want to eat earlier, you can remain silent. It's a moral issue, do you understand?"

Then, on the 22 January, with China at the height of its coronavirus crisis, news of the massive, nationwide attempt to control the epidemic reached the prisoners.

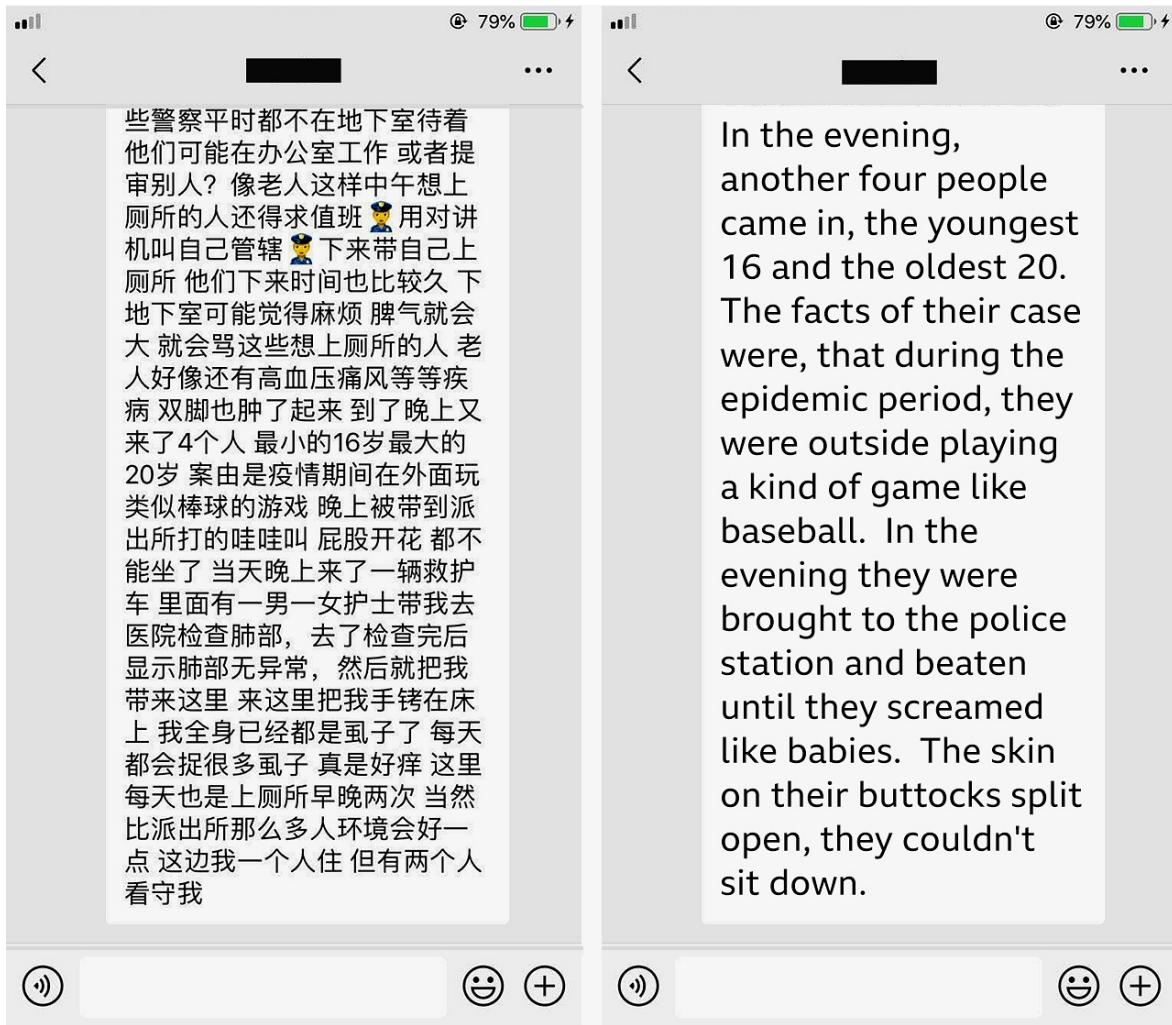
Mr Ghappar's account suggests the enforcement of quarantine rules were much stricter in Xinjiang than elsewhere. At one point, four young men were brought into the cell aged between 16 and 20.

"During the epidemic period they were found outside playing a kind of game like baseball," he writes.

"They were brought to the police station and beaten until they screamed like babies, the skin on their buttocks split open and they couldn't sit down."

The policemen began making all the prisoners wear masks, although they still had to remain hooded in the stuffy, over-crowded cell.

"A hood and a mask - there was even less air," he writes.



When the officers later came around with thermometers, several inmates including Mr Ghappar, registered higher than the normal body temperature of 37C (98.6F).

Still wearing his "four-piece suit", he was moved upstairs to another room where the guards kept the windows open at night, making the air so cold that he could not sleep.

There, he said, the sounds of torture were much clearer.

"One time I heard a man screaming from morning until evening," he says.

A few days later, the prisoners were loaded onto minibuses and sent away to an unknown location. Mr Ghappar, who was suffering from a cold and with his

nose running, was separated from the rest and taken to the facility seen in the video he sent - a place he described as an "epidemic control centre". Once there, he was handcuffed to the bed.

"My whole body is covered in lice. Every day I catch them and pick them off from my body - it's so itchy," he writes.

"Of course, the environment here is better than the police station with all those people. Here I live alone, but there are two people guarding me."

It was the slightly more relaxed regime that gave him, he says, the opportunity he needed to get word out. His phone appears to have remained unnoticed by the authorities among his personal belongings, some of which he was given access to in his new place of imprisonment.

After 18 days inside the police jail, he was suddenly and secretly in touch with the outside world.

For a few days he described his experiences. Then, suddenly, the messages stopped.

Nothing has been heard from Mr Ghappar since. The authorities have provided no formal notification of his whereabouts, nor any reason for his continued detention.

It is impossible to independently verify the authenticity of the text messages. But experts say that the video footage appears to be genuine, in particular because of the propaganda messages that can be heard in the background.

"Xinjiang has never been an 'East Turkistan'", says an announcement in both Uighur and Chinese from a loudspeaker outside his window.

"Separatist forces at home and abroad have politicised this geographical term and called for those who speak Turkic languages and believe in Islam to unite," the announcement says.

James Millward, a professor of history at Georgetown University and an expert

on China's policies in Xinjiang, translated and analysed Mr Ghappar's text messages for the BBC.

He says they are consistent with other well documented cases, from his transportation back to Xinjiang and the initial processing in crowded, unsanitary conditions.

"This firsthand description of the police holding cell is very, very vivid," Professor Millward says.

"He writes in very good Chinese and gives, frankly, a lot of horrific detail about the way these people are treated. So, it's quite a rare source."

Dr Adrian Zenz, a senior fellow in China studies at the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, and another leading Xinjiang scholar, suggests that the video's real value is what it says about the Chinese government claim that the camp system is being wound down.

"It is extremely significant," Dr Zenz says. "This testimony shows that the whole system of detaining people, sorting them and then feeding them into extra judicial internment... that this is very much ongoing."



China's ambassador: "There is no such concentration camp in Xinjiang"

Another layer of credibility is provided by a photograph of a document that sources say Mr Ghappar sent after finding it on the floor of one of the epidemic control centre toilets.

The document refers to a speech made by the Communist Party Secretary of Aksu Prefecture, and the date and location suggest it could well have still been circulating in official circles in the city of Kucha around the time of Mr Ghappar's detention.

The document's call for children as young as 13 to be encouraged to "repent for their mistakes and voluntarily surrender" appears to be new evidence of the extent of China's monitoring and control of the thoughts and behaviours of the Uighurs and other minorities.

"I think this is the first time I've seen an official notice of minors being held responsible for their religious activity," says Dr Darren Byler, an anthropologist at the University of Colorado, Boulder who has researched and written extensively about the Uighurs.

Despite the risk that the publication of Merdan Ghappar's video and text messages will put him at risk of longer or harsher punishment, those close to him say they no longer have any choice.

"Staying silent will not help him either," says his uncle, Abdulhakim Ghappar, from his home in Amsterdam.



Demonstrators in Paris hold signs calling for an end to the Uighur "genocide"

Abdulhakim says he kept in regular touch with his nephew before he was taken into detention, and he believes - as has been well documented in other cases - that this overseas connection is one of the reasons Mr Ghappar was detained.

"Yes, I am 100% sure about it," he said. "He was detained just because I am abroad and I take part in protests against Chinese human rights abuses."

Abdulhakim's activism, which began in 2009 in Xinjiang when he helped hand out flyers ahead of a large-scale protest in the city of Urumqi, was the reason he fled to the Netherlands in the first place.

The protest in Urumqi later spilled into a series of violent riots which, Chinese authorities say, claimed nearly 200 lives and are seen as another one of the major turning points towards its tightening control over the region.

Told that the Chinese authorities were seeking his arrest, Abdulhakim got himself a passport and left. He has never been back.

He insists that all of his political activities, both inside China and abroad, have been peaceful, and his nephew, he says, has never shown any interest in politics at all.

The list of questions sent by the BBC to the Chinese authorities asked them to confirm whether Merdan Ghappar or his uncle are suspected of any crime in China.

It also asked why Mr Ghappar was shackled to a bed, and for a response from the authorities to his other allegations of mistreatment and torture.

None of the questions was answered.

Wherever Merdan Ghappar is now, one thing is clear.

Whether his earlier conviction for a drugs offence was just or not, his current detention is proof that even well-educated and relatively successful Uighurs can become a target of the internment system.

"This young man, as a fashion model, has a successful career already," said Professor Millward. "He speaks wonderful Chinese, writes very well and uses fancy phrases, so clearly this is not someone who needs education for a vocational purpose."

Dr Adrian Zenz argues that this is the point of the system.

"It doesn't actually matter so much what the background of the person is," he says.

"What matters is that their loyalty has been tested by the system. At some point almost everybody is going to experience some form of internment or re-education, everybody is going to be subjected to this system."

The Chinese government denies that it is persecuting the Uighur population. After heavy criticism over the issue recently from the US, a spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry, Hua Chunying, invoked the death of George Floyd, saying that Uighurs in Xinjiang were free in comparison to African Americans in the US.

But for Merdan Ghappar's family, haunted by the image of him chained to a bed in an unknown location, there is a connection between the two cases.

"When I saw the George Floyd video it reminded me of my nephew's own video," says Merdan's uncle Abdulhakim.

"The entire Uighur people are just like George Floyd now," he says. "We can't breathe."

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