

Podcast Citations in US Election Rumors on Twitter

Podcasts, misleading information, cross-platform, Twitter, computational social science

Extended Abstract

As research on rumors, false and misleading narratives, and other forms of problematic information online has demonstrated, one revealing phenomena observed in misinformation-centered communities is their unified work to cite various forms of misleading evidence to buttress their beliefs, causes, and theories [1]. These forms of evidence vary from disproved testimonies from individuals alleging ballot stuffing to selective citation and misleading framing of scientific articles. A growing body of research investigates the spread and impacts of using these types of “evidence”, yet significant gaps exist. To date, this work has largely overlooked non-textual evidence and platforms. In this work we look at the use of podcasts—online, episodic, talk radio [2, 3]—as evidence in discussion of election-related rumors in the United States (US). The knowledge gap about the role podcasts may play in this phenomena is notable, as podcasts have wide listenership in the US: 41% of Americans over 12 listen to podcasts at least monthly and 25% rely on them for news [4]. Moreover, compared with other major platforms, podcasts go largely unmoderated by their largest providers, making space for individuals to amplify rumors without the risk of sanction [3]. Lastly, podcasts are distinct in their positioning and interaction with audiences, offering an intimate way for speakers to connect with listeners. Hosts curate and synthesize information and interview their selected guests, often lending an air of journalistic or researcher expertise. While this in itself isn’t unique—one could write a blog with similar outcomes—the spoken format helps hosts (and their guests) create a parasocial relationship with listeners, exploiting the theorized human predisposition to believe someone you *hear* more than something you read [5]. This research explores if and how podcasts were cited by online accounts generating and spreading false and misleading US election information on Twitter. We compare behaviors in 2020 and 2022, offering longitudinal perspective into this domain’s changing information ecosystem.

To explore the use of podcasts as evidence, we used a dataset collected and curated by the Election Integrity Partnership (EIP) [6]. The data encompasses 3.5 billion tweets related to false and misleading stories around election integrity and procedures spreading on Twitter about the 2020 US election. Every tweet in this data set is tied (categorized) to at least one specific misleading narrative (*e.g.* Dominion Voting System machines were rigged to elect Joe Biden). We selected tweets containing “podcast” or “listen” and “episode” to capture content promoting or referring to podcasts within this set. We then identified which narratives these podcasts were largely being used to promote. To compare across years, we repeated the analysis on a similarly curated dataset from the 2022 midterm election, again collected and curated as part of the EIP’s election rapid response project. It is important to note that significantly less election-related rumors spread on Twitter in 2022, likely the combined results of less national engagement over midterms, platform migration, and Twitter’s deplatforming of accounts.

In analyzing the data, we found 27,534 tweets, retweets (RTs), quote tweets (QTs), and replies that referred to or responded to podcasts in 2020 election rumors captured by the EIP. Podcasts were mentioned in, engaged with, or otherwise tied to 73 unique rumors. Most of these tweets—23,488—used podcasts to promote misinformation about Dominion Voting Systems (DVS). 75.87% of these tweets were retweets of a post from 8kun co-founder, Ron

Watkins, an event which heavily skewed these data, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. Watkins misconstrues Fontes' comments, however, even without the Watkins post, DVS was the focus of podcasts and reposts (RTs and/or QTs) (81.46% of the data). Aside from DVS, podcasts were prevalent in the "Stop the Steal" narrative and to prop up rumors that the Hammer and Scorecard voting technologies company was also corrupted in the Democratic Party's favor.

We identified 183 tweets, RTs, QTs, and replies that referred to or responded to podcasts in the 2022 election rumors captured by the EIP. Podcasts were referenced in 30 unique narratives. 61% were RTs and/or QTs, a drop from 2020. The most reposted tweet in this data was a promotion for an episode of "The Weekend Recap Podcast", a far-right podcast by the Gateway Pundit (the tweet was pushed by multiple bot-like accounts). This accounted for 32% of all of the tweets in 2022 data, and was categorized by the EIP as supporting the false narrative that the polls were being stuffed with fake ballots in Texas. The tweet additionally advertised discussion of two other election-related conspiracies. As a result of the promotion of this podcast episode, podcasts were most heavily cited when promoting the conspiracy theory that ballot padding was occurring in Texas. This aside, podcasts were next most used to promote rumors about suspiciously defective voting equipment in a contested voting district in Arizona (25 tweets), and to drive skepticism about the safety of ballot drop boxes in Los Angeles, CA (19 tweets).

Our analyses suggest that podcasts were cited by accounts spreading a variety of misleading election information on Twitter in 2020 and 2022. We noted that the most reposted tweet used a direct quote from a guest on a podcast as "evidence" of election fraud, using audio media as a primary source. Some tweets promoted conspiratorial podcasts as reliable news hubs, framing their content as secondary sources. Further work examining how podcasts are used as primary and secondary sources will help underline which attributes make podcasts a desirable source to cite when building misleading election narratives. Overall, this work helps establish that content from podcasts were incorporated into misleading U.S. election narratives on Twitter by their framers, and Twitter was used to advertise misleading podcasts. Though more research is needed, this work suggests that those promoting misleading see podcasts as a compelling resource to be used to achieve their ends.

References

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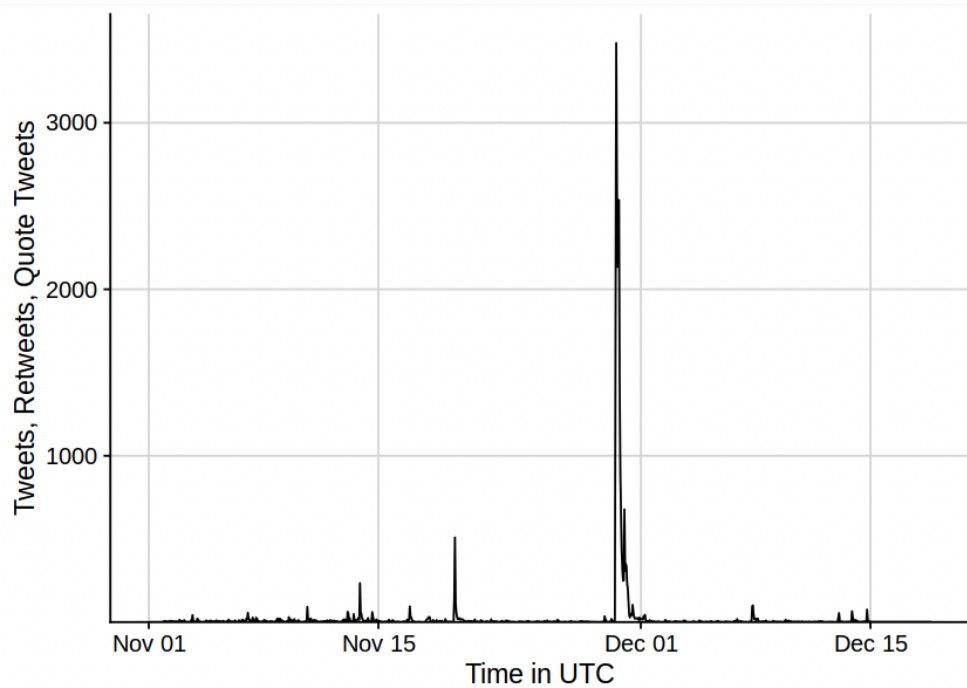


Figure 1: Number of Twitter posts referring to podcasts per hour, November 1st, 2020 to December 15th, 2020. The large spike corresponds to the prolific reposting of the Watkins tweet.

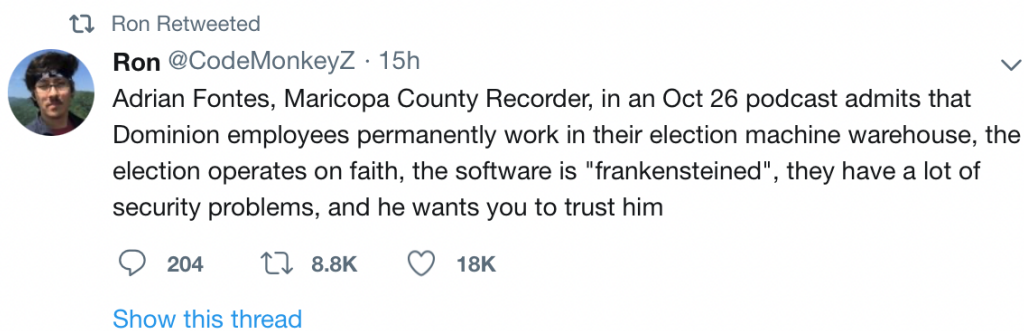


Figure 2: Screenshot of the widely retweeted post from Ron Watkins. Here, Watkins uses a quote from a podcast interview with Adrian Fontes as a primary source in the construction of the misleading narrative that the 2020 election was stolen.