

W

CENTER FOR AN INFORMED PUBLIC

UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON



2020

YEAR IN REVIEW

BUILDING A NEW MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH CENTER DURING A PANDEMIC



When 2020 got underway a year ago, the **Center for an Informed Public** was officially only a few weeks old. “If we care about common goals — things like safe communities, justice, equal opportunity — we have to care also about facts, truth and accuracy,” **University of Washington President Ana Mari Cauce**, pictured above shaking hands with **Washington State University President Kirk Schulz**, said during the CIP’s Dec. 3, 2019 launch event on UW’s Seattle campus. “Misinformation can be weaponized. It has been weaponized to divide us and to weaken us.” Looking back on a tumultuous year, Cauce’s words that day were especially prescient.

For all those assembled on stage that day, it was impossible to know just how much the world would change in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic and just how vital the CIP’s mission and work to resist strategic misinformation, promote an informed society and strengthen democratic discourse would be during what ended up being an incredibly tumultuous, uncertain and challenging year.

Early in 2020, as the COVID-19 crisis was rapidly turning into a far-reaching pandemic, building a new multi-disciplinary research center at the University of Washington necessitated shifting to remote work and research collaboration and quickly adapting planned in-person events for virtual engagement, all the while helping to bring clarity and informed expertise to a confusing time clouded by rampant misinformation.

Looking back at the work we did in 2020 supporting our four founding Research, Education, Engagement and Law & Policy pillars, the Center for an Informed Public's five cofounders and principal investigators — **Ryan Calo**, a School of Law professor; **Chris Coward**, an iSchool senior principal research scientist and director of the Technology & Social Change Group; **Emma Spiro**, an iSchool associate professor; **Kate Starbird**, a Human Centered Design & Engineering associate professor, and **Jevin West**, an iSchool associate professor and the CIP's inaugural director) — and the rest of the CIP's team, including staff, affiliated faculty members and researchers, postdoctoral scholars, PhD and graduate students and undergraduate research assistants, were able to accomplish a lot during a busy year while expanding our reach and helping to build a strong foundation for the CIP's continued future growth and impact.

As we continue to pursue our work and mission to resist misinformation and create a more informed public, the following report provides an overview of key highlights and accomplishments from the previous year.

FIRST-YEAR GROWTH



Despite a tumultuous year that saw the COVID-19 pandemic disrupt plans for in-person events, programs and initiatives for so many organizations, the Center for an Informed Public saw tremendous growth during 2020 and a deep level of interest in our work and mission to resist strategic misinformation, promote an informed society, and strengthen democratic discourse.

This past winter, the CIP hired and onboarded three professional staff members to help support the center's mission, operations, research activities and engagement efforts with the public: **Julia Carter Scanlan**, director of strategy and operations; **Paul Lockaby**, senior data engineer; and **Michael Grass**, communications manager.

One of the CIP's early research efforts was purchasing and setting up special servers that would allow us to collect more than 6.5 billion tweets across 12 distinct collections this past year,

including tweets related COVID-19 and social justice protests following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, more than 12 terabytes of raw, compressed data. The CIP's tweet collections are vital for misinformation research associated with [two COVID-19 rapid-response funding grants](#) secured this spring: An approximately \$200,000 grant from the **National Science Foundation** and a \$20,000 grant from the **UW Population Health Initiative**.

The CIP's tweet collection efforts and technical expertise were important contributions to the **Election Integrity Partnership**, [a nonpartisan research consortium](#) we helped stand up this summer with **Stanford Internet Observatory**, **Graphika** and the **Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research Lab**, an effort that identified, tracked and responded to voting-specific dis- and misinformation during the U.S. elections. The work of the EIP and the CIP's contributions to the research consortium saw significant national and international media attention and helped provide timely and vital research insights to evolving social media narratives, conspiracy theories and how social media platforms responded to dis- and misinformation. The EIP's final report on dis- and misinformation in the 2020 U.S. elections, which includes chapters written by the CIP's research team, is anticipated for release in the coming weeks.

In our first year, we welcomed CIP faculty members **Carl Bergstrom**, a Department of Biology professor; **Mary Fan**, a School of Law professor; **Franziska Roesner**, a Paul G. Allen School of Computer Science & Engineering associate professor; **Tanu Mitra**, an iSchool assistant professor; research fellow **Jason Young**, an iSchool senior research scientist; and our first cohort of CIP postdoctoral scholars, **Joe Bak-Coleman**, **Kolina Koltai** and **Rachel Moran**. Our postdocs hit the ground running this summer, launched weekly CIP lab meetings, jumpstarted an invited speaker series, and were instrumental in the CIP's research contributions to the Election Integrity Partnership.

During 2020, CIP principal investigators, faculty and other researchers published 13 articles and other research papers, with numerous others in the pipeline. Among 2020's research and publications highlights:

- **Tom Wilson** and **Kate Starbird**. "[Cross-platform disinformation campaigns: lessons learned and next steps](#)." *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, January 2020.
- **Eric Zeng**, **Tadayoshi Kohno**, and **Franziska Roesner**. "[Bad News: Clickbait and Deceptive Ads on News and Misinformation Websites](#)." *Workshop on Technology and Consumer Protection (ConPro)*, May 2020.
- **Kate Starbird**, **Emma Spiro**, and **Kolina Koltai**. "[Review of Misinformation and Public Health Crises](#)." *MediaWell*, Social Science Research Council, June 2020.

- **Carl Bergstrom** and **Jevin West**. [*Calling Bullshit: The Art of Skepticism in a Data-Driven World*](#), Random House, August 2020.
- **Melinda McClure Haughey**, **Meena Devii Muralikumar**, **Cameron Wood**, and **Kate Starbird**. "[On the Misinformation Beat: Understanding the Work of Investigative Journalists Reporting on Problematic Information Online.](#)" *Proceedings of the ACM Human Computer Interaction*, October 2020.
- **Jason Young**, **Brandyn Boyd**, **Katya Yefimova**, **Stacey Wedlake**, **Chris Coward** and **Rolf Hapel**. "[The Role of Libraries in Misinformation Programming: A Research Agenda.](#)" *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, October 2020.

The CIP's growth in 2020 was in part fueled by enthusiastic interest in research from students across the University of Washington. Twenty-six UW students participated in CIP-led Directed Research Groups during Spring Quarter, working on a variety of projects, including helping to build an interactive Spot the Deepfakes quiz that was released in September. The CIP's Election Integrity Partnership research team included approximately 20 UW PhD students, graduate students and undergraduate research assistants from the **Information School**, **Department of Human Centered Design & Engineering**, **School of Law**, **Department of Political Science**, **Department of Sociology** and the **Paul G. Allen School of Computer Science & Engineering**.

INFORMING POLICY DISCUSSION AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Increasing attention on misinformation in 2020, especially timely given the COVID-19 pandemic and the U.S. elections, put the CIP and our researchers in a good position to help inform journalists, decision-makers and the public at large through numerous interviews, articles, panel discussions and educational programming. CIP-affiliated faculty, researchers and students were interviewed or featured in articles or news segments more than 325 times in 2020, including publications and news organizations like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Seattle Times*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Politico*, NBC News, National Public Radio, BBC News, *Science* and *MIT Technology Review*, just to name a few.

CIP researchers participated in numerous conference presentations and other research panels hosted by organizations including the **National Science Foundation**, **Conference on Computer-Supported Work**, the **Association of Internet Researchers**, **Social Science**

Research Council, Interdisciplinary Association for Population Health Science, and the Academic Data Science Alliance, among others.

In April, CIP cofounder and UW School of Law professor **Ryan Calo** testified in the **U.S. Senate's** first so-called "paper hearing," on "[Enlisting Big Data in the Fight Against Coronavirus](#)," hosted by the **Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation**. On state-level policy, the CIP has advised Washington state legislators on S.B. 6513, which would restrict the use of "deepfake" audio or visual media in campaigns for elective office.

The CIP, in partnership with **Microsoft's Defending Democracy Program**, hosted a series of workshops this summer that examined the threats and policy challenges posed by synthetic media known as "deepfakes." Our work to better understand deepfakes and inform the public about the risks led to the creation of an online [Spot the Deepfakes quiz](#), which was released in September and has been played more than 25,000 times, and a white paper, "[Deepfakes in the 2020 Elections and Beyond: Lessons from the 2020 Workshops](#)."

Over the course of 2020, the CIP collaborated with **KUOW Public Radio** in Seattle on "[Who Can We Trust?](#)" a live event discussion hosted in January at **Town Hall Seattle** and then in the spring, "[Stand With the Facts](#)," a virtual event series hosted by KUOW's **Kim Malcolm**. The series first focused on COVID-19 misinformation and was reprised in the fall to look at misinformation related to the U.S. elections. CIP-affiliated researchers, including **Jevin West, Kate Starbird, Rachel Moran** and **Kolina Koltai**, were regularly interviewed about misinformation-related issues during "**The Record With Bill Radke**."

Although plans for a statewide roadshow misinformation awareness tour had to be put on hold due to the pandemic, the CIP hosted "[Surviving the Infodemic](#)," a virtual event discussion, in partnership with **Washington State University** in April, that provided incredibly timely and valuable insights about the novel coronavirus and how to seek out authoritative and trustworthy COVID-19 news and information.

In June, the CIP launched **News & Insights**, [an email newsletter](#) to promote our virtual events and programming, share updates, recent news and timely insights into research about dis- and misinformation, digital literacy and other issues related to creating a more informed public. In the six months since we jump-started News & Insights, our newsletter has nearly 2,000 subscribers. Our Facebook and Twitter follower counts continue to steadily increase as well.

WORK BUILT AROUND COLLABORATION

So much of our work at the Center for an Informed Public in 2020 wouldn't have been possible without ongoing collaborations with partners across the University of Washington, Washington State University and beyond. That's been especially true for our work with the Election Integrity Partnership this fall, where rapid-response voting-specific dis- and misinformation research done in partnership with other academic institutions and the private sector could be used as a model for future research collaborations.

We've been especially excited by the ongoing development of K-12 misinformation awareness educational programming that was inspired by **MisinfoDay**, [an event designed for high school students, teachers and librarians](#) launched at the UW iSchool in 2019 and now part of the CIP's educational program offerings. Although our planned in-person MisinfoDay 2020, slated for March, was canceled due to COVID-19, it was retooled into [a webinar tailored for high school teachers and librarians](#) interested in incorporating misinformation awareness and digital literacy skills into their classroom work. Inspired by MisinfoDay, a group of Washington state high school teachers and librarians launched a new group this summer, **Teachers for an Informed Public**, which has been busy in recent months developing and testing out new classroom lessons built around misinformation awareness and digital survival skills. In October, [a virtual MisinfoNight](#) at **Ballard High School** in Seattle drew approximately 300 students, parents and teachers. The CIP is excited to support this work and plans are underway to host a virtual MisinfoDay 2021 for hundreds of students in March.

Through a partnership with **AARP Washington** and **BECU**, the CIP helped develop "**Sorting Fact from Fiction**," a four-part series of virtual lectures this fall that explored fact-checking tips, how to avoid scammers and techniques to spot misinformation. The "Sorting Fact from Fiction" series was also developed into a special KING-5 "[New Day Northwest](#)" special program, featuring discussions with the CIP's Jevin West and Kate Starbird. The program was aired on KING-5 in Seattle and rebroadcast on NBC affiliates in Portland and Spokane, nearly 1.6 million combined impressions. Hundreds of AARP members in Washington state not only tuned in for the virtual lecture series but also signed up for a new **AARP Factcheck Ambassador** training program [launched in partnership with the CIP](#), where volunteers were taught additional misinformation awareness skills they can use spot questionable content being shared online and how to respond to it.

The CIP's **Carl Bergstrom** and **Jevin West**, whose book, [Calling Bullshit: The Art of Skepticism in a Data-Driven World](#), was released in August, teamed up with the **Pacific Science Center** in Seattle to develop two virtual exhibits related to misinformation, "[Facts in the Time of](#)

[COVID-19](#)" and "[Uncovering Reality](#)," which looked at the common ways data visualizations can be mistakenly distorted or intentionally manipulated. Bergstrom and West also joined the Pacific Science Center for [a virtual Science in the City discussion](#) about their book and misinformation awareness.

Although COVID-19 forced the CIP to pause work on a planned in-person **Community Labs** partnership with the **King County Library System**, our work with the library community in 2020 included the CIP teaming up with Washington State University to host a misinformation education and resources webinar for members of the **Washington Library Association**. The CIP's **Chris Coward** also participated in a **TEDx** talk hosted by **Sno-Isle Libraries** about "[Unmasking Misinformation](#)."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



As we start 2021, the Center for an Informed Public would like to express our gratitude for the support we've received from our funders, the University of Washington and so many individuals and organizations involved in various ways to help the CIP get off the ground and flourish in the previous year.

Launching the CIP wouldn't have been possible without the generous financial support from the **John S. and James L. Knight Foundation**, the **William and Flora Hewlett Foundation** and other funding from the **University of Washington Office of the Provost**, the **UW Information School** and the **Technology & Social Change Group**.

Since the CIP's launch, we've received philanthropic contributions from generous individuals in support of our work. In addition, we've pursued and secured funding to support our work from the **National Science Foundation**, **UW Population Health Initiative**, **AARP Washington**, **BECU**, **Craig Newmark Philanthropies**, **Omidyar Network**, **Microsoft** and the **Social Science Research Council**. We're grateful for their support.

We'd like to thank University of Washington **President Ana Mari Cauce** and **Provost Mark Richards** for their steadfast support of our mission and the research that helps us better understand the impacts of strategic misinformation, how it's shared and amplified and ways we can create a more informed public.

We'd like to recognize the work of the CIP's Oversight Committee — **Carole Palmer** (chair), associate dean for research, **iSchool**; **Jihui Yang** (incoming chair), vice dean, **College of Engineering**; **Steve Majeski**, senior associate dean for research and infrastructure, **College of Arts & Sciences**; and **Zahr Said**, associate dean for research and faculty development, **School of Law** — in helping us to lay a solid foundation for future work.

The CIP is deeply appreciative of ongoing support from the iSchool, our administrative home at the University of Washington, including iSchool Dean **Anind Dey**; **Michele Norris**, assistant dean for advancement; **James Pérez**, assistant director of advancement; **Tara Warming**, alumni relations officer, **Crystal Welliver**, director of research services; **Jenn Moore**, lead grants and contracts specialist; **Maggie Foote**, director of communications; **Doug Parry**, assistant director of content; and **Putri Hiendarto**, learning technologies manager.

Beyond our group of CIP cofounders and principal investigators (**Chris Coward**, **Ryan Calo**, **Emma Spiro**, **Kate Starbird** and **Jevin West**), affiliated faculty and research fellows (**Carl Bergstrom**, **Mary Fan**, **Tanu Mitra**, **Franziska Roesner**, and **Jason Young**) and postdoctoral scholars (**Joe Bak-Coleman**, **Kolina Koltai** and **Rachel Moran**), we also want to recognize the numerous contributions made by PhD students, graduate students and undergraduate research assistants across the University of Washington, including **Andrew Beers**, **Nicole Buckley**, **Damita Gomez**, **Ian Kennedy**, **Melinda McClure Haughey**, **Connor Klentschy**, **Sarah Nguyen**, **Emily Porter**, **Stephen Prochaska**, **Joey Schafer**, **Morgan Wack**, **Tom Wilson**, **Himanshu Zade**, and **Martin Zhang**.

We've been excited to see the CIP's mission to create a more informed public be embraced by a group of K-12 educators in Washington state who have created a new organization, **Teachers for an Informed Public**, to develop and test new educational programming around misinformation awareness and digital survival skills. Kudos to **Ballard High School** teacher **Shawn Lee** and Nathan Hale High School librarian **Liz Crouse**, for their support of the CIP's mission and their efforts to educate and collaborate with teachers and librarians across Washington state. Crouse has been instrumental in planning and organizing the CIP's annual MisinfoDay.

Among our group of collaborators, we're thankful for ongoing support from the **UW Communication Leadership** program, including co-founder **Hanson Hosein**, who has moderated some CIP events in 2020, **Alex Stonehill**, director of creative strategy and CommLead students.