

# Science Technology Innovation Program



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# Vulnerable Landscapes:

## Case Studies of Violence and Disinformation

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*Disinformation is a global phenomenon that affects almost all countries because anyone with a political agenda can use disinformation in pursuit of political power (Bradshaw and Howard, 2018). Disinformation campaigns are particularly suited to exacerbating already strained ideological, societal, and political relationships, and these campaigns often work to sow individual distrust in government capability and sovereignty (Jackson, 2018; Ma, 2018).*

Disinformation existed in the past (Levin, 2016), but the growing ubiquity of social media grants political actors increasing capacity to spread dangerous rhetoric and imagery in their pursuit of power (Woolley and Howard, 2017). Incendiary content has the potential to catalyze mob violence, riots, and vigilantes taking the law into their own hands (Frenkel, 2018). Disinformation and fostered distrust in legitimate news sources can lead to threats and violence against journalists, further undermining the institutions that could provide accurate information (UNESCO, 2018.).

In the cases we discuss here—the U.S.-Mexico border, India and Sri Lanka, and three Latin American 2018 elections—disinformation inflamed existing cleavages and caused violence. While these illustrative cases are spread across the world, and the violence in each place is related to distinct histories, close analysis highlights five common challenges for addressing disinformation in areas vulnerable to violence. These common challenges include:

- The growing ubiquity of social media, usually combined with low trust in traditional forms of media, creating a situation in which disinformation can spread quickly.
- Low or declining trust in government institutions, causing a rise in vigilantism—which social media encourages and fuels.
- Low levels of media literacy, and sometimes also low levels of general literacy, among perpetrators who do not have consistent access to formal school systems.
- No transparency in social media company policies, making it difficult to evaluate and improve upon content moderation policies that could quell or spur violence.
- Finally, government actors that could legislate change have an interest using disinformation to their own ends.



We adopt Bennett and Livingston's (2018, p.124) definition of disinformation as "intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated to advance political goals." Once disinformation has been released into the wild, it is possible for it to spread as misinformation, which Weedon, Nuland, and Stamos (2017, p.5) define as "inadvertent or unintentional spread of inaccurate information without malicious intent." However, it is important to note that in many of the cases discussed here, people may spread false information and rumors without a specific political goal, but their spread of that information is certainly grounded in existing and malicious prejudice and hatred of vulnerable groups.

## **DISINFORMATION AND MASS MIGRATION AT THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER**

Vigilante action and racist violence have been a fixture in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands since before the current border's formation in 1848 (Ward, forthcoming). The U.S. and Mexico have seen increasing numbers of asylum seekers arriving from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador in the past five years, with a major surge occurring beginning in autumn 2018 (International Organization for Migration, 2019). The increasing number of asylum seekers combined with the long history of racial violence in the region and the politically charged issue of migration has created the perfect climate for disinformation fueled violence and xenophobia on both sides of the border. Disinformation campaigns have taken advantage of xenophobic anxieties in the U.S. and Mexico, inciting mob violence, vigilante policing, and mass shootings (Albright, 2018; Cacelín, 2018; Sanchez and McDonnell, 2018; Romero, 2019).

To reach the U.S. border, Central American migrants pass through Mexico. Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador initially proposed an increase of work visas for migrants from Central America, with Mexico's local city governments working to provide refugee services and support. But pressure from the United States government has caused the Mexican government to urge city officials to cease support to new waves of migrants (Schmidtke, 2018). Despite journalists from both the United States and Mexico actively covering the movement of the asylum seekers, misinformation and disinformation has spread rapidly on both sides of the border, in part because of the politicization of the border itself in the U.S. (Cadelago and Hesson, 2018). As a result, within Mexico, Mexico's National Human Rights Commission reported that 25 people in Mexico had been killed in mob violence related to hoaxes spread on Facebook, WhatsApp, and similar social media platforms (Martínez, 2018). Victims in each case were outsiders and the violence always coincided with both increased migration throughout the country and the increased visibility of migrant caravans' arrival in Mexico.

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On August 29, 2018, two men were burned alive in the town of Acatlán, in the Mexican state of Puebla (Sanchez and McDonnell, 2018). The two men, a law student and his uncle, were pulled from the local police station after a message circulated on WhatsApp that said, "Please everyone be alert because a plague of child kidnappers has entered the country" (Martínez, 2018). The two men were visiting the town for supplies and had only been





brought to the local police station on charges of disorderly conduct (Martínez, 2018). The false message was accompanied by stories of criminal organ harvesting and the names of the two men. Videos of their deaths were uploaded to social media. The WhatsApp messages were proven to be false shortly afterwards (“Two men burned alive by lynch mob in central Mexico,” 2018). The same day, another two people were killed by a mob in Tula in central Hidalgo state after the same messages circulated (Martínez, 2018).

On November 14, 2018, days after the arrival of a large migrant caravan in the border city of Tijuana, anti-caravan protesters and vigilante groups attacked a sleeping migrant camp set up near the affluent neighborhood of Playas de Tijuana (Uniradio Informa, 2018). The attackers called the migrants “invaders” and attempted to provoke the members of the caravan into fighting (Uniradio Informa, 2018). The action was organized by Facebook group “Tijuana en contra de la caravana migrante,” (“Tijuana against the migrant caravan”) where fabricated news stories have circulated since before the 2018 caravan’s arrival at Mexico’s southern border (Tijuana En Contra de La Caravana Migrante, 2019).

Posts include allegations that migrant caravans have thrown away donated food and clothing and attacked peaceful police officers (Cacelín, 2018). In each case, the news reports were confirmed false, and the photos, such as the bloody images of abused police officers, used in the posts were correctly attributed to other past events not associated with the migrants (Cacelín, 2018). Since the largest migrant caravan’s arrival in Tijuana, hundreds of anti-caravan demonstrators have clashed with police, resulting in riots and vigilante violence against the migrant caravan and their local supporters (“Clashes in Tijuana over migrant caravan,” 2018). Analysts note that the hostile climate in Tijuana is unusual considering the large number of migrants that live and travel through the city on a regular basis, and that the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media are to blame for the uncharacteristic response (Cobian, 2019).



*Matias Romero, Oaxaca/Mexico - Nov. 10, 2018: Salvadorans fleeing poverty and gang violence in the third caravan to the U.S. gather to wait for trucks to take them to their next stop in Veracruz.*



Disinformation tied to migrant arrivals has also led to violence on the U.S. side of the US-Mexico border. Asylum seekers left their countries in the wake of gang violence, poverty, and political instability to travel in the relative safety of a caravan, all with the eventual goal of seeking asylum at the United States' southern border (Callahan and Grinnell 2018). While asylum seeking is a lawful process under U.S. and international law at any port of entry, including a border, coastal port, or airport, the rhetoric from some U.S. leaders has been that these people constitute an "invasion" that must be stopped (American Immigration Council, 2018).

On April 20, 2019, the leader of the armed vigilante group United Constitutional Patriots (UCP) was arrested by the FBI after impersonating law enforcement and detaining migrants at gunpoint at the southern U.S. border (Romero, 2019). UCP members posted videos of themselves stopping, detaining, and turning over the families of migrants to border officials. In response, human rights groups have urged the United States to take action against what are essentially armed kidnappings (Riley, 2019). Spurred by U.S. President Donald Trump's unfounded claims that migrant caravans contain dangerous criminals and terrorists (e.g., Reuters, 2019b), and bolstered by "invasion" narratives in disinformation campaigns, UCP has gathered members from across the United States (Ainsley, 2019). UCP leaders state that they have helped the U.S. Border Patrol detain over 5,600 migrants in 2019 and that they feel called to help secure the border against the migrant caravan "invaders" (Hay, 2019).

The Trump administration's claims that ISIS terrorists and dangerous criminals are present in migrant caravans are unsubstantiated and unlikely, according to military assessments (Miroff and Ryan, 2018; US Army North, 2018). These same military assessments highlight the danger armed vigilante groups like the UCP pose to law and safety in the borderlands (Miroff and Ryan, 2018; US Army North, 2018). UCP recruitment on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube repost disinformation that includes claims that Mexican citizens are sneaking over the border with Central American asylum seekers, claims that migrants are being paid to walk for the cameras, and claims that the U.S. government asked UCP vigilantes work on the border (Shorenstein Center, 2018). For instance, in an hour-long livestream, UCP Facebook user and militia member Greg Clark claimed that the militia was "asked by the people in the government" to patrol the border (Clark, 2018; Shorenstein Center, 2018). This livestream received 1,100 shares and 39K views and a similar UCP radio YouTube channel video made claims that George

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Soros paid \$500 million to support the caravan, echoing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that specific left-wing politicians and personalities are responsible for the migrant caravan (Shorenstein Center, 2018; Rep. Matt Gaetz, 2018).

Further, disinformation stating that left-wing politicians and political figures are aiding migrant caravans spurred further violence weeks later in October 2018 when Trump supporter Cesar Sayoc mailed pipe bombs to Mr. Soros and other Democrat party members that he believed were causing the migration influx (Peters, 2018). Then, on October 27, 2018, Robert Bowers killed 11 people at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh (Perez, 2018). Bowers last posts on the social media site Gab.com indicated that this anti-Semitic mass shooting was motivated by white-supremacist theories that coupled Jewish groups and individuals with migrant caravans. Bowers stated that the refugee support non-profit group HIAS was bringing “invaders that kill our people” into the U.S. Bowers had also previously posted and shared the Soros-based conspiracy (Albright, 2018).

As with most disinformation campaigns, the reality of the situation does not matter, and the combination of the affordances of social media with weak governance and/or leaders using migrants as political fodder has led to the perfect environment for vigilante violence. The climate surrounding migration is unlikely to improve, especially as violence, poverty, and climate change in Central America continues to push more people to migrate into Mexico and the United States. The polarized political landscape in the United States is predicted to worsen as the 2020 elections approach.



*Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania / USA – Oct 30 2018: A makeshift shrine to the victims of Saturday's deadly shooting outside of Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.*



## DISINFORMATION AND RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN SOUTH ASIA

Like the U.S.-Mexico border, existing societal cleavages, low trust in government, and fears of internal enemies in South Asia create an atmosphere where disinformation can lead to violence. For instance, throughout 2018, unprecedented mob-violence and lynching occurred in several regions of India following false news stories that circulated on social media platforms such as WhatsApp (Bajoria, 2019b). These attacks are not the only disinformation-related violence in South Asia. Historical religious and political divisions and deep prejudice against Muslim populations characterize many of the incidents.

Colonial-era policies often required countries in the region to define national identity and class by categories of religion, social strata, and race for the purpose of colonial census and social control (Syarif Al Syechabubakar, 2013). These divisions manifest in the present day in deep divides, often generated or fostered by these colonial categories (Croissant and Trinn, 2009). Historically underrepresented groups' moves towards social mobility and political visibility have created push back from dominant populations (Chatterjee, 2009; Klem, 2011; Jeffrey and Young, 2012). Disinformation engineered to incite reactionary ideology to violence has become a problem without obvious solutions.

In India and Sri Lanka, long standing tensions between dominant and minority religious groups are not new, but the increase of mob violence towards minority religious groups is directly related to disinformation and deliberately inflammatory news reports tailored to reach large markets (Sayrah, 2018; Teitelman, 2019). In India, tensions between majority Hindu and minority Muslim groups have led to the lynching of Muslims. In Sri Lanka, a majority Buddhist country, prejudice against Muslims has led to widespread violence.

Since 2013, disinformation circulating on WhatsApp caused 40 confirmed lynching deaths in India (Bajoria, 2019b; Nazmi, et al, 2018). In many cases, these attacks were perpetrated in rural areas by young men with little to no formal education and low levels of literacy (Rajput, 2018). Additionally, disinformation spread regarding these lynching attacks after the fact, causing further unrest and cycles of violence (Teitelman, 2019). In India, "cow killing" messages and videos spread particularly quickly over different platforms, inciting violence towards Muslims accused of killing cows for beef in violation of Hindu religious beliefs (Bajoria, 2019a). These campaigns have claimed an estimated 44 deaths since May 2015, although tacit approval of these attacks by local law enforcement and leaders often result in shallow investigations and cover-ups (Bajoria, 2019a).<sup>1</sup>

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1 It is difficult to know exact numbers and there is some variation in the number of people killed. Human Rights Watch notes that law enforcement and local government complicity in sectarian violence can make it difficult to know exact numbers of hate caused murders (Bajoria, 2019a). Generally, probably around 44 people have been killed related to "cow defense" with an additional 33 killed because of rumored child abduction. However, victims in all cases tend to be Muslim (Bajoria, 2019a).



The U.S. State Department has highlighted the rampant mob violence targeting Muslims and the culpability of rising Hindu Nationalism in the country, although India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) officially rejected the arguments about religious intolerance in the report (U.S. State Department, 2019). Despite technological solutions designed to curb the viral spread of mass fake messages, such as WhatsApp limiting the number of message forwards, disinformation enabled endemic religious violence continues (Bajoria, 2019b). In June 2019, a 22-year-old Muslim man named Tabrez Ansari was beaten to death by a mob of Hindu Nationalists, and doctored videos of his death continues to circulate to support various disinformation campaigns (Krishnan, 2019).

The religious violence is not limited to Indian Muslims. As Rohingya Muslims flee rampant state violence in Myanmar, disinformation campaigns and rumors started by the Myanmar government have spread on social media outside the country's borders. Disinformation demonizing the Rohingya has been picked up by anti-Muslim groups in India, where rumors spread accusing the Rohingya of cannibalism and religious desecration (Goel and Rahman, 2019). As a result, violent protesters allegedly connected with the BJP attacked refugee camps and burned homes (Goel and Rahman, 2019; Ganguly, 2019).

In Sri Lanka, similar rumors and attacks against Muslim and Muslim owned business have occurred since 2013 following various hoaxes spreading across social media platforms Facebook and WhatsApp (Chotiner, 2019). The Sinhalese Buddhist majority in control of the government has encouraged the strong Buddhist nationalism that has existed in the country since the country's long-running civil war (Chotiner, 2019). Disinformation campaigns claim that Muslims are trying to replace Buddhists and Hindus in the country (Srinivasan, 2018). Riots and mob violence left four dead and 80 injured in 2014, which prompted the government to institute a social media blackout (Prakash, 2019). In 2018, fake rumors that Muslims were putting sterilization drugs into food intended for the country's Sinhalese Buddhist majority led to a Muslim man being burned alive by a small mob (Taub and Fisher, 2018). The government repeated the blackout action in March 2018, and in April 2019, following events such as the Easter massacre, arguing that social media would facilitate anti-Muslim riots and violence (Sayrah, 2018).

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Buddhist and Hindu nationalisms continue to grow across South Asia with visible incidents of religious violence in many countries. In the India case, most of the perpetrators were young uneducated men from rural areas who had received false news stories via cell phone (Rajput, 2018). Sri Lanka's disinformation circulates rampantly via Facebook and WhatsApp, and although the government has taken steps through legislation and blackouts to stop violence, analysts agree that these policies have not been effective enough at curbing the violence (Solon, 2018). Likewise, Facebook and WhatsApp have taken measures to reduce the spread of divisive false news, but analysts are skeptical these efforts are anything more than stop-gap measures (Solon, 2018).

Often those spreading the disinformation use new technologies or loopholes to get around forward limits and blackout efforts. It is predicted that disinformation fueled violence will not only continue, but increase. Many fear that government actors will increasingly use disinformation to create dangerous mob violence for





political gain (Nemr and Gangware, 2019). The religious nationalism rising in the region and mobilization against different Muslim communities can be seen as both generative of —and exacerbated by— refined disinformation campaigns.

## **DISINFORMATION AND ELECTIONS IN BRAZIL, COLUMBIA, AND MEXICO**

Elections offer particularly valuable insight into disinformation campaigns because political factions will put more resources into disinformation during election seasons. In 2018, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico underwent large national elections at a variety of governance levels. In each of these elections, disinformation campaigns disseminated false stories that accused opposing parties of publicity stunts, authoritarian behavior, and spreading disinformation (Bandeira et al., 2019; “Candidatos presidenciales firmaron pacto por la no violencia,” 2018). Accusations of fake news has allowed political leaders to avoid accusations of violence committed by their own parties. The high levels of disinformation on social media appeared to have a significant effect on the electoral climate inside all three countries (Bandeira et al., 2019).

Due to Latin American countries’ low trust in news media and high rate of social media engagement, as well as a history of contested elections, the region is vulnerable to disinformation fueled political violence relating to fears of illegitimate elections (Newman et al., 2019). The region’s history of contested elections and foreign intervention contributes to anxieties about sovereignty and continued foreign involvement in their electoral processes (Almeida, 2013). The consistent use of Venezuela as a cautionary tale, citing the authoritarian leadership and foreign presence in the country, demonstrates that these anxieties are felt at a regional level (Bandeira et al., 2019).

For example, prior to the 2018 election in Brazil, then candidate Jair Bolsonaro was stabbed at a rally by a man who was an active consumer and distributor of disinformation on Facebook (Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2018). Brazil’s two frontrunner campaigns took the opportunity to spread virulent disinformation about the attack, each accusing the other of assassination attempts or staging the injuries respectively (Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2018). Bolsonaro’s campaign itself directed successful disinformation attacks against opponent Fernando Haddad



*PORTO ALEGRE, BRAZIL - SEPTEMBER 29, 2018: Crowd protesting against Bolsonaro one week before Brazilian elections*



over WhatsApp, the preferred news source for Brazilians (Boadle, 2018). These campaigns were characterized by fears that Brazil would become the next Venezuela. Pro-torture, racist, and homophobic disinformation was also spread—disinformation that prompted the public to target journalists critical of Bolsonaro with death threats (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The pro-Bolsonaro disinformation campaigns culminated on the night of the first round of elections on October 7, 2018, when a Bolsonaro supporter murdered a vocal Haddad supporter, Moa do Katende, citing the racially charged campaign information he read on social media for his actions (Bandeira et al., 2019).

Additionally, disinformation fueled a violent climate and possibly caused death in Colombia's June 2018 election. 121 social media activists were murdered in the year leading up to the election and analysts attribute this violence to these activists' attempts to combat disinformation and relay accurate information to the public regarding the government (Worley, 2018). Although specific disinformation campaigns were never attributed to the deaths, Colombia's election cycle was deeply affected by divisive disinformation campaigns spread over WhatsApp. Like Brazil, WhatsApp is the preferred news source for Colombians between 16-65 (Freedom House, 2017). Voting monitor Misión de Observación Electoral found one out five social media posts during the 2018 legislative elections were "laden with intolerance and polarization" and that these messages "translated in a real way into an atmosphere of violence against candidates" ("Candidatos presidenciales firmaron pacto por la no violencia, 2018). These messages highlighted comparisons between opposing candidates and visible authoritarian leaders and manipulators such as Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela (Bandeira et al., 2019).

In contrast to Brazil and Colombia, Mexico provides a unique case in that after a huge build up of anxiety surrounding the 2018 Presidential election, Mexico achieved what most analysts agreed was a legitimate outcome (Aguilar-Camín, 2018). Research suggests new programs such as Mexico's *Verificado 2018* successfully tracked and combated traditional disinformation campaigns by cooperative fact checking between journalists, the public, and other stakeholders (Bandeira et al., 2019). However, the program noted the dominance of automated bots in amplifying dominant PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) party messages, effectively drowned out PRI opponents on social media sites. The bot armies help to explain the electoral climate, which was hardly peaceful. Authorities in Mexico registered 774 acts of aggression against politicians during the 2018 election cycle (Bandeira et al., 2019). 152 candidates were murdered and 48 of these victims were pre-candidates and candidates running for office (Bandeira et al., 2019). In addition, Mexico remains the most dangerous country for journalists to operate in the Americas, and the fourth most dangerous country in the world, effectively compromising legitimate reporting of political issues (McCarthy, 2018). Likewise, Mexican media and news organizations are highly dependent on federal money, creating a clear conflict of interest in regards to fair reporting on election matters (Oprea, 2019). Although violence has a clear presence in Mexico's many elections, it is unclear whether the disinformation directly spurred these attacks.

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Disinformation is an effective tool in swaying voters, despite the violence and polarization these tactics cause.



In all three countries' disinformation campaigns exploited the lack of institutional trust among the public. The historical memory of past contested elections and foreign intervention continued to haunt modern political processes and is reflected in the fears spread by disinformation campaigns. Even though third party fact-checking organizations were present in all these elections, only Mexico reported substantial returns from their efforts.

Although varied in levels of internet connectivity, across the region people regularly rely upon social media, particularly WhatsApp, for their political news. This is possibly due the poor traditional media, with journalists consistently under threat of violence. Violent incidents largely resulted from disinformation distributed purposefully by political parties, but were exacerbated by intense political polarization, lack of trust in institutions, and a dangerous climate for legitimate journalists and fact checkers. It is likely that the turbulent political climate will continue for as long as people lack trust in institutions and rely on social media coverage for political news.

## **CROSS-CUTTING CHALLENGES**

The countries discussed here display the difficulties policymakers, private companies, and public organizations have in combating disinformation. In every case where disinformation leads to violence, disinformation is playing on long-standing, societal divisions and tensions—often rooted in historical processes and perceived differences, that, very frequently, are inflamed through the conscious efforts of those attempting to gain political power. Disinformation's deep roots in existing divisions and fears mean that it is difficult to address without grappling with deeply challenging societal problems, such as how to make people trust each other or how to increase literacy rates. Across the three cases of disinformation leading to violence we discuss here, we find five cross-cutting challenges that will need to be addressed to combat disinformation in places vulnerable to violence.

First, the growing ubiquity of social media, usually combined with low trust in traditional forms of media, create a situation in which disinformation can spread more quickly and widely than ever before. As outlined in the example of disinformation about asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border, the dangerous media environment in Mexico means that there is no arbiter of truth for Mexican citizens. Likewise, government officials' attacks on media legitimacy in the U.S. undermines legitimate reporting. Fact checking programs such as Stop Fake show some successes in combatting the dizzying scale and scope of disinformation spread on social media and low trust in media. However, once bad information has been spread, it is difficult to correct—a problem that includes the issue that correcting bad information does not necessarily change beliefs (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Lazer et. al., 2017). Additionally, studies illustrate that reporting on extremist content or bad information can actually serve to amplify the content rather than counter it (Phillips, 2018).

Second, in most of the places where disinformation can lead to violence, there is low or declining trust in government institutions. The low trust then causes a rise in vigilantism—which social media encourages and fuels. Vigilante violence usually occurs when governments are viewed as ineffective, unwilling, or otherwise unable to step in to punish wrongdoing, protect citizens, and keep out perceived threats (Nivette, 2016; Johnston, 1996). Dominant cultural, ethnic, and religious groups have greater propensity for vigilante violence, and their victims are usually marginalized groups that have less protection and recourse against violence committed against them (Rosenbaum and Sederberg, 1974; Jacobs et al, 2012).





Research into vigilante groups highlights the role that spectacle and duty play into their actions (Lechuga, 2017; Chavez 2001). Vigilante sentiment is spread through varied sources and cultural artefacts, but social media disinformation campaigns that call people to violently protect religious symbols and national borders are evident throughout the above cases. In addition, because vigilante violence and action are deeply tied with spectacle, public drama, and symbolic violence, the documentation and viewing of said violence can further spread and generate these calls to action. Many of the above incidents include public executions that are documented via video and photo, and spread as part of the vigilante message, inciting further fear and anger. Therefore, while improving trust in government may nearly impossible to enact, de-platforming vigilante groups and those who post vigilante violence on social media platforms may provide a mitigation strategy because it will undermine the use of spectacle to perpetuate more violence.

Third, violence is often perpetrated by rural, low-educated individuals relying on personal sources via social media for news. These perpetrators of disinformation-fueled violence often have low levels of media literacy, and sometimes also low levels of general literacy. In some cases, such as Mexico and India, perpetrators of violence often are not only lacking education in traditional media literacy, but have limited literacy levels due to weak and unevenly distributed educational institutions in rural areas. Media literacy campaigns often assume wide and consistent access to state-provided education programs. Media literacy campaigns, cited as successful in places such as Finland (Mackintosh, 2019), run up against uneven and limited educational systems in resource-poor environments. In places such as Mexico, children routinely work and/or are not able to access these types of programs. One way to counter this is to use other types of trusted institutions, such as libraries, to deploy literacy campaigns (Clark, Coward, and Rothschild, 2017).

Fourth, places where there is a single major social media platform that ties together trusted friend groups into informational networks, are particularly vulnerable to disinformation. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp, meant to connect people and allow them to share information, then become the architecture of disinformation spread. And, while social media companies are dealing with unheard of data volume and data dynamism, they do not make their policies or data holdings transparent, making it difficult to evaluate and improve upon content moderation policies that could quell or spur violence. The lack of transparency makes it difficult for policymakers who want to address disinformation to make serious steps forward (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, Merrill and Tobin, 2019). Non-transparent algorithms and processes create information hierarchies and automate attempts to maintain user attention through providing desired content regardless of its extremism or potential damaging nature (Bergen, 2019; Dwoskin, 2019). Targeted advertising and unclear moderation policies further the problem (Angwin and Parris, 2016; Angwin and Grassegger, 2018). And, companies appear to struggle with non-Western contexts, potentially assisting violent actors and exacerbating violence in places such as Myanmar (Douek, 2018) and those we have discussed here.

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However, all the countries discussed here have political figures that have used and benefited from disinformation campaigns meant to embolden their bases and secure power.

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This leads to the greatest challenge of all. The very government actors that could legislate change often have a vested interest in perpetuating disinformation. Many countries have penalized the spread of disinformation



with fines and jail time (Reuters, 2019a). However, all the countries discussed here have political figures that have used and benefited from disinformation campaigns meant to embolden their bases and secure power. Therefore, legislation that guarantees punitive and effective consequences for disinformation spread is unlikely, as all governments discussed in this report have purposefully spread misleading, false, and divisive information themselves. Likewise, there remains significant concerns that legislation designed to punish fake news and disinformation campaign spread, is either explicitly designed or implicitly utilized to silence dissident and critical voices.

## **CONCLUSION**

In all three highlighted cases— mass migration in the U.S. and Mexico, religious violence in India and Sri Lanka, and 2018 election based disinformation in Latin America—both sophisticated and casual disinformation material reflected and inflamed existing cultural, religious, and historical divides to cause violence and death. As policymakers, private companies, and public stakeholders seek to mitigate and prevent future violence and the disinformation that causes it, we stress attention to both regional vulnerabilities that contextualize the disinformation at work, as well as overarching trends that characterize disinformation that leads to violence.

Low trust in traditional media and government institutions, low transparency in social media company policies, and the growing use of disinformation campaigns as tools of political mobilization interact with sites of historical, religious, and ethnic divides to create a deeply vulnerable landscape where violence can become endemic and self-perpetuating. It requires a careful response that does not further the marginalization of its victims, nor compromise the governance of sovereign countries.

It is unlikely that one overarching policy or program can address the multiple instances where disinformation campaigns incite violence across borders, or where governments may implicitly but deliberately sanction violence and abuse. But an understanding of disinformation and context may be the first step in informing varied programs and efforts to neutralize these destructive and deadly campaigns.



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