



GDI

Global
Disinformation
Index

GDI Primer: The U.S. (Dis)Information Ecosystem

www.disinformationindex.org



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The Global Disinformation Index is a UK-based not-for-profit that operates on the three principles of neutrality, independence and transparency. Our vision is a world in which we can trust what we see in the media. Our mission is to restore trust in the media by providing real-time automated risk ratings of the world's media sites through a Global Disinformation Index (GDI). For more information, visit www.disinformationindex.org

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Introduction

The harms of disinformation¹ are proliferating around the globe—threatening our elections, our health, and our shared sense of accepted facts.

As voting is underway in the 2020 U.S. elections, it is critical to understand the (dis)information ecosystem and the risks posed by it over the election, transition and inauguration period.

The Global Disinformation Index (GDI) sees disinformation as a process, not an event, one that results in purposely and/or maliciously misleading content.²

The GDI has put together this primer for brands and advertisers to highlight:

- 1. The disinforming narratives and angles to watch for in the election.**
- 2. The online publications peddling in these conspiracies.**
- 3. The ad tech companies that currently enable this advertising.**
- 4. The revenue from advertising that these sites make from this content.**
- 5. The sites that offer the lowest disinformation risks for advertisers and readers.**

This primer aims to help brands and advertisers understand and change their role in the disinformation ecosystem—something for which the GDI has consistently [advocated](#). They can make a difference by directing their advertising away from high-risk and brand-unsuitable sites toward sites with low levels of disinformation risk.

Such advertising decisions are not about censorship or curtailing free speech. Advertisers have the right to brand safety and the right not to fund divisive, polarising and disinforming content.³

The GDI has used both artificial intelligence powered classifiers as well as human assessment to identify sites which represent good, brand safe environments over this election period as well as those which brands should avoid. Through this process, and with additional research using our risk assessment methodology, we have developed the following guidance.

Step One: Know the adversarial narratives

Disinformation is best understood as “adversarial narratives”.⁴ These stories seek to set up an adversarial relationship between the reader and the subject of the article.

The subjects of the stories can be **groups** (e.g. based on ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, political identification, etc.); **institutions** (e.g. police, government, judiciary, democratic processes such as elections and voting) or **scientific consensus** (e.g. COVID-19, vaccinations, 5G, the environment).

Adversarial narratives undermine trust in our social, political, economic, and scientific institutions. They are often amplified algorithmically by multiple platforms due to their engaging nature, creating a false sense that an extreme viewpoint or misconception is more widely held than it really is. Adversarial narratives risk real-world harms, for example via deaths from bunk cures and vaccine preventable diseases, or potentially deadly political violence stoked by extreme rhetoric.

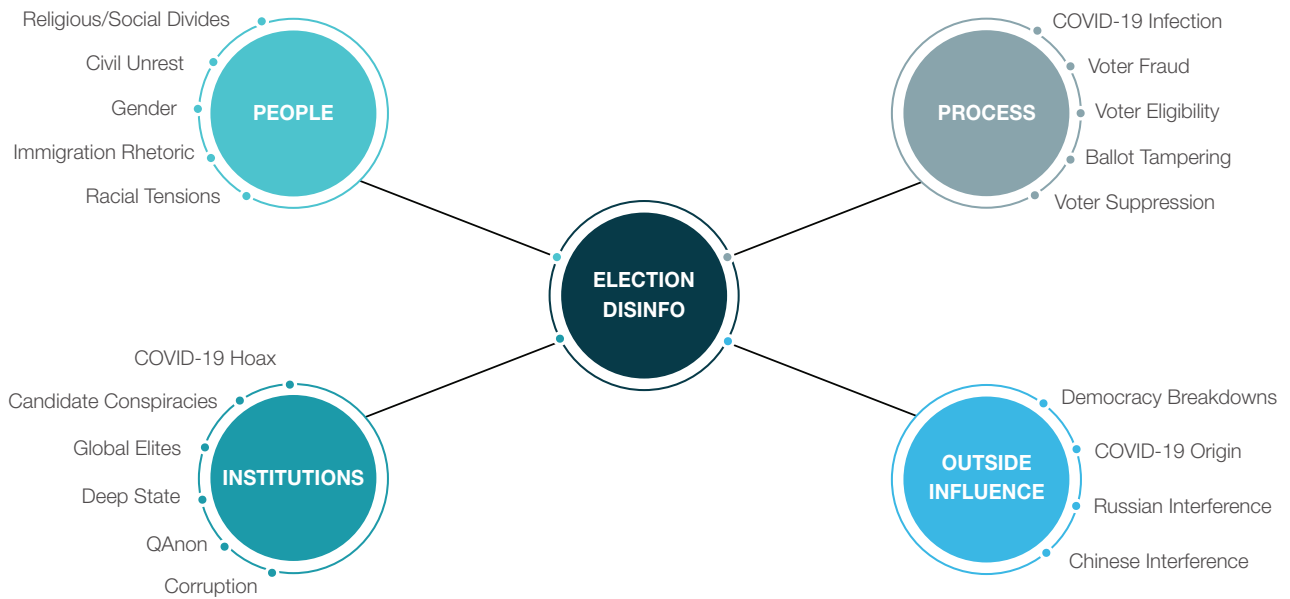
GDI’s technology has identified 519 sites with a particularly high concentration of disinforming content related to elections. Based on an algorithmic analysis of these 519 sites, we found clustering of issues across multiple sites. Most sites carried stories that were strongly “Anti-Latinx” (59 percent) and promoting white supremacy (57 percent), while others carried stories promoting conspiracies about “Voter Fraud” and “Anti-candidate” positions (31 percent and 38 percent).

Drilling down into the election related disinformation topics carried on these sites, 4 categories emerge:

- **People:** The individuals and parties being nominated, and the citizens who vote, are unsound, dangerous or fraudulent.
- **Processes:** The systems are broken, rigged or otherwise corrupt.
- **Institutions:** The electoral institutions are flawed and cannot be trusted.
- **Outside Influence:** Foreign powers, institutions or companies are meddling.

Across these categories, election-related disinformation draws heavily on existing disinformation topics, such as those around race, gender, religion and other political and social issues.

Figure 1: Election Disinformation Map



Voter Fraud

Conspiracy claims of voter fraud are persistent throughout the span of modern elections. However, disinformation about votes being miscounted, incorrectly allowed or “stolen” by other political parties has gained increasing traction after the 2018 midterm elections. Stories have tapped into other social and political fears, such as illegal immigrants voting and “deep state” actors determining who won or lost an election. Building off a similar framing, the current set of conspiracies are focused on alleged cases of fraud in the immediate run-up to the 2020 elections (see Figure 2). These stories are seeding doubt that the election can be free and fair—and thus the results can, and should, be contested.

Figure 2: Kohl’s ad delivered by Infolinks on CanadaFreePress.com

Anti-Candidate Claims

The disinformation efforts against candidates running in local, state and federal elections are usually based on the premise that they are not fit or eligible for office. This is an old mud-slinging tactic that has been used in past elections, but the existence of high risk sites, hate-filled attacks and algorithms that push these claims is new in the 2020 elections. Some examples include the false claim that Kamala Harris was ineligible to be a vice presidential candidate.

This assertion links up with the broadening of attacks using misogyny and racist rhetoric. Other similar examples of this sort combine white supremacist tropes with claims of competency issues (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Warby Parker ad delivered by Google on amgreatness.com



Step Two: Know the risky sites spreading disinformation

Once we have a grounding in which disinforming narratives are being spread, we need to identify which sites are promoting—and profiting from—them.

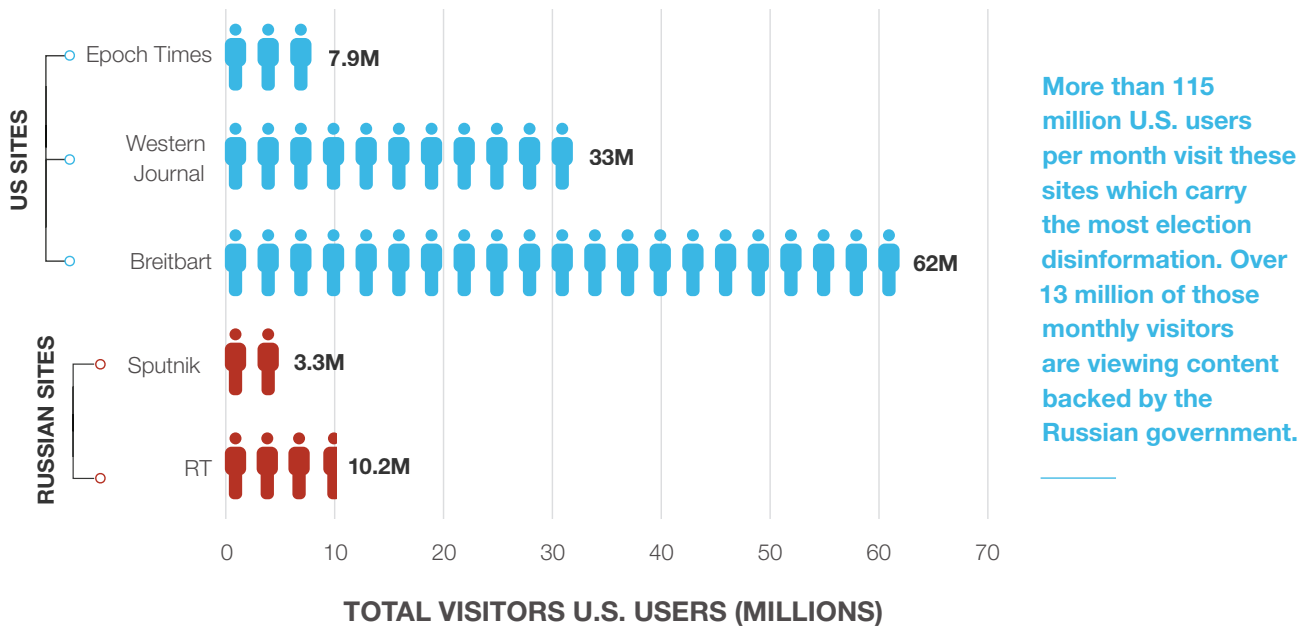
Using our technology, GDI has identified five sites which currently carry the highest amount of election-related disinformation. These sites are: three U.S.-based sites (**Breitbart, The Western Journal and The Epoch Times**) and two Russian-based sites (the Kremlin-backed **RT.com** and **SputnikNews.com**).⁵

Many of these sites are the preferred information source for large groups of Americans, as shown by a recent [investigation](#) from The Wall Street Journal. Breitbart is the fiftieth most popular site in the U.S., while the Western Journal is in the top 140 sites (based on visitors to these sites).⁶ **In total, these five sites have an average of over 115 million U.S.-based visitors per month** (see Figure 4).⁷ While Breitbart.com and WesternJournal.com lead on U.S. visitors, the third-highest site is RT.com.⁸ These figures represent only direct traffic to the sites. The reach of these sites is greatly amplified on social media, where disinforming sites often gain more followers than much larger lower risks sites.

These sites⁹ contain stories that are adversarial across multiple disinformation topics, including those relating to the elections. They are by no means the only sites trafficking in these narratives, but GDI analysis has identified that they have both high volumes and high density of content relating to these topics.

Brands and advertisers have a choice whether to fund such content. This is not a question of free speech, but rather whether advertisers have sufficient oversight and control over what speech they are funding, and the content to which their brand is adjacent.

Figure 4: Disinformation Risk Sites Monthly Visits



Note: These traffic numbers are direct traffic only and exclude additional reach through social media.

Figure 5: New Balance ad delivered by Google on breitbart.com

breitbart.com/politics/2018/07/19/foreign-born-voters-voter-fraud-election-meddling/

BREITBART

BREITBART

TRENDING: TRUMP VS. VIRUS | VP DEBATE | AMY CONEY BARRETT | DEMOCRAT CITY UNREST | CHEAT-BY-MAIL BATTLE | WOKE SPORTS

U.S. ELECTION MEDDLING: NATIONWIDE VOTER FRAUD, IMPORTATION OF 15M FOREIGN-BORN VOTERS

AdChoices

new balance

FRESH FOAM TEMPO
DEEJAYTEN SPECIAL EDITION

COMPRA

advertisement

by JOHN BINDER | 19 Jul 2018 | Washington, D.C.

B SOCIAL BREITBART STORE >>

om/url?ct=abg&q=https://www.google.com/adsense/support/bin/request.py%3Fcontact%3Dabg_afc%26url%3Dhttps://www.breitbart.com/politics/2018/07/19/foreign-born-voters-voter-fraud-electic

Step Three: Know the ad networks serving ads to these sites

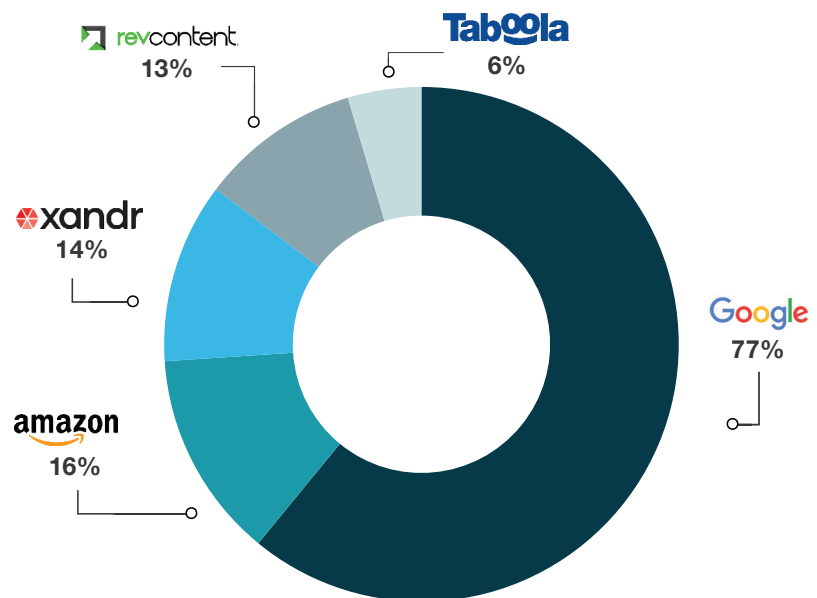
Of the 519 sites we identified, 200 carry ads. These ads help to fund their operations.

Much advertising on these sites is placed programmatically, meaning that the brands concerned do not actively choose to advertise on these sites. However, their inadvertent funding provides an incentive to create toxic and divisive content in order to attract an audience and earn revenue.

Tech companies like Amazon, Google and Xandr (part of AT&T) serve up ads against electoral disinformation on 200 of the worst offending sites. For example, our findings show that Google services three out of every four, or 145 of these sites (see Figure 6).

While the ad tech companies continue to include these sites in their programmatic inventories, the risk for brands of ending up next to these election disinformation stories will remain high.

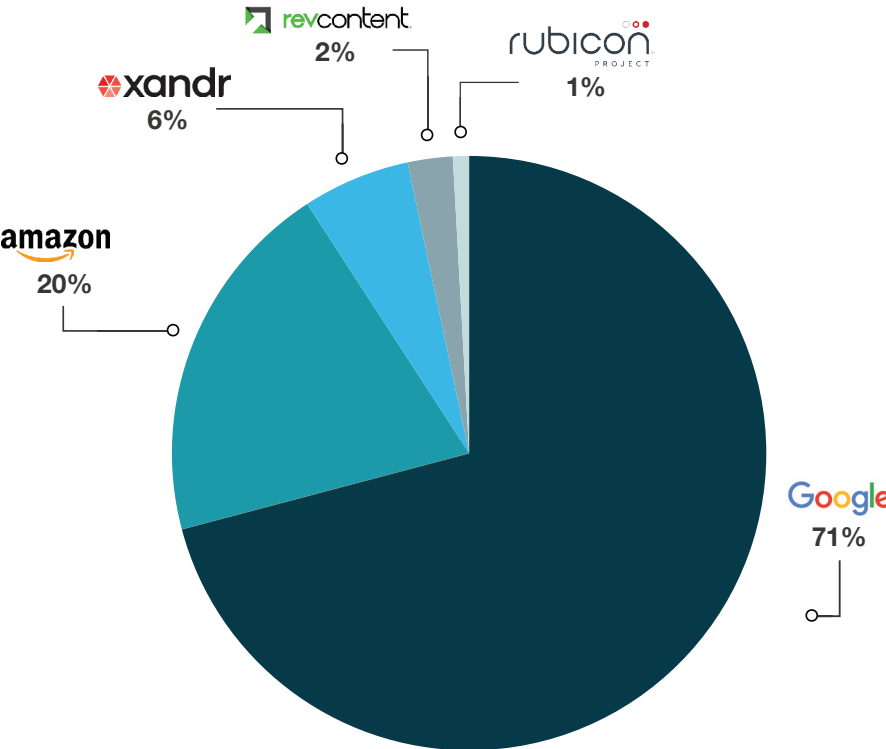
Figure 6: Number of sites served by company



Step Four: Know the ad revenues being paid to high-risk sites

GDI estimates that the nearly 200 high risk sites spreading electoral disinformation make over **US\$1 million in ad revenues each month**. Google accounts for 71 percent of all advertising dollars placed on the 200 sites (See Figure 7).

Figure 7: Revenues shares paid to sites, by company share



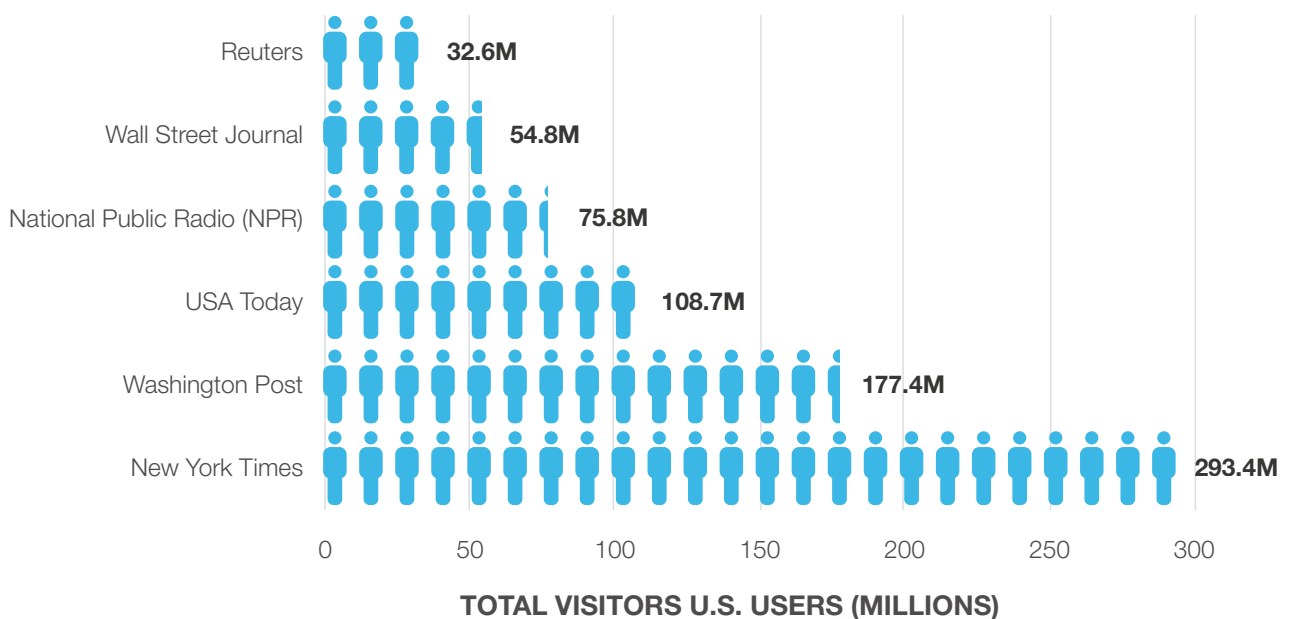
Step Five: Know which sites are low risk for your brands

Along with a panel of global disinformation experts, GDI has also developed a risk scoring methodology for some of the largest news sites in a given media market.

Unlike GDI's AI powered assessments seen above, these assessments are done by humans.

We have applied the GDI human-review methodology to a sample of over 75 U.S. news sites.¹⁰ Our findings show that the following **national news sites present minimum chances of carrying disinformation.**¹¹ These sites are: National Public Radio (NPR), The New York Times, Reuters, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post. In total **these sites have nearly 750 million monthly U.S. user visits and outstrip site traffic to the sites with high disinformation risks.** For example, the New York Times site has nearly five times the amount of U.S. traffic as Breitbart. However, as stated earlier, highly disinforming content is magnified on social media where followers of high risk sites can outstrip those of lower risk sites.

Figure 8: Low Risk Sites Monthly US traffic¹²



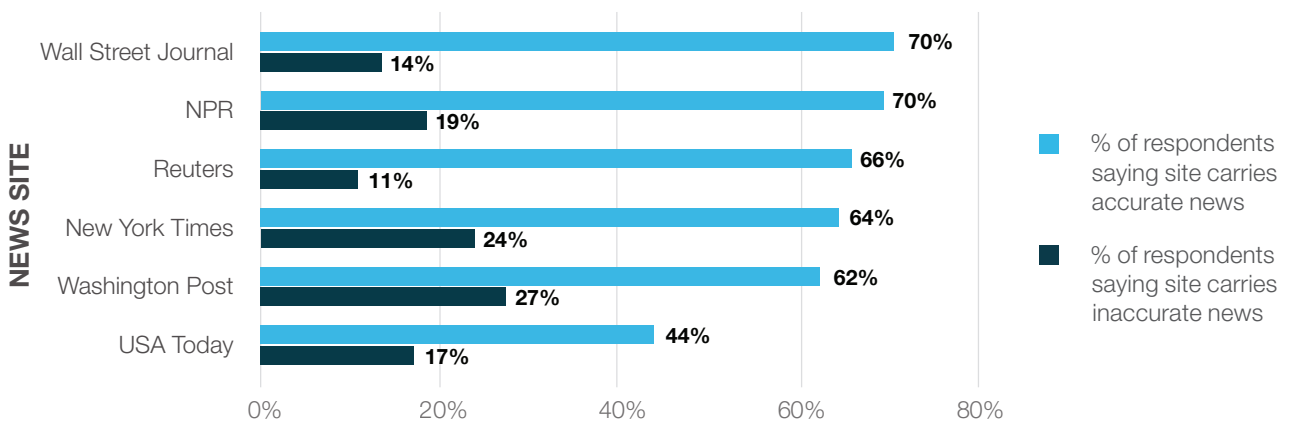
GDI risk ratings are based at looking at [disinformation risk in three areas](#).¹³

- **Content:** The reliability of content published on the site
- **Operations:** Checks and balances which support operational integrity as set out by the [Journalism Trust Initiative](#) (JTI)
- **Context:** Surveying informed online readers on brand and site trust perceptions

The context category was assessed using an externally commissioned survey of more than 1000 individuals. Respondents were selected to provide a sample of U.S. respondents across the political spectrum (left, center and right).¹⁴ One of the questions respondents were asked was whether the site carried accurate or inaccurate news (see Figure 9).

For most of these sites, more than one out of two people who responded rated their news as being accurate. Among this group, The Wall Street Journal, Reuters and NPR are perceived to be providing the most accurate coverage. When it comes perceiving these sites providing inaccurate news, no more than one in four respondents feel these sites have inaccurate news. Reuters and USA Today do the best. Using this combination of risk assessment and trust perception analysis can help steer and strengthen brand approaches to advertising and engagement.

Figure 9: Perceptions of Brand Trust¹⁵



Conclusion

As election news continues to break, the variety and intensity of disinformation narratives will increase.

Brands and advertisers have a powerful role to play in supporting trusted content and cutting the funding to high-risk sites spreading disinformation.

So what can brands do to avoid these high-risk sites?

- 1. recognise their role and power to defund disinformation and reduce the risk of offline harms**
- 2. use impartial disinformation risk ratings for news sites as part of brand suitability decisions**
- 3. align corporate responsibility agendas with what content they fund**
- 4. demand ad networks use real time exclusion lists to avoid high-risk content**

The GDI looks forward to working together across industry to defund disinformation and support high quality news content for the U.S. election and beyond.

Endnotes

- 1 We define disinformation in terms of the verb ‘to disinform’: ‘to deliberately mislead; opposite of inform.’
- 2 See: https://disinformationindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/GDI_Report_Screen_AW2.pdf.
- 3 The GDI will continue to publish additional and new findings about U.S. electoral disinformation in the run up to and following the November vote. This includes releasing a disinformation risk assessment for a sample of over 75 U.S. news sites in the coming months. The findings in this overview profile some early insights from this research.
- 4 For more information on GDI’s definition of adversarial narratives, see: <https://disinformationindex.org/2019/08/adversarial-narratives-are-the-new-model-for-disinformation/>.
- 5 This is based on the density of these electoral-related topics across a range of sites.
- 6 According to Alexa.com, the ranking of these sites in the U.S. and globally is as follows: Breitbart.com: 50th top site in the U.S. (#226 globally); TheEpochTimes.com: 313th top site in the U.S. (#557 globally), RT.com: 1,172th top site in the U.S. (#340 globally); Sputniknews.com: 5,885th top site in the U.S. (#559 globally), and www.WesternJournal.com: 138th in the U.S. (#530 globally). Numbers as of 5 October 2020.
- 7 These are based on SimilarWeb figures for each of the sites, based on a global monthly average for visitors (desktop). GDI has calculated the average monthly U.S. visitor traffic by taking their global traffic figures and then multiplying it by their share of U.S. visitors (as of 6 October 2020).
- 8 For more on RT.com, see: <https://www.rt.com/about-us/>.
- 9 The worst offender site list is generated on a topic-by-topic basis. The GDI gathers the following data to make this assessment: number of total published articles, number of articles published on the specified topic, and number of articles on the specified topic that have been identified by the relevant topic classifier as disinformation. For the sites in the worst offender list, each site has triggered a relevant AI powered topic classifier a minimum of 15 times. The trigger threshold is much higher for larger topics. The distribution of these classifier hits is examined across our set of websites and a threshold consisting of the minimum number of hits for each topic classifier is determined.
- 10 The GDI rating does not assess whether a specific news domain is actually carrying disinformation nor does the rating attempt to assess which stories are true or false. To collect the data, the GDI did a review of anonymised articles. The articles were presented to the researchers as text files, with all identifying characteristics (i.e. name of site and/or URL), images and videos removed. GDI checked the sites for the JTI operational information, and commissioned an independent survey of informed online readers.
- 11 Out of 79 sites assessed by the Global Disinformation Index. The GDI will shortly release the full ratings and all the sites covered in the U.S. market sample.
- 12 These are based on SimilarWeb figures for each of the sites, based on a global monthly average for visitors (desktop). GDI has calculated the average monthly U.S. visitor traffic by taking their global traffic figures and then multiplying it by their share of U.S. visitors (as of 6 October 2020).
- 13 To review the sites, the GDI worked with Henry M. Jackson School at the University of Washington. We did a review of anonymised articles. The articles were presented to two researchers as text files, with all identifying characteristics (i.e. name of site and/or URL), images and videos removed. The researchers checked the sites for the Journalism Trust Initiative’s operational information. The GDI commissioned an independent survey of informed online readers that was carried out by YouGov. In total 1003 respondents responded. The survey was conducted between 2-11 June 2020.
- 14 Of the 1003 people surveyed, 40percent self-identified as ‘center’ (center-left, center, and center-right), 34percent of the respondents said that they were on the “left”, 24percent said that they were on the “right” and 2 percent did not self-identify.
- 15 Based on combined number of responses of “extremely accurate” and “somewhat accurate” to respondents rating a site’s level of accuracy in covering news events.



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