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The Misinformation Pandemic––How Politicians, Commentators, and Extremist Groups Used Social Media to Infect America

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THE MISINFORMATION PANDEMIC
How Claims of Election Fraud on Social Media Infected America

Presentation by Emily King

Methodology

Definitions:
Politicians
- Includes elected current and former officials
- May have used their power in office to challenge election results

Commentators
- "Influencers," journalists, and news outlets

Extremist Groups
- Organizations which promote radical beliefs, sometimes with violence

Questions:
- What rhetorical choices are most popular
- How effective were Twitter and Facebook's moderation policies and actions in practice?

Process:
- Comparing tweet/post analysis statistics across different existing sources and studies

Research Limitations:
- Cannot view the content of accounts that are currently banned or private unless their posts have been documented outside of their page
- Twitter recently put up an expensive paywall for its APIs, which researchers use to gather and analyze public tweet data

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Figure 1 and 2:
https://issueone.org/articles/60-of-president-donald-trumps-post-election-tweets-sought-to-undermine-legitimacy-of-presidential-race/

Argument:
- Politicians, commentators, and extremist groups exploited the underlying structures in engagement-based social media algorithms to spread 2020 Presidential Election misinformation and disinformation
- Additionally users are responsive to sensational and shocking content and their engagement with it perpetuates its viral spread

Findings
- Despite sites such as Twitter and Facebook having policies against promoting election misinformation, loose guidelines and courses of action allow posts below a threshold to slip by
- Moderation does not tackle underlying problematic algorithm structures

Scholarly Conversation
- "The Big Lie" and Election Integrity Partnership
  - Analyze the spread of disinformation and misinformation as a dually bottom-up and top-down process
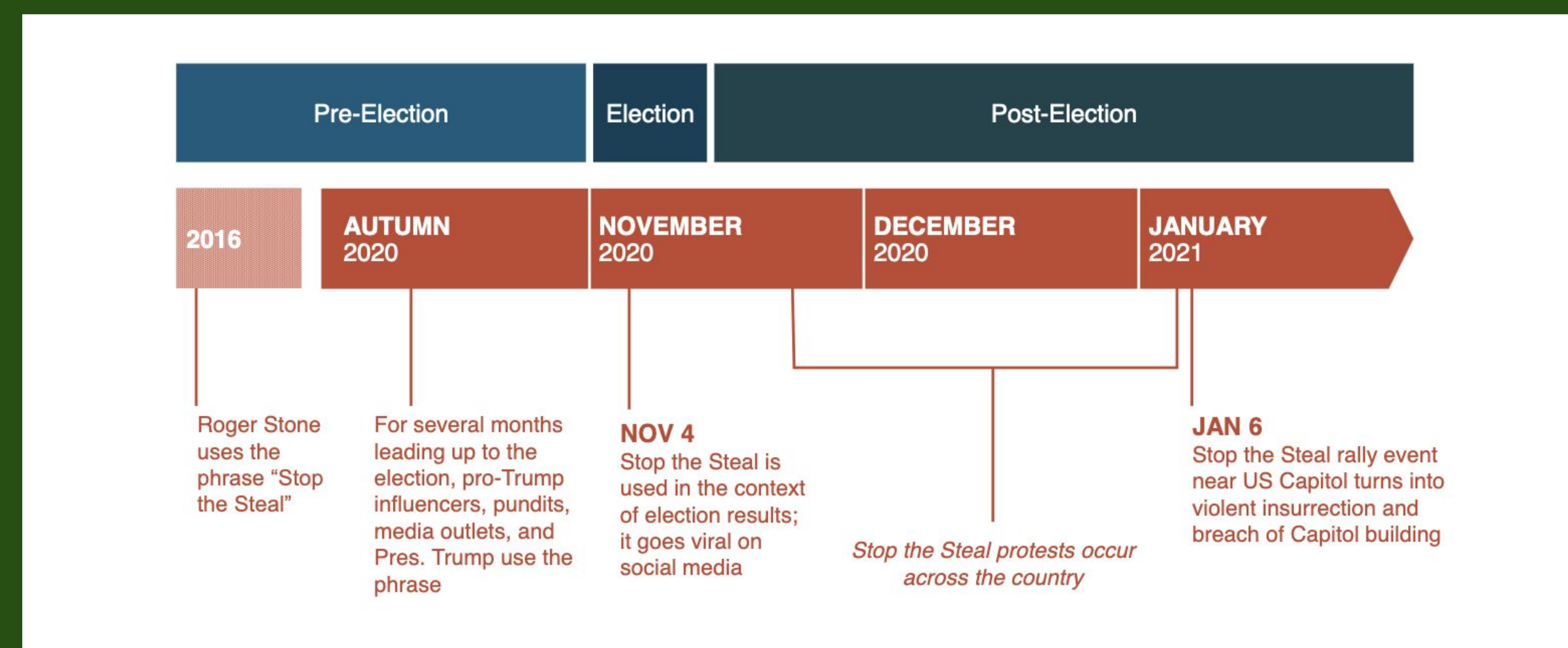- Rhetorical analysis and categorization of tweets

Figure 5: https://www.eipartnership.net/2020

Human Rights & Legal Framework
- United States Code 47 Section 230 leaves moderation up to companies' discretion
- Unrealistic and undesirable for US government to enact bans on types of content or speech and force companies to moderate
- Currently it's immensely difficult suing companies for real-world damage caused by their algorithms, a key factor in spreading and recommending content to users

Conclusions
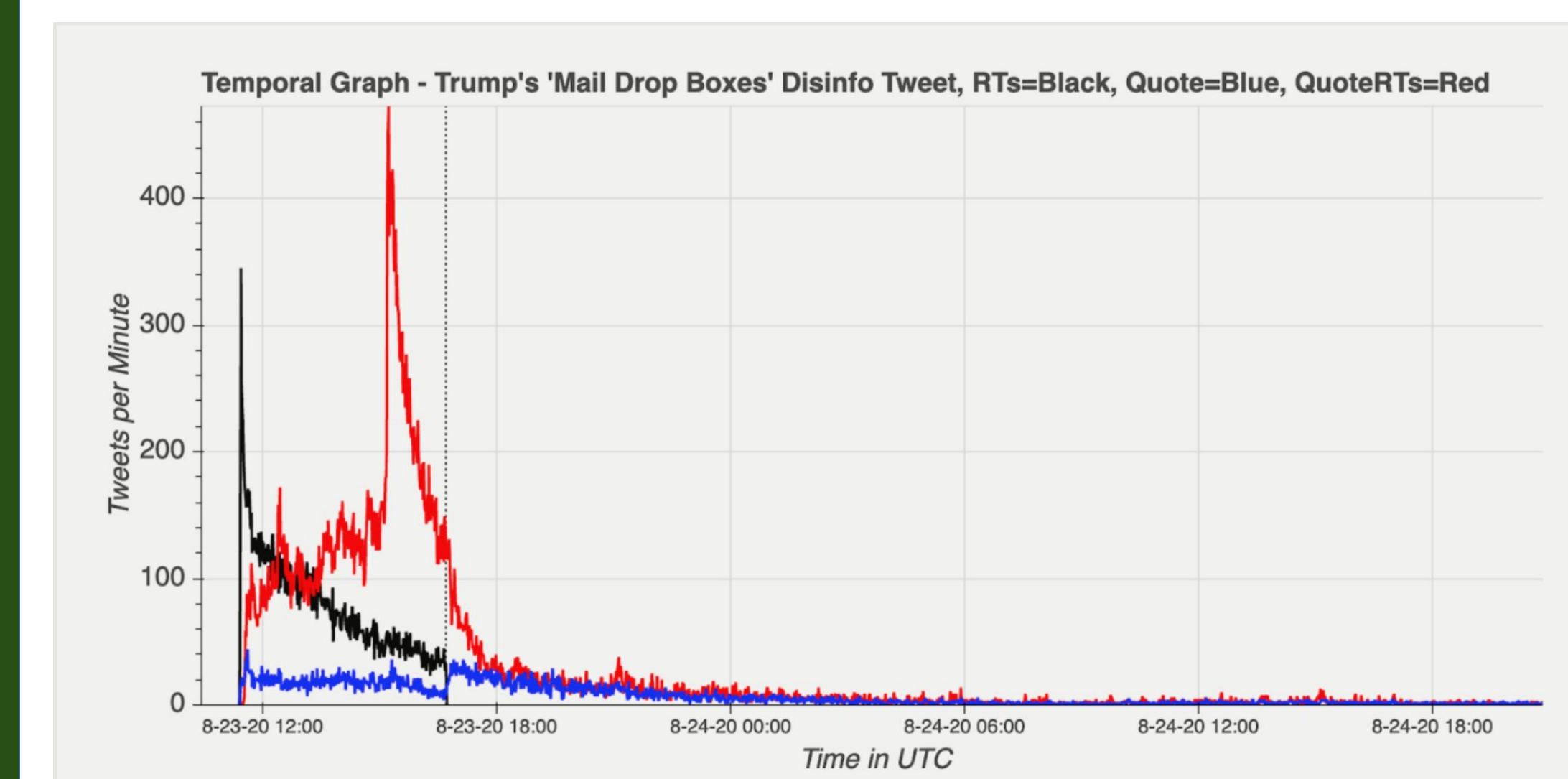- Lawmakers should focus more on pushing for algorithm reforms ahead of future elections

Figure 7: The graph above displays the volume per-minute of retweets (Black), quote tweets (Blue), and retweets of quote tweets (Red) of Trump's tweet. The number of retweets of quote tweets rises steadily for about three hours, and then spikes at 15:14 UTC before falling off sharply. Eventually it falls to about the level of the quote tweets, suggesting a rate of about one retweet per quote tweet.

Figure 3 (above) and 4 (below): https://www.eipartnership.net/2020
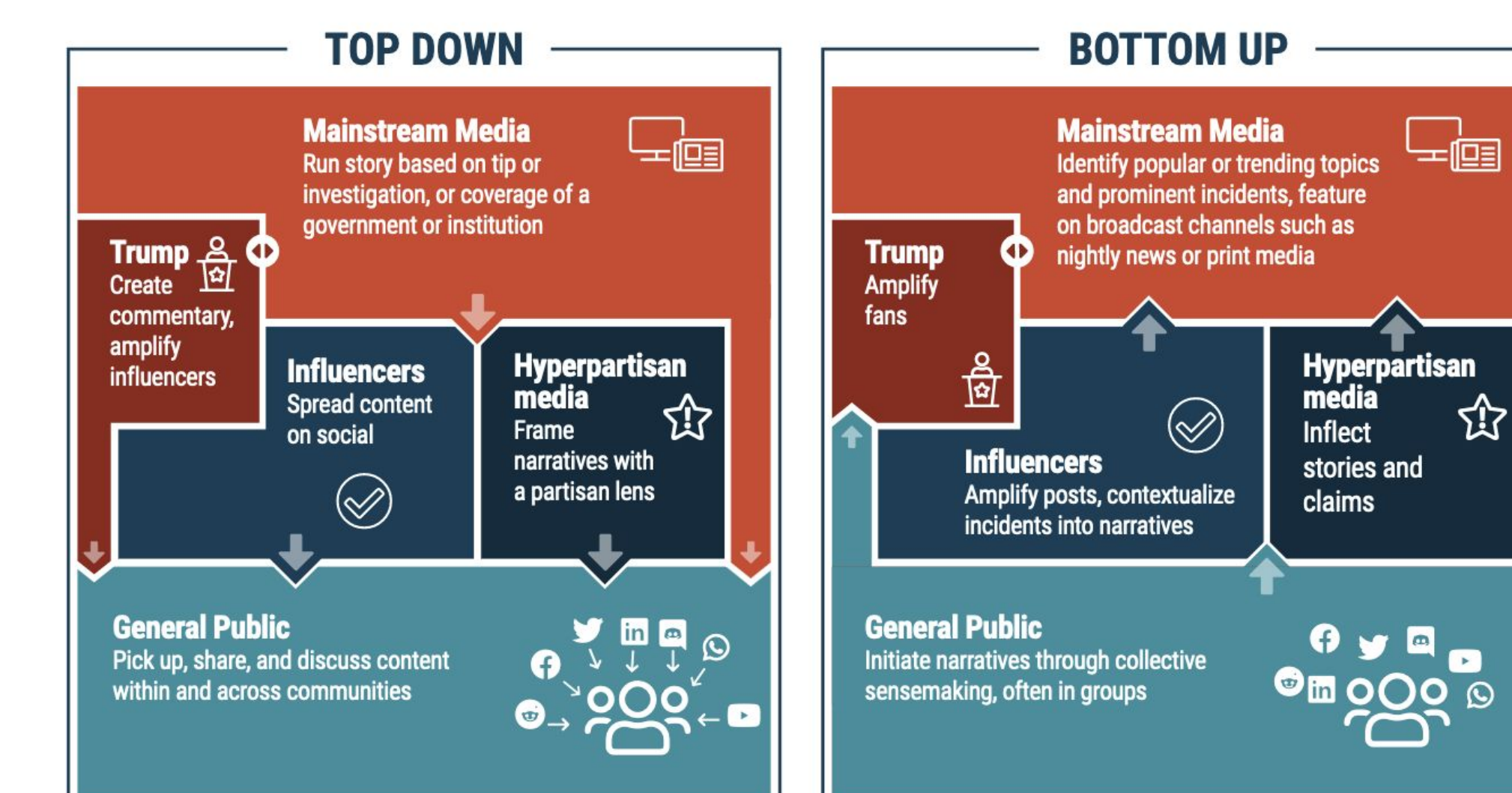
Works Cited and Additional Resources →

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