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The Source Project; Disinformation Stream. Thank you Prof. Dement!!

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Introduction

Currently, political rhetoric is driven, often not by facts, but by a complicated and toxic mix of falsehoods, anxiety, and in the case of the Republican party, bigotry, leading to policy goals and legislation divorced from reality, and an American populace problematically influenced by moral panic and fear.

The Rainbow Fentanyl Panic

In the fall of 2022, parents were warned by the DEA that the potent, deadly opioid responsible for 70% of youth drug deaths in 2018 was being dyed bright colors to entice their young children into addiction and overdose ("DEA Warns of Brightly-Colored Fentanyl Used to Target Young Americans"). However, experts in the drug manufacturing and distribution world immediately pointed out the absurdity of this claim, as children likely have no money, no transportation, and scant understanding of what is happening, and therefore would make for extremely poor clientele for the profit motivated drug dealer (Mann). Despite the complete logical breakdown in the DEA's claim, Republican politicians and news pundits immediately latched on to rainbow fentanyl, injecting it with other, salient issues, including the opioid crisis, border control, and immigration. **Suddenly, rainbow fentanyl was a story about illegal Mexican immigrants murdering innocent children.**

Disinformation as Political Communication

The rainbow fentanyl panic was an example of the larger problem of political disinformation; politicians were likely already aware of its improbability. As the months have gone by, no reports have been published specifically naming rainbow fentanyl as the cause of death or injury (Palma). Disinformation is the purposeful spread of false information for one's own gain – in this example, **the Republican party created a powerful, anti-immigrant narrative to generate support for stronger border control right before the 2022 midterm election.**

Wielding Fear Appeals

Disinformation often includes a strong emotional component (Wardle 34). In this case, the rainbow fentanyl narrative hinged upon fear – parents were told that their children would die. Moreover, it played upon pre-existing anxieties about the opioid crisis, crime, and border security.

How does fear create potent disinformation?
- **Impairs logic:** When people are afraid, a 2015 study proved they make worse decisions, and use less of the left side of the brain (responsible for critical thinking). (Wagner 11)
- **Future vulnerability:** A 2019 study found that people exposed to fear appeals were more open to manipulation, and more reactive to following threatening stimuli. (Miu et. al 104)
- **Stronger rhetoric**: Fear of harm is a strong, logical motivator. In addition, the sensation of fear in and of itself is unpleasant, leading people to seek security. (Walker-Wilson 22)
- **"Virality":** In 2021, researchers found that social media content containing negative emotions like fear spread faster and farther than positive content. In addition, a 40 year review of news content found that the amount of 'scary' content has steadily increased because of profit incentives. (Albertson 61)

Political effects of fear appeals:
- A 2013 study found that threatening events can create a country wide conservative shift. Overall, conservatism is associated with increased negativity bias and greater sensitivity to threats. (O'Rule et. al 4)
- More generally, both parties often use fear appeals to garner support – **worried people are drawn to policies that protect them, and politicians compete to win attention and offer protection.** (Albertson 74)

Bigotry, a Comorbidity

Within the rainbow fentanyl narrative and outside of it, illegal Mexican immigrants are often falsely blamed for the opioid epidemic and crime. In an op-ed about rainbow fentanyl, Republican senator Marco Rubio stated: "if [Democrats] want to keep Americans safe and healthy, it's critical that they start enforcing the rule of law and crack down on illegal immigration". (Rubio)

- **Bigotry & fear:** Often, immigrants are falsely painted as the source of threats: they are associated with a declining economy, increased violence, depleted medical and educational resources, the erosion of cultural and national values, and terrorism (Weisman 3). Individual immigrants are portrayed as criminal, poor, violent, and uneducated (Yakusko 37).
- **Bigotry & disinformation:** Disinformation that utilizes racist or xenophobic stereotypes is more likely to be believed because of confirmation bias (Wardle). Confirmation bias coincides with nationalism and racism, creating circumstances in which people only seek out or agree with information that verifies their racist viewpoint. This creates incentives against fact-checking, and aids the spread of disinformation (Flores-Yeffals 17).
- **Bigotry & political communication:** Lee Atwater, campaign manager for Presidents Reagan and Bush Sr said in 1981, "You start out in 1954 by saying, 'N****r, n****r, n****r.' By 1968 you can't say 'n****r.' That hurts you, backfires." Instead, he explained, post-Civil Rights era speakers switched to more "abstract" appeals which nonetheless reassured voters that, "We're doing away with the racial problem one way or the other...so any way you look at it, race is coming in on the back burner.'"(Brown 317).
- **Conspiracy theories:** Political extremists create conspiracy theories or instrumentalize existing ones to demonize real or perceived ideological opponents by creating "images of the enemy" that justify radical political action or even violence against the group or state in question (Selvage 32).

Sources →