


Logically.



**Online Situational
Awareness Helps
Counter **Mis/
Disinformation** and
Mitigate Threats**

www.logically.ai

Summary

Election officials are keenly aware of the problem of mis/disinformation narratives and physical threats to election staff and facilities. However, a significant share of election administrators lacks the personnel, tools, and expertise necessary to be situationally aware of online mis/disinformation targeting the election process before it goes viral or results in real-world harm. Gaining online situational awareness can provide election officials valuable time and space to combat mis/disinformation early or take preventive measures to mitigate physical threats to staff and facilities.



Mis/Disinformation and Physical Threats Have Not Gone Away

Heading into the 2022 midterms, election officials across the country are concerned that mis/disinformation campaigns will disrupt the smooth conduct of elections and cause confusion, chaos, and civil unrest. During the 2020 presidential election, many states were overwhelmed with the mis/disinformation circulating on social media. Indeed, throughout the 2020 election cycle (January 2020 and February 2021), over 3,425,102 pieces of election-related high-threat content were detected online.¹

To confront this challenge, states including Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, and Idaho, among many others, have significantly expanded their counter mis/disinformation capabilities.² However, a significant share of election administrators lacks the personnel, tools, and expertise necessary to remain situationally aware of online activity.

Online situational awareness is about getting visibility into the narratives and threats spreading online, particularly across different platforms, and knowing when those narratives are gaining momentum and could lead to real-world harm.

Election officials also face several challenges in detecting narratives before they go viral and discovering physical security threats in a timely manner.

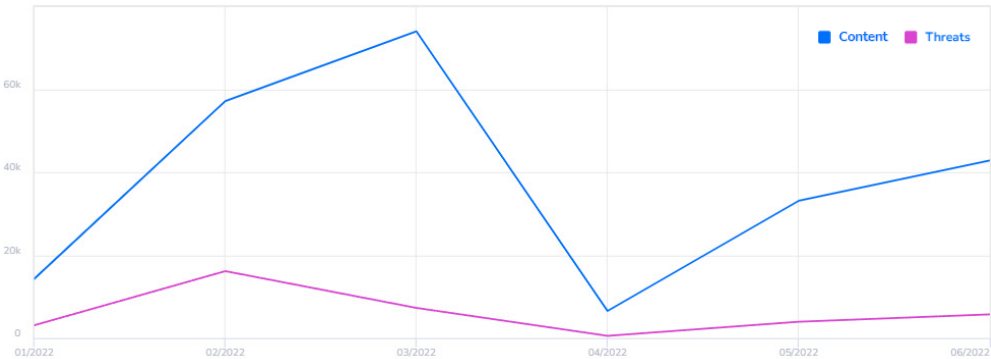
2 | Online Situational Awareness Helps Counter Mis/Disinformation and Mitigate Threats

Too Much Data on Too Many Platforms

The underlying problem many election officials face when trying to maintain situational awareness online is that there is simply too much content being spread on too many platforms, and each platform presents different challenges. Just keeping tabs on the main social media sites that most Americans use (Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter) is hard enough. These sites are some of the most popular and account for a large share of content, but there are hundreds, if not thousands, of other platforms, blogs, and websites that are often responsible for spreading mis/disinformation content and harboring threats. A lot of these smaller networks have a hands-off approach to moderation, leading to mis/disinformation flourishing. Most state and local election administrators have neither the time nor the staff with the tools and expertise to maintain robust situational awareness across these platforms.

Elections-Related Content Online

January 1, 2022 - June 1, 2022



Elections-Related Content By Platform

January 1, 2022 - June 1, 2022

Platform	Content	Threats
Twitter	85586354	16897488
News & Articles	1801992	344237
Facebook	1330256	122307
Instagram	18553	2761
Reddit	4420	681
Telegram	2294	464
Tumblr	1033	99
Forum Post	738	81
Blogs	708	63

Election officials are already seeing in the 2022 primaries that mis/disinformation is causing real-world disruptions, and they are expecting more in the weeks and months ahead. In June 2022, unsubstantiated concerns about the integrity of voting systems led county commissioners in rural New Mexico to refuse to certify the results of a recent primary.³ It is only a matter of where and when, not if, the next #sharpiagate-type video gets uploaded or individuals seeking to disrupt the election use social media to draw attention to their cause. The more important question is whether state and local election officials will have the online situational awareness to see this activity in its early stages, or will they constantly be playing catch up.

The Evolving Playbook For Online Situational Awareness

Maintaining online situational awareness has its challenges, but increasingly it is something that election officials can realize. In the private sector, large corporations concerned about maintaining their brands have driven innovation in this space resulting in social media monitoring tools that help them understand the online conversations about their company and products. Because these have been driven by commercial clients, the tools are primarily designed to address commercial needs, which can differ in some ways from the public sector.

In addition to tools, maintaining situational awareness online requires individuals with expertise to make sense of the massive amounts of information. It is both time-intensive to build this expertise and time-consuming to effectively use the tools to remain aware of what is happening online. Increasingly, it requires sophisticated techniques, tactics, and procedures to keep up with online threats. Many big corporations have the resources to bring these capabilities in-house, but smaller organizations often outsource to firms with the tools and expertise because the value of remaining situationally aware online is worth the investment.

Enabling Early Countermeasures To Mis/Disinformation and Threats

Maintaining situational awareness enables organizations to spot emerging narratives and threats early, which provides more time and space to take action to counter mis/disinformation or mitigate physical threats to staff and facilities. In recent years, states and localities have invested in hiring mis/disinformation specialists and additional communications staff to better educate their residents and voters. Some have hired election security staff and bolstered their physical security presence to protect election workers and facilities. Online situational awareness is a force multiplier for these individuals and teams because it helps them focus their efforts, particularly when their jurisdiction becomes the target.

4 | Online Situational Awareness Helps Counter Mis/Disinformation and Mitigate Threats

Online situational awareness has the potential to take communication efforts to the next level by shifting teams from the reactive position of responding to already viral mis/disinformation, to the proactive position of countering emerging narratives before they go viral. Furthermore, online situational awareness enables election administrators to analyze the threat in terms of which actors are spreading the information, the credibility of the content, and the volume of engagements to decide the most effective response.⁴ This helps officials use their scarce resources in the most effective ways possible. Imagine communications teams being able to see #sharpiegate-type videos while they are still circulating in small local circles as opposed to after they have been shared or re-tweeted by influencers with millions of followers.

On the physical security front, situational awareness can help officials anticipate or uncover threats to election workers and facilities before they materialize, providing decision makers more time to take precautions to mitigate the threats. Imagine security teams seeing posts about disrupting an election facility on fringe social media platforms before they see large crowds outside a location on CNN. When it comes to mis/disinformation and physical threats, online situational awareness gives election officials more time and options to take action to ensure elections run smoothly.

Conclusion

While every state and locality is different, all would benefit from increasing their online situational awareness. Maintaining situational awareness can be a challenge, but it is increasingly in reach for state and local election officials. Gaining this awareness can provide election officials valuable time and space to combat mis/disinformation early on or take preventive measures to mitigate physical threats to staff and facilities before lives, property, or the election process are in danger. Heading into election season, each jurisdiction should take the time to evaluate their current capabilities and assess whether they can enhance their online situational awareness of mis/disinformation and security threats.

About Logically

Logically is a technology company combining advanced artificial intelligence with human expertise to tackle harmful and problematic online content at scale. Logically is an award-winning international team of over 150 data scientists, engineers, analysts, developers and investigators, united by the company's mission to provide access to trustworthy information.

References

1. Source: Logically Intelligence analysis
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/technology/misinformation-sheriff-election-midterms.html>
3. <https://www.kob.com/new-mexico/otero-county-commissioners-schedule-second-vote-on-election-certification/>
4. <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/d3pTT/Comms.pdf>