

To: News Division Heads, Editors in Chief, Bureau Chiefs, Political Directors, Editors, Producers, Reporters, Anchors

From: ACRONYM, BlackPAC, Color Of Change PAC, EMILY'S LIST WOMEN VOTE!, Higher Heights Political Fund, MomsRising, NARAL Pro-Choice America, Planned Parenthood Votes, SumOfUs, Supermajority, UltraViolet, and Win Black / Pa'Lante

Re: Countering bias and disinformation in debate coverage

In coming weeks, the presidential and vice presidential debates will shape the national conversation on critical issues, including the Covid-19 pandemic, the Supreme Court, and police violence that led to the murder of Breonna Taylor. Your platform will serve as a critical medium for voters to review the debates and form opinions. We urge you to commit to proactively countering racism, sexism, and disinformation in your debate coverage.

In an age of widespread disinformation and confusion, Americans depend on media sources like yours to provide accurate information and to counter racist and sexist biases. Headlines, photos, social media previews, and the content of a story can be used to spread racist and sexist ideas, and encourage or legitimize disinformation and extremism, as noted in "[Reporting in an Era of Disinformation: Fairness Guide for Covering Women and People of Color in Politics](#)".

It's up to the media to counterbalance bias for your viewers and readers. We hope we can trust your newsroom to identify dangerous racist and sexist narratives and disinformation. You must provide live fact-checking and balanced debate coverage on Tuesday as well as in weeks to come.

The debates have yet to begin, but already earlier this week, debate moderator and Fox News host Chris Wallace announced his debate framework, which includes the dangerous trope "race and violence in our cities." This racist dog whistle framework equates Blackness with violence and has no place serving as a foundation for our national conversations. Meanwhile, Donald Trump and the extreme-right have spread racist and sexist lies about Kamala Harris, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Ilhan Omar, Nancy Pelosi, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and other women leaders across social media and during campaign events.

Disinformation campaigns draw on negative stereotypes to lend a sense of credibility while attacking the intended target. The so-called "Pizzagate" conspiracy that spread across social media and resulted in a shooting in Washington, D.C. relied on the narrative that Hillary Clinton was unlikeable and untrustworthy -- insults that are frequently lobbed at women running for office. The birther conspiracy theory used to discredit President Obama relied on both racist and Islamophobic ideas. False information about voting deadlines and requirements have kept people away from the polls and suppressed votes for centuries. Disinformation paired with racism and sexism puts lives at risk: death threats have been aimed at women of color

candidates and leaders, healthcare clinics have been attacked at gunpoint, and most recently, Kyle Rittenhouse murdered people in Kenosha based on conspiracy theories and racism spread online.

Medical disinformation has helped the coronavirus spread and puts lives at risk and furthers the harms of systemic racism. Our nation has exceeded 200,000 deaths from COVID-19—with a disproportionate impact on Black, Latinx and Indigenous people—and medical disinformation about the coronavirus puts lives at risk. Donald Trump’s promotion of unproven Hydroxychloroquine led to overdoses and a medication shortage that made the drug inaccessible to chronic illness patients who rely on it—predominantly women of color. Disinformation regarding disinfectants led to people drinking and inhaling poisonous household cleaning products.

Last month, UltraViolet, in conjunction with ACRONYM, Color Of Change PAC, Disinfo Defense League, EMILY’s LIST WOMEN VOTE!, NARAL Pro-Choice America, Planned Parenthood Votes, SumOfUs, Women’s March, Strategic Victory Fund, GQR Digital, and #ShePersisted, launched [Reporting in an Era of Disinformation: Fairness Guide for Covering Women and People of Color in Politics](#).

The guide makes specific recommendations designed to help journalists and platforms identify and avoid unintentional sexist and racist bias or disinformation when interviewing, writing, or moderating content about race, gender, and disinformation, including the following:

- Consider biases that are at play when it comes to race, gender, ability, orientation, and other protected statuses, and question and debunk stories and language that perpetuate bias.
- Ask yourself how this strand of disinformation is targeting those who are Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander, LGBTQ people, women, Muslims, immigrants, and other underrepresented communities.
- Write headlines and social media posts as if they are the only things people will read. Headlines that sensationalize disinformation and racist or sexist attacks help to spread disinformation and attacks when the headlines circulate on social media and in news aggregators.
- Reporting on disinformation rather than debunking it can help spread it. Name disinformation as unfounded, a conspiracy theory, debunked, dubious, unlikely, misleading, a lie, false, etc. in the headline if you must write about disinformation.
- Avoid covering “trending” topics on Twitter as reflective of broad support, even when total volume is still very low. Twitter “trends” are based on many factors, and do not necessarily mean a large number of users are participating in a conversation.

In August, with the release of our media guide, we set the standard for avoiding sexism, racism, and disinformation in political news coverage. Today we remind the media to review and reference [Reporting in an Era of Disinformation: Fairness Guide for Covering Women and](#)

[People of Color in Politics](#) as they report on the presidential election, and we invite newsrooms to come to the table with us for a discussion on steps they can take to prevent the spread of bias and disinformation.

The best way to combat the spread of disinformation as well as racist and sexist attacks is to stop them at the source. It's critical that the media commit to actively working to stop the spread of disinformation, sexism, and racism while covering the presidential and vice presidential debates. The future of our country, our people, and our democracy are at stake.