ONYX
IMPACT

2024
# The Black Online
Disinformation Landscape

Executive Summary

Black communities hold immense power in our political system. In an era of unprecedented technological and social change, confronting the challenges created by misinformation and disinformation affecting Black communities is crucial to ensuring the health and stability of our democracy.

Onyx Impact's *Black Online Disinformation Landscape Analysis* is a vital step in that effort. **This landscape analysis provides the first ever comprehensive roadmap for understanding and addressing the unique disinformation networks and narratives both within and targeting Black online spaces.**

Takeaways

1. **The three most significant narrative threats to Black voter engagement in 2024** are misleading narratives about: Civic Disengagement, Biden Broken Promises, and Stoking Division.

2. **The Far-Right Activist Network, particularly Black Far-Right Activists, spread the most disinformation** to Black communities and engage with the highest number of misleading narratives.

3. **Anti-immigrant narratives are prevalent across multiple Black disinfo networks** and the risk of this narrative "breaking out" is high.

4. **In the current media environment, Black Gateway Influencers and Platforms are critical to stemming the rising tide of disinformation** and reaching Black audiences targeted by harmful narratives.

2024 Strategic Guidance
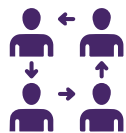
Develop Robust Strategies to Engage Black Gateway Influencers Immediately.

Identify and Resource As Many Black Trusted Messengers and Media as Possible.

Expose and Discredit Key Bad Actors in the Core Black Disinfo Networks.

Aggressively Counter Revisionist History, Civic Disengagement, and Biden Broken Promises Disinformation Narratives.

Nuance is Necessary: Foundational Choices in this Landscape

While this landscape strives to be a comprehensive overview of the current online disinformation ecosystem impacting the Black community, it is important to approach the research findings with nuance and an understanding of the complex, ever-evolving nature of Black culture and our information ecosystems. Onyx Impact has documented thousands of accounts within and tangential to this Black disinformation ecosystem, but we recognize that the intentionality spectrum of harmful discourse is broad, and therefore focused on highlighting the most pernicious networks, narratives and influencers in these spaces. **Onyx Impact rejects any attempt to use this research to make broad generalizations about the Black community or fuel divisions within the Black diaspora.**

Overview of Landscape

Confronting the challenges created by misinformation and disinformation affecting Black communities is crucial to ensuring the health and stability of our democracy. **Onyx Impact's** *Black Online Disinformation Landscape Analysis* **provides the first ever comprehensive roadmap for** **understanding and addressing the unique disinformation networks and narratives within Black online spaces.** To conduct this analysis, Onyx Impact researchers implemented a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques.

Six Core Networks Identified

Onyx Impact identified six prominent online networks reaching or targeting Black Americans. This includes both authentic online networks and personalities influencing Black Americans' views and disinformation networks targeting Black Americans across social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube. Although many more networks exist in Black online spaces, these six represent some of the most significant in connection with spreading false and misleading narratives in Black communities. Key networks identified in the analysis include:

1 **Gateway Influencers and Platforms,** represent authentic online influencers and platforms in Black spaces and with large Black followings who serve, often unintentionally, as high-value targets for bad actors to introduce harmful narratives. This network serves a critical role in elevating Black news and culture, but may also uplift misleading influencers and narratives. (Ex: *The Breakfast Club*, *The Shade Room*, *19 Keys*, *The Joe Budden Podcast*, *Earn Your Leisure*, *The Stephen A. Smith Show*)

2 **Far-Right Activists and Media Outlets,** including Black and non-Black extremists who target Black audiences with inauthentic persuasion campaigns and promote anti-Black, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ+, revisionist histories, and other disinformation narratives to advance their political agenda.

3 **Black Manosphere,** is a subset of the internet's manosphere that encompasses a group of online communities sharing extreme misogynistic views that specifically address Black men's experiences. This network emphasizes a narrow view of Black masculinity tied to dominance, emotional suppression, and material achievement, while creating an extremely negative portrayal of Black women that strains gender relations and reinforces divisive narratives within the broader Black community.

4 **Black Extreme Nativists and Separatists,** separate themselves from other Black nativist movements uplifting Black determination by creating, promoting, and amplifying racialized disinformation, a xenophobic worldview, and pushing far-right talking points on gender, sex, and health care.

5 **Health Skeptics,** target Black communities with mis/disinformation about medical treatments and public health measures. By targeting health issues disproportionately affecting Black communities, they foster skepticism towards conventional healthcare practices, advocating for alternative healing methods.

6 **Foreign Actors,** include individuals or entities acting on the behalf of, have strong ties to, or may be inadvertently promoting talking points from foreign governments, organizations, or interests that seek to influence or interfere in US political discourse, particularly as it relates to Black voters and Black social issues.
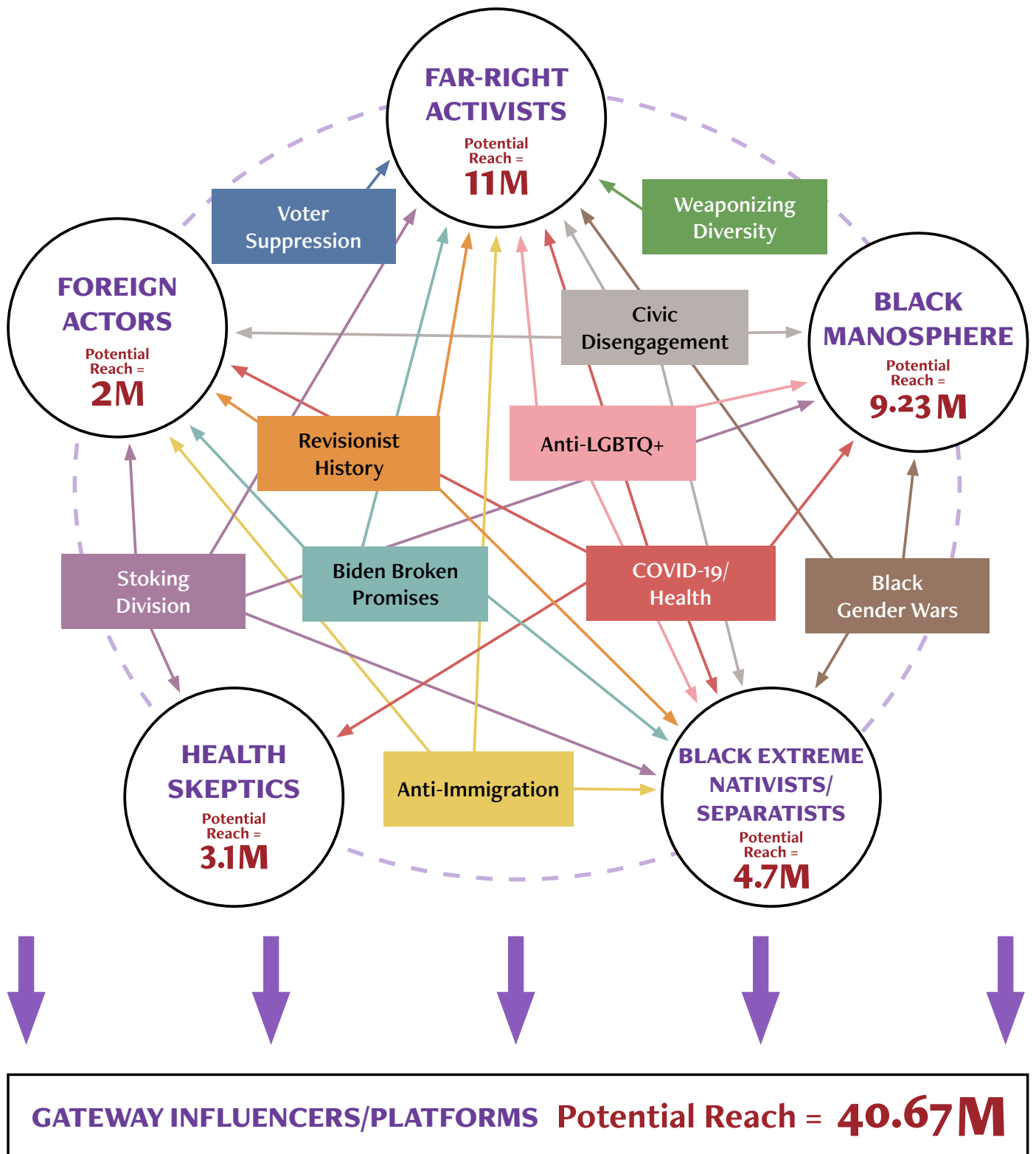

10 Prominent Narratives Identified

NARRATIVE	REACH	IMPACT
Revisionist History	High	High
Civic Disengagement	High	High
Anti- Immigration	High	Moderate
Voter Suppression*	Moderate	Moderate
Black Gender Wars	High	High
Anti-LGBTQ+	High	Moderate
Biden Broken Promises	High	High
Stoking Division	High	High
COVID-19/Health	High	High
Weaponizing Diversity	Moderate	Moderate

Onyx Impact's research identified ten of the most prominent narratives across Black disinformation online spaces. The reach of these narratives was determined by the number of core networks actively engaging with each narrative and the volume of conversation across platforms. **"High Reach"** narratives are defined as those spanning three or more networks. **"High Impact"** narratives were defined as those actively moving people into new networks or were currently popular topics of discussion across multiple "Gateway Influencers."

*(The full landscape analysis defines each narrative and examines their reach, impact and influence across core networks. **Note: this measure reflects a narrow definition of "reach" and "impact" used consistently throughout this landscape—in which narratives must span three or more core networks and be a current popular topic of discussion across multiple Gateway Influencers to be considered "high." Voter suppression is obviously a very dangerous narrative and a threat to our democracy.)*

The Web of Online Black Disinformation[1]

FAR-RIGHT ACTIVISTS
Potential Reach = **11M**

Voter Suppression

Weaponizing Diversity

FOREIGN ACTORS
Potential Reach = **2M**

Civic Disengagement

BLACK MANOSPHERE
Potential Reach = **9.23M**

Revisionist History

Anti-LGBTQ+

Stoking Division

Biden Broken Promises

COVID-19/ Health

Black Gender Wars

HEALTH SKEPTICS
Potential Reach = **3.1M**

Anti-Immigration

BLACK EXTREME NATIVISTS/ SEPARATISTS
Potential Reach = **4.7M**

GATEWAY INFLUENCERS/PLATFORMS Potential Reach = **40.67M**

[1] Potential reach represents the cumulative number of subscribers for the top 5 actors' main platform

Key Takeaways

The Most Significant Narrative Threats to Black Voter Engagement in 2024 are Misleading Narratives About Civic Disengagement, Biden Broken Promises, and Stoking Division.

These misleading narratives currently have the highest reach and impact across core networks and are consistently platformed by Gateway Influencers. (The narrative section below defines and explains the dynamics of each of these threats in detail).

The Black Far-Right Activist Network is Spreading the Most Disinformation to Black communities.

We cannot underestimate the power of this network to shape 2024 discourse and persuade Black voters. The Black Far-Right Activist Network is the only core network actively engaging with and amplifying all ten prominent narratives identified in this analysis. In addition, the reach of just five leading actors in this space is more than 11 million subscribers, with content views and engagement numbers many factors higher.[2] Well known far-right influencer Candace Owens has experienced a remarkable rise in notoriety in Black online spaces, coinciding with her split from the far-right outlet Daily Wire. In recent months, Owens has strategically rebranded herself to appeal to Black audiences and has aligned herself with "Black Manosphere" key actors like the Fresh and Fit podcast, while gaining access to top "Gateway Influencer" actors like The Breakfast Club and The Joe Budden Podcast

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Black Gateway Influencers Are Key to Stemming Rising Tide of Disinformation.

The Black Gateway Influencer network serves a critical role in informing Black communities and uplifting Black news and culture and should not be viewed as bad actors. Onyx Impact recently conducted seven national Black focus groups to gain insights into how they consumed online information and engaged with prominent narratives. The Breakfast Club was one of the most frequently cited sources of news across groups, indicating widespread reach and impact. This network is targeted by bad actors for this very reason. Because most of the prominent narratives exist across multiple networks, when bad actors successfully spread a key narrative to a Gateway Influencer, the added audience exposure and potential algorithmic referral impact serves every network engaging with that key narrative. Ensuring Gateway Platforms are flooded with good information will be key to mitigating this effect and the 2024 risks.


Anti-Immigrant Narratives are Breaking Out Across Multiple Black Disinfo Networks.

The growing prevalence of anti-immigrant rhetoric is notable across the Far-Right Activists, Black Extremists, and Foreign Actors core networks. Given anti-immigrant rhetoric is active across multiple core networks, there is significant breakout risk if Gateway Influencers begin to focus on this topic. Anti-immigrant narratives currently take two distinct tracks: Extreme Black Nativists and Separatists often push bigoted beliefs toward Black immigrants and Indigenous people, suggesting that support for these communities comes "at the expense" of addressing the needs of native-born Black Americans, primarily through reparations. Far-Right Activists have focused more on "border crisis" narratives that suggest Latino immigrants are responsible for taking resources and jobs in Black communities. However, this distinction is weakening as foreign and domestic actors in these networks amplify both tracks simultaneously.

2024 Strategic Guidance

Develop Robust Strategies to Engage Black Gateway Influencers Immediately.

If we want to stem the current wave of disengaging rhetoric and inauthentic persuasion of Black voters, we must have plans to consistently engage Black Gateway Influencers between now and the election. Our focus groups showed again and again that mediums such as The Breakfast Club are still main engagement platforms for Black voters, regardless of how they are seen in political circles.
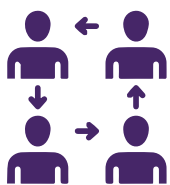
If Candace Owens is on *The Breakfast Club* five times this year, we should have our trusted messengers on ten times. We should make sure informative ads/content and information is appearing on Gateway Influencers platforms constantly. This is especially important in 2024, as social media companies announced that they are limiting political content on feeds. Bad actors are circumventing these rules by engaging non-political "lifestyle" influencers to share their narratives. We must also be prepared to engage non-political influencers if we hope to fight back.

Identify and Resource As Many Black Trusted Messengers and Media as Possible.

There is a crisis of trusted messengers in our community, in part caused by the attacks on news media and the spread of disinformation globally. Onyx Impact's focus groups showed that there are few national leaders seen as trusted messengers. As the cost of spreading disinformation approaches zero it will become increasingly more difficult to determine what is authentic and inauthentic news.

We must find and develop innovative, quantitative strategies to identify who can actually be considered a trusted messenger in Black communities at a local, state and national level. With the advent of generative AI, soon who information is coming from will be the only way for many people to verify it. As research indicates young Black people may be moving farther away from the church and more time passes from the Civil Rights Era, it would be a grave mistake to assume trusted messengers have remained the same.

Expose and Discredit Key Bad Actors in the Core Black Disinfo Networks.

We cannot allow Bad Actor's spread of disinformation to millions of Black Americans to continue to go unchecked. Onyx Impact's focus groups showed that when Black voters are shown examples of clear deception, they become motivated to demand change. Creating strategies to expose, undermine and discredit key bad actors will be critical in 2024.

Aggressively Counter Revisionist History, Civic Disengagement, and Biden Broken Promises Disinformation Narratives while Overwhelming Narratives Meant to Stoke Division.

Onyx Impact found a lack of effective counter-narratives against harmful revisionist history rhetoric in Black online spaces. These well-funded misleading narratives are gaining traction and shaping perceptions and attitudes about the past and present, targeting Black audiences with messages that undermine the legitimacy of civil rights movements and progressive causes. We must create online content and deploy tactics like keyword and search-engine optimization to ensure access to factual history and increase the likelihood of counter-narratives actually reaching key audiences.

A Message
From The CEO

Onyx Impact believes Black people deserve brilliant, resilient information sharing ecosystems that build trust, power and community. Disinformation—information created to mislead or harm—doesn't just close doors, it builds walls of distrust and disillusionment. Fighting disinformation is vital to strengthening and empowering Black communities. We are proud to put forth the Black Online Disinformation Landscape Analysis as a vital step in that effort— **the first comprehensive roadmap for understanding and addressing the unique disinformation networks and narratives within Black online spaces and targeting Black online spaces.**

Esosa Osa, Founder and CEO

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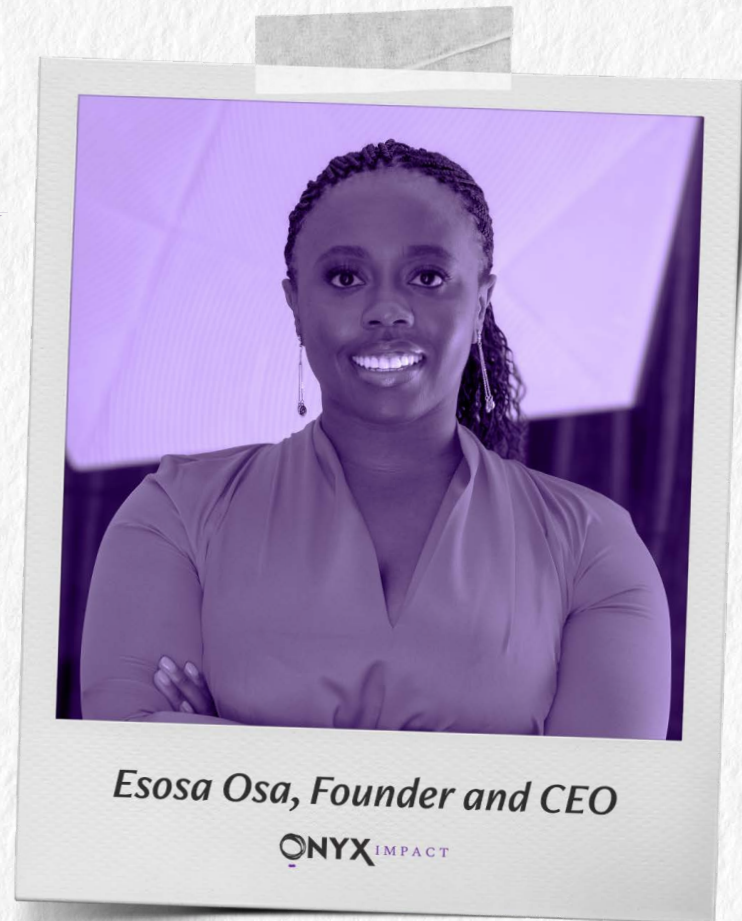
The Moment

This work has never been more critical.

The current political environment is ripe for the spread of disinformation in Black communities. Disinformation needs distrust to spread, and research shows Black voters are more dissatisfied with the current political landscape than in previous cycles. This genuine Black voter discontent is creating the ideal social environment for disinformation to seed, grow, and ultimately disengage and disillusion voters.

But we cannot hope to address a problem we do not understand. Despite a vast amount of research in recent years on how disinformation affects various communities, a systemic lack of curiosity and care has resulted in substantially less research and action on this topic specifically for Black communities. Onyx Impact believes the threat to Black communities from increasingly sophisticated disinformation is real, and our research indicates–

Disinformation in Black online spaces is exacerbating, and in some cases, causing:
- Black voter disengagement, disillusionment, and suppression,
- An increase in tensions between and within minority communities,
- More difficult medical outreach to Black communities and potentially worse health outcomes and
- Pipelining to Black extremist spaces touting anti-immigrant, anti-government, misogynistic rhetoric

The risk to Black civic engagement and broader coalition fracturing as a result of disinformation cannot be ignored. We must meet this moment of disinformation intensity with intentional counter-strategies based on new research and historical precedent.

> "It's bad. [Disinformation] causes a lot of division in the Black community. They do it purposely to cause a lot of division...it can definitely cause even more division and more tension and chaos in the Black community."
>
> – Black man, from Cincinnati, Ohio
> Onyx Impact Focus Groups

> "Disinformation is a real issue because it influences not just the way people vote but whether or not they vote. And a lot of what I've seen and heard has been disinformation targeted towards basically disenfranchising people, particularly people of color and people who are not in the top 1%."
>
> – Black woman, registered voter from Atlanta, GA
> Onyx Impact Focus Groups

A Historical Lens

Non-digital disinformation strategies have historically been used to suppress Black voter turnout, withhold civil rights from Black Americans, and undermine the basic humanity of Black people. Deceptive practices were often used during Reconstruction and the Civil Rights eras to mislead, intimidate, and harm Black voters. Widespread racist propaganda has historically been used to: depict Black people as less than, deepen false narratives about the Black community, and foster hate, extremism, and bigotry.

Modern-day disinformation tactics against Black communities have continued to increase in frequency and sophistication as evidenced in the 2016 and 2020 presidential election cycles. While the methods, technologies, and sophistication have changed, the intent remains the same— to outright prevent, discourage, and dissuade Black communities from civic engagement, dilute Black power, and restrict Black resources.

Yet the online spread of disinformation and artificial intelligence has created a new battlefield that we are woefully unprepared to fight on.

> "[Disinformation] discourages people from just investing in Black communities, investing in Black people, period."
>
> – Black woman, registered voter from Raleigh, NC, Onyx Impact Focus Groups

The Path Forward

We can fight this new and growing threat to democracy and outcompete, mitigate, and inoculate against disinformation. As James Baldwin once said, "Those who say it can't be done are usually interrupted by others doing it." A long-term strategy created in coalition is needed to win this battle. But in this moment, we can take steps to improve immediately the landscape for our community by:

Investing in Black Research and Black Mitigation Strategies

More foundational research is needed in this space to better inform action and policy. But it is not enough to understand this new online battlefield, we must also work to constantly create and deploy strategic campaigns to protect Black communities by mitigating the spread of disinformation, reducing the harm caused, and holding bad actors accountable.

Supporting Black Media and Black Messengers

With the advent of generative AI, the cost of spreading disinformation is approaching zero, while the cost of accessing truth continues to rise. Research shows that deciphering authentic news stories from inauthentic imitations is becoming increasingly more difficult. In this environment, it has never been more important to have trusted messengers and media outlets that Black communities can turn to for accurate information. According to a recent Pew Research Study 64% of Black people still use Black outlets for news content. This information ecosystem continues to be vital to engaging Black audiences and as the threat of disinformation targeting Black communities grows, it is critical to arm Black media outlets and messengers with the resources to reach larger audiences, be trusted fact-checkers, and spread inoculation best practices.

Holding Social Media Companies Accountable

Amid increasingly sophisticated disinformation campaigns targeted at Black voters, social media companies have significantly rolled back policies meant to mitigate hate and harassment and provide voter protection on their platforms ahead of the 2024 presidential elections. Social media companies cannot act as if there is no link between false claims about elections and the political violence we saw against Black election workers and election officials in previous cycles. They must not be allowed to create environments of hate, harassment, and misleading information that disproportionately targets communities of color during election cycles and we should hold them accountable in real time for the harmful information they allow to flow unimpeded across their platforms.

Ultimately, the fight against disinformation in Black online spaces is not just about protecting democracy, but also about creating safer, more resilient information ecosystems that build trust, power, and community. Onyx Impact hopes this foundational research can serve as an important step towards achieving this goal for our community.

**– Esosa Osa,
Founder and CEO of Onyx Impact**