**Pre-bunking falsehoods: How Wisconsin voters can avoid falling for election misinformation**

*By Howard Hardee, Wisconsin Watch*

News that three trays of mail had been discovered in a ditch in Greenville, Wisconsin, recently spread on social media and evolved into a national talking point for conservative outlets such as Breitbart.

President Donald Trump’s administration used the story in its ongoing campaign to sow distrust in voting by mail. White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany cited it as evidence of “a system that’s subject to fraud,” and Trump claimed that mail ballots were being “dumped in rivers” and “creeks” during the presidential debate against Democratic challenger Joe Biden — an apparent reference to the mail found in a Fox Valley ditch.

But the claims were based on incomplete information. While the Outagamie County Sheriff’s Office told news outlets that the trays of mail included “several” absentee ballots, none of the ballots came from Wisconsin, and no authority has linked the trays to nefarious activity.

“There was mail found outside of Appleton, and that mail did not contain any Wisconsin ballots,” said Meagan Wolfe, administrator of the Wisconsin Elections Commission, in an online news conference on Oct. 1.

Wolfe said she did not have additional information about the contents of the mail, which the U.S. Postal Service was investigating.

An onslaught of Wisconsin-focused social media content has attacked the integrity of the Postal Service, voting by mail, elections officials and the country’s election system. And Wisconsinites can expect to see more falsehoods and misleading statements ahead of Nov. 3.

The deluge of disinformation could shape the outcome of the election, said Michael Wagner, a professor of journalism and mass communication and expert on political messaging at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

“It’s certainly possible that these kinds of messages could affect a subset of voters,” he said. “In swing states like Wisconsin, something that affects 5,000 to 15,000 people could sway the entire presidential election. So, it doesn’t have to have a big effect in terms of numbers to have a huge effect with respect to who wins.”

The best defense from rumors, hoaxes and partisan propaganda is knowing what to expect. Here’s a preview of election-related misinformation that voters are likely to encounter on social media in the weeks ahead.

**Attempts to discredit elections officials and processes**

In this era of extreme political polarization, Trump’s supporters are branding city and county clerks as partisan actors who cannot be trusted to oversee basic processes such as counting ballots.

“The most insidious kind of voter suppression are posts that try to sow a lack of confidence in the integrity of our electoral systems,” Wagner said.

Milwaukee-based WISN radio host Dan O’Donnell used this strategy on April 7, primary election day, appearing to prime his wide audience to doubt the results through an evidence-free tweet suggesting a conspiracy. He said ballots would sit “unwatched” in office buildings, surrounded by “a bunch of hardcore partisans.”

Asked for evidence that Madison poll workers would violate their oaths to uphold the state constitution, O’Donnell pointed Wisconsin Watch to tweets expressing liberal viewpoints from a Twitter user who identifies as a volunteer poll worker in Madison.

In his response to Wisconsin Watch, O’Donnell also criticized Dane County Clerk Scott McDonell, a Democrat, for telling voters ahead of the April 7 primary that they could request a mail-in ballot without having to provide a photo ID by designating themselves as “indefinitely confined” during the state’s Safer at Home order. The Wisconsin Supreme Court blocked that guidance, saying it conflicted with the law.

More recently, O’Donnell’s fellow WISN host Vicki McKenna took aim at Madison’s Democracy in the Park event, which allowed voters to hand completed absentee ballots directly to poll workers on Sept. 26 and Oct. 3. McKenna, who did not respond to a request for comment, called the event “illegal ballot harvesting” and claimed the ballot-collection bags were “entirely unsecured,” while questioning the legitimacy of the poll workers themselves.

“The poll workers in each city park tomorrow have taken an oath of office,” Madison City Clerk Maribeth Witzel-Behl said in a press release ahead of the first day of the event. “They are the same dedicated public servants who administer elections at your polling place on Election Day.”

She added that on-site poll workers could double-check that voters completed their certificate envelope to ensure each ballot could be counted at the polls on Election Day.

Caroline Hoffman, a poll worker stationed at Burrows Park on Oct. 3, told Wisconsin Watch that the ballot-collection bags were, in fact, secure.

“We have it in our sight at all times,” she said. “We hand it to a courier, and the courier takes it straight to the City Clerk’s office. There are at least three witnesses who watch it being locked, and we all count the ballots and sign our names.”

Voters can check the status of their absentee ballots at myvote.wi.gov.

**Mail carriers, postal system will stay in the crosshairs**

A photo of a stack of mailboxes in an industrial lot went viral on social media in mid-August, after a Twitter user falsely called it evidence of “massive voter suppression” in Wisconsin and a bigger plan to “steal the election.”

The conspiratorial post came after Trump declared opposition to emergency funding for the Postal Service and mail-in voting and questioned the agency’s ability to deliver ballots in the November elections.

While the image was captured in Wisconsin, the mailboxes weren’t being decommissioned to sabotage voting by mail. Online sleuths quickly uncovered that, in reality, the photo depicted Hartford Finishing, a business in Hartford, Wisconsin, that contracts with the Postal Service to refurbish or destroy old mailboxes. That explains the stacks in the photo.

Another example appeared in the public Facebook group Western Wisconsin Conservatives. The post shows a postal worker rounding up Trump signs and claims that “they found his truck full of them.”

“Just think, he might be responsible for delivering your ballot and vote,” the user says. “Let that sink in!”

The post doesn’t specify when or where the photo was taken, but its appearance on a Wisconsin-specific page might lead people to believe it was local. However, a reverse-image search shows the image originally accompanied a story about a postal worker who removed Trump signs in Townsend, Delaware, immediately before the presidential election — in 2016. The image wasn’t new or relevant, but was presented as both.

Social media users are likely to encounter that strategy in the weeks ahead, said Jesse Littlewood, vice president for campaigns with Common Cause, a nonpartisan citizen reform advocacy group.

“Usually, there is either an old or out-of-context example or story that is re-upped and oftentimes presented as a contemporary example, when in reality it’s something that happened years ago,” he said.

Littlewood added: “This is a common tactic of disinformation actors: Find a story that says what you want it to say … make sure you either screen-capture it so it doesn’t say the state or the date — or that the link preview you put on Facebook doesn’t say those things — and then put it up online, and say, ‘This is further evidence of what’s happening’ or ‘Why is no one talking about this?’ ”

The Postal Service treats ballots as first-class mail and takes special care to make sure they are delivered securely. And evidence suggests that universal vote-by-mail isn’t an advantage for either party.

“There is no evidence that there is any widespread effort of postal workers to somehow affect the vote,” Littlewood said. “In fact, the opposite is true — they are the people most committed to ensuring everyone is able to vote by handling mail in a pandemic, which is a threat to their health.”

Though the Postal Service is facing logistical challenges and has struggled in recent months to hit on-time service goals in handling first-class mail — including in Wisconsin — that doesn’t mean the agency is participating in a conspiracy to sabotage the election.

The Postal Service’s web page on election mail is required reading for voters who doubt that mail-in ballots will be handled with care and professionalism.

Misdirection about polling locations and hours

Posts on social media commonly mislead people about the date of the election or polling place locations, Wagner said. Watch for posts making claims like “Election Day for Republicans is this date, and that date for Democrats,” and “Given the long lines, officials say show up tomorrow.”

Bad actors may also falsely post that a polling place has become the site of a COVID-19 outbreak. Voters shouldn’t assume such rumors are true unless confirmed by elections officials, a local or county health department or trusted local journalists.

“In theory, that could be used by a bad actor to dissuade people from showing up to their polling place,” Littlewood said.

**Influencers will play up intimidation tactics**

With the threat of political violence growing in the United States, armed “poll watchers” might show up to polling places on Election Day. Social media accounts might also spread false rumors that militia members are at a specific polling place.

“That may be true in some cases, but it may not be true at your polling place,” Littlewood said. “That’s something that could easily be manipulated by bad actors.”

Another common voter suppression tactic: posting that law enforcement, military or ICE personnel are waiting at polling places. During Wisconsin’s two primary elections, for example, misinformation about the National Guard’s assistance at the polls ran rampant.

Before the Aug. 11 partisan primary, Matt Trewhella — a Brookfield pastor who publicly connected mask mandates to atrocities like the Holocaust — called the presence of guard members “utterly ridiculous and dangerous.”

In reality, guard members wore civilian clothes and performed the regular functions of poll workers, said Maj. Joe Trovato, deputy director of public affairs for the Wisconsin National Guard.

“In the past three elections, thousands of citizen soldiers and airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard served on state active duty as poll workers across Wisconsin’s communities,” he said. “They served in civilian clothes and performed all the same duties as traditional poll workers while largely working in the counties in which they reside.”

In a news briefing Thursday, Gov. Tony Evers said he planned to activate the National Guard to help dozens of communities facing poll worker shortages on Nov. 3.

“A picture that has a bunch of National Guard members holding their military rifles with the argument, ‘These are the folks who were at the polling place today’ paints an inaccurate picture of what’s happening,” Wagner said. “While it’s true the National Guard might be mobilized to help as poll workers, they’re not going to be there in camouflage ready to attack. They’re there to check you in, take your ballot and give you an ‘I Voted’ sticker.”

**Bad actors will capitalize on chaos**

Election Day won’t unfold perfectly. Wisconsinites could see long lines and individual voting machines malfunction. But that wouldn’t suggest a widespread effort to disqualify votes.

“We see this every election cycle: There are people’s videos of a ballot-marking device changing their vote,” Littlewood said. “It’s a touch-screen, and you press one candidate and it looks like it’s marking another candidate. That will happen because of a miscalibration of the machine, because touch screens can be sort of finicky. And that can be fixed. What’s important is that voters fix that at their individual polling place, but it’s not an indication of a widespread plot to change votes or disenfranchise people.”

Social media users should avoid amplifying misleading narratives, Littlewood said. Unsure about a sketchy-sounding claim made on Facebook or Twitter? Don’t share, like or comment on the post — actions that would draw more attention to potentially false information.

A better bet: Wait for verification from an elections official or nonpartisan civic engagement group, such as the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin.

**Delays will spawn disinformation**

A surge in voting by mail will almost certainly delay the declaration of the winner of the presidential election, adding additional time for disinformation to spread, Littlewood said. Wisconsin is among the few states that bans poll workers from processing absentee ballots until Election Day.

There is no such thing as night-of results. Elections are certified weeks after Election Day, not when news anchors on cable TV project the winner.

“Regardless of what Wolf Blitzer puts up on the big board on CNN, it is important that we have the expectation that we must count every vote,” Littlewood said.

“It’s more important to be accurate than fast,” he continued. “It may take time to count every vote, but that’s what we do in a democracy.”

Misinformation isn’t going away after the election. Here’s a defense kit to help engaged citizens navigate the head-spinning world of social media through Nov. 3.

*Howard Hardee is a Madison-based journalist who created a misinformation toolkit for consumers funded by the Craig Newmark Philanthropies. He is a fellow at First Draft, an organization that trains journalists to detect and report on disinformation. Wisconsin Watch (wisconsinwatch.org) collaborates with Wisconsin Public Radio, PBS Wisconsin, other news media and the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communication. All works created, published, posted or disseminated by Wisconsin Watch do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of UW-Madison or any of its affiliates.*