

To: **The Civic Listening Corps**

From: John Schmidt and Kaitlyn Dowling

Date: September 14th, 2022



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**The Civic Listening Corps was formed in January 2022 to give communities across the country the tools and training needed to identify and fight the impact misinformation has on the issues we discuss online every day.** Our goal is to use the knowledge we gather together to prevent attempts to further undermine our civic discourse. We have created this report to provide a deep dive into key narratives identified over the last two weeks and to share some of the best examples of your efforts.

All of the information presented in this report was made possible by your contributions during our weekly guided monitoring shifts. Thank you so much for all you have done! **If you would like to invite your network to join us and learn more about how to combat online misinformation, they can access all of our materials by signing up here: [ati.io/signup](https://ati.io/signup)**

**Want to read our last report?** Find it here:

📄 Civic Listening Corps September 7th Volunteer Report.pdf

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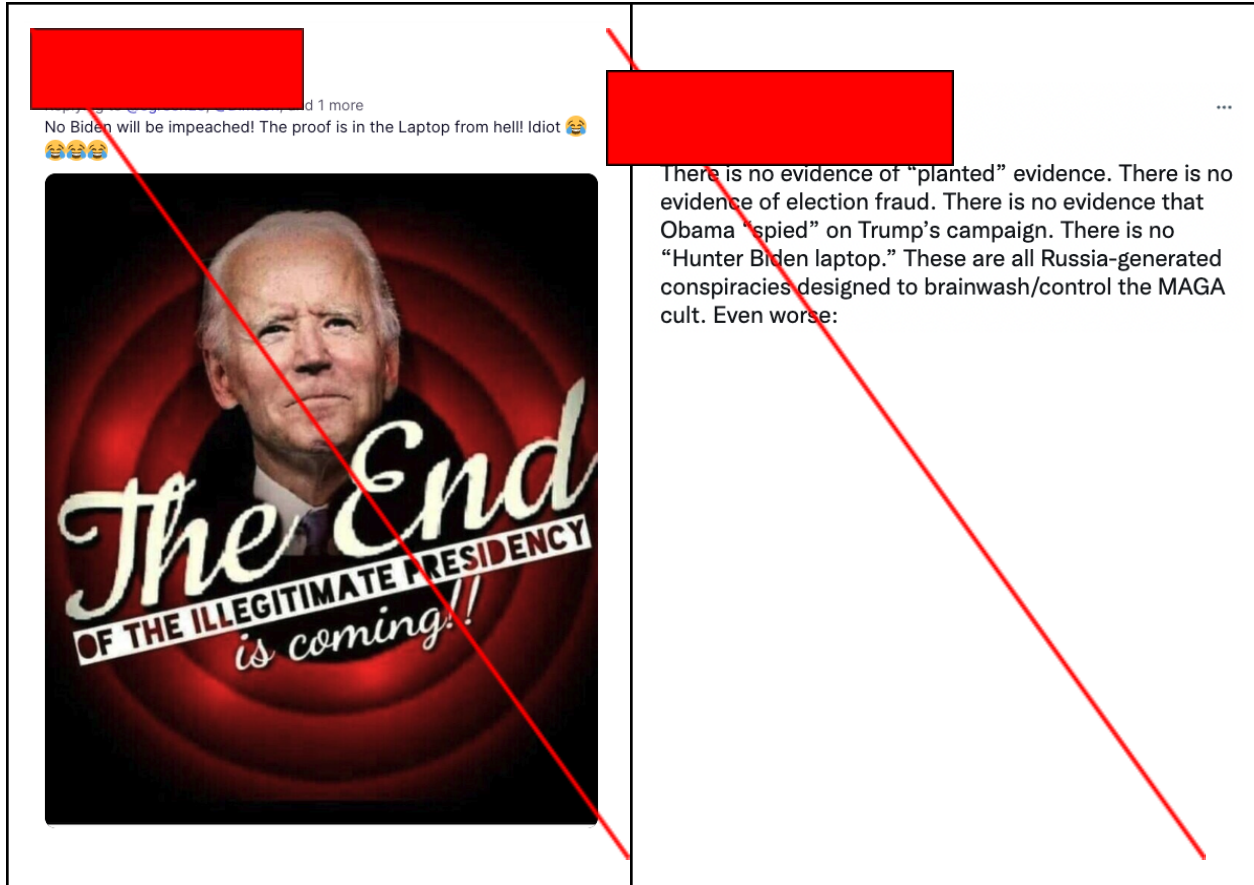
## Major Narratives

### I. Liberal and conservative accounts spread misleading claims about contents of Hunter Biden's laptop

In October 2020, the New York Post published the [first story](#) in a series describing the contents of a laptop that allegedly belonged to Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden. The Post reported that the contents were both salacious – images and video depicted Hunter Biden doing drugs and having sex – and evidence of shady business dealings. This evidence included emails and other documents on the laptop's hard drive that described business dealings between Hunter Biden and foreign companies that Joe Biden might have benefitted from.

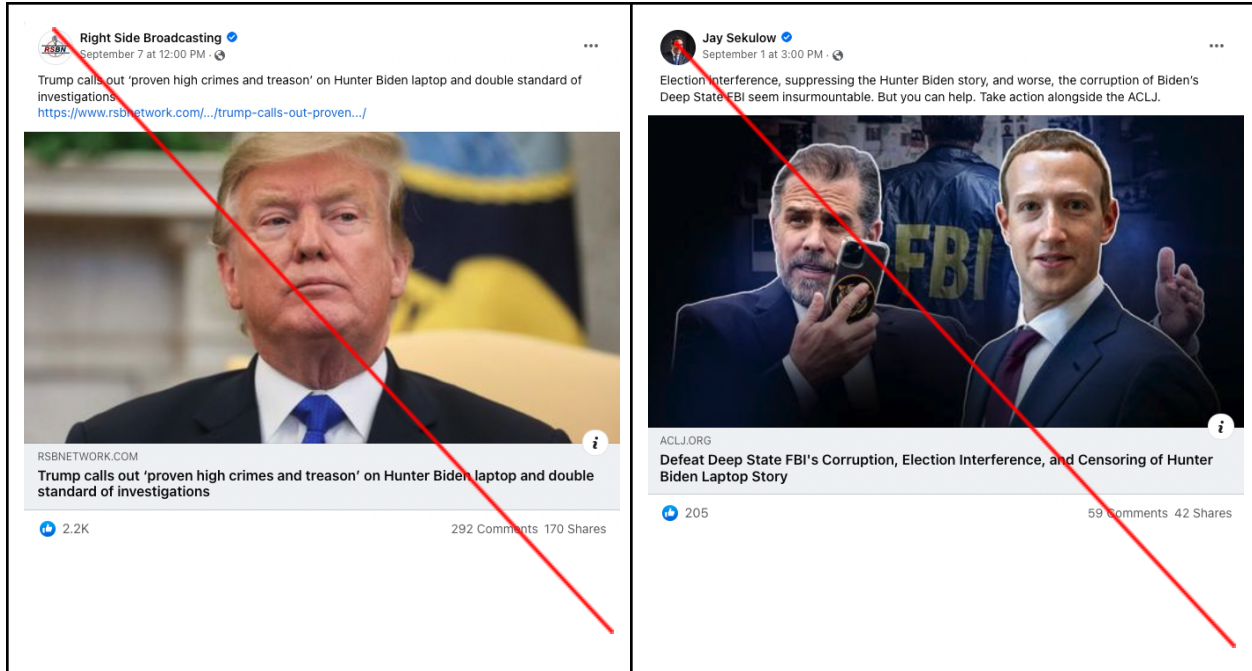
Claims about the laptop have spread in the time since, but have been challenging to address due to a lack of comprehensive mainstream reporting on the issue. Most recently, pro-Trump accounts have used the laptop story to claim the FBI has been politicized by Democrats, a key narrative leading into the midterm elections. On Tuesday, [New York magazine](#) published a lengthy article laying out what we do and do not know about the laptop and various claims around it.

The key claim, mostly made by anti-Biden accounts, is that the story proves Biden's involvement in business dealings for which he should be removed from office. Pro-Biden accounts have also claimed that the story is a foreign influence operation meant to harm Biden.



*Left: A TruthSocial user says Biden will be impeached based on the contents of his son's laptop. Right: A pro-Biden account that has spread conspiracy theories about Russia's involvement in US politics claims the laptop is a Russian-generated conspiracy meant to "control the MAGA cult." Images courtesy of Junkipedia.org.*

In light of the FBI's raid of Trump's Mar-a-Lago property, pro-Trump accounts have claimed the FBI and other federal agencies are being weaponized by Democrats to punish their political rivals. Accounts that have promoted the Hunter Biden story have also argued it is further evidence of the FBI's politicization: they claim the Bureau declined to investigate the contents of the laptop because it would have harmed Joe Biden before the 2020 election and, now, as the 2022 midterms approach.



*Left: Outlet Right Side Broadcasting shares a Trump comment on the “double standard of investigations.” Right: Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for the legal organization American Center for Law and Justice, calls the FBI’s corruption “insurmountable” in a post fundraising for ACLJ. Images courtesy of Junkipedia.org.*

The [New York Post](#), other [tabloids](#), and conservative [media](#) have continued covering the story. However, mainstream coverage has lagged and the Biden family and White House have repeatedly declined to comment on the story. Recent reporting from [New York magazine](#) lays out the extensive story, answering some key questions:

- **Does the laptop’s contents prove Joe Biden was involved in shady business deals?** According to [New York magazine](#), one 2017 email discussed a doomed business deal that “proposed a corporate structure in which Hunter would own 20 percent of the company, with another 10 percent ‘held by H for the big guy.’ The big guy, many on the right believe, was Joe Biden.” The reporting points out, however, that Joe Biden was a private citizen at the time, there is currently no evidence that he was aware of Hunter’s dealings, and the email referencing the “big guy” was not written by either Biden.
- **What about Hunter?** The Department of Justice has been investigating Hunter Biden since before the laptop story broke. [CNN](#) reported in July that investigators were weighing charges related to alleged “tax violations and making a false statement in connection with Biden’s purchase of a firearm.”

- **Why haven't I seen much mainstream coverage of the story?** It's a difficult story to report on credibly because much of the evidence is circumstantial. In addition, many people handled the hard drive that made its way to the Post, compromising the [chain of custody](#). At the time, many members of the intelligence community were [suspicious](#) of its veracity as well. [New York magazine](#) adds, "Members of the press who attempted to independently verify the report, meanwhile, were told by [Rudy] Giuliani that he would not hand over the hard drive." New York magazine's reporting also quotes a journalist who said the story had "a million red flags" and was "thorny to report out." Mainstream outlets, the reporting says, did not want to damage their credibility or face legal challenges and [reported](#) limited [stories](#) on the [laptop](#).
- **Why did Facebook and Twitter limit the spread and visibility of the original New York Post story?** Recently, Mark Zuckerberg appeared on the [Joe Rogan Experience](#) and addressed this question. Zuckerberg said, "The FBI came to us and was like, 'Hey, just so you know, you should be on high alert. We thought there was a lot of Russian propaganda in the 2016 election. We have it on notice that basically there's about to be some kind of dump that's similar to that. Just be vigilant.'" That warning influenced Facebook's decision to [initially limit](#) the organic spread of the article, feeling that the Post story "fit the pattern" of the FBI's warning. Twitter took more [extreme action](#), completely preventing users from posting the story. Twitter justified its response [saying](#) the material may have been obtained illegally, a violation of its policies. Both platforms faced scrutiny for their decisions, and Twitter's then-CEO Jack Dorsey [said](#) his platform's communication about the decision was "unacceptable" and reversed its decision shortly thereafter.

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## II. Questions about Clinton email server lead to claims of FBI politicization

As the investigation into former President Trump's handling of classified material continues, some are reigniting the debate over the private email server former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used during her time in the Obama administration. **Left-leaning commentators are sharing misinformation about the private email server, which invites false comparisons between the emails and the material found at Mar-a-Lago**

The key question is whether Clinton’s private server also contained classified material, an accusation she denied in a Twitter thread last week:

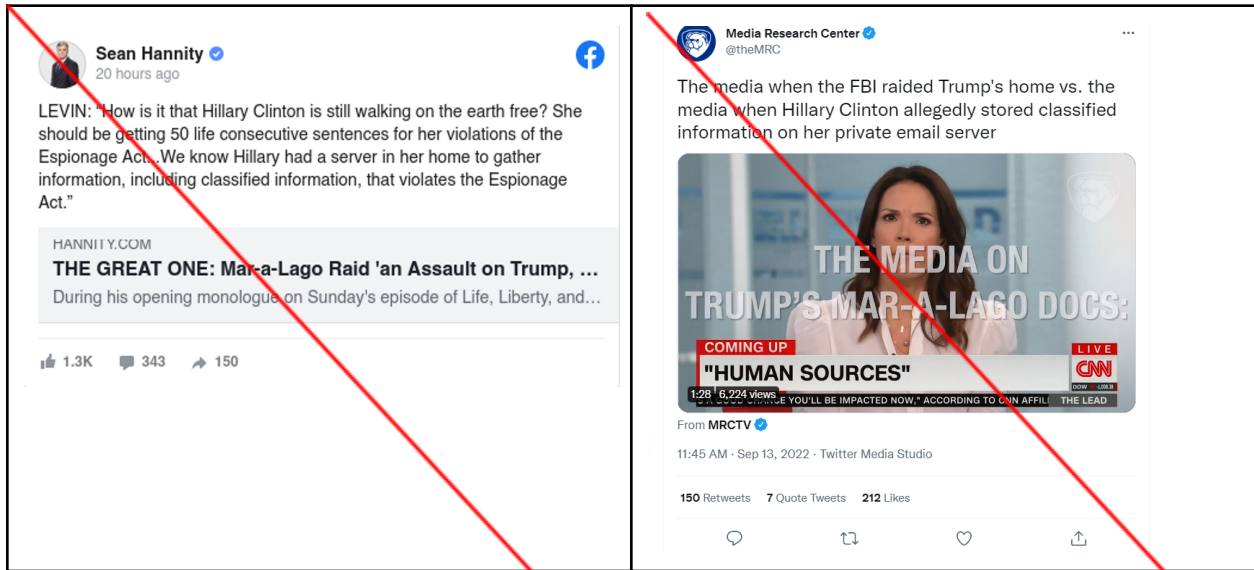


*Above: Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton insists that “zero emails” on her server were classified, and that former FBI Director James Comey had confirmed this.*

This statement from Clinton is misleading, and requires a certain definition of “classified material.” It is true that none of the material on Clinton’s server [was ever properly labeled as classified](#), but this narrow criteria neglects to include two important factors:

- **This was not the sole reason for investigations around her email server.** The [primary revelation](#) was that the State Department’s discussions of highly classified material had bled into unclassified discussions.
- **There were low-level classified emails sent to Secretary Clinton, but they were not properly labeled.** Former FBI Director James Comey [reported finding three emails](#) at the lowest levels of classification at the time they were sent or received, but they were marked in the body of the text instead of including a header, as was standard at the time. These were “call sheets” that were declassified the same day.

This debate has blurred the distinctions between the two scenarios. The comparison is still inappropriate because **the email server debate dealt with an agency-wide failure of easing regulations for convenience, while the current FBI investigation revolves around an ex-government official taking high-level classified materials at the end of their time in office and allegedly refusing to return them.** But this ambiguity opened the door to claims that US institutions are being used as political weapons:



*Left: A post from Sean Hannity quoting Mark Levin falsely insinuates that Clinton personally violated the Espionage Act (as Trump is being investigated for potential violations of that law). Right: A video from the Media Research Center compares news coverage of Clinton to Trump, attempting to demonstrate that mainstream media was biased against Trump.*

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### III. Conspiracy theorists seize on liberal comedian's post implying post-election violence

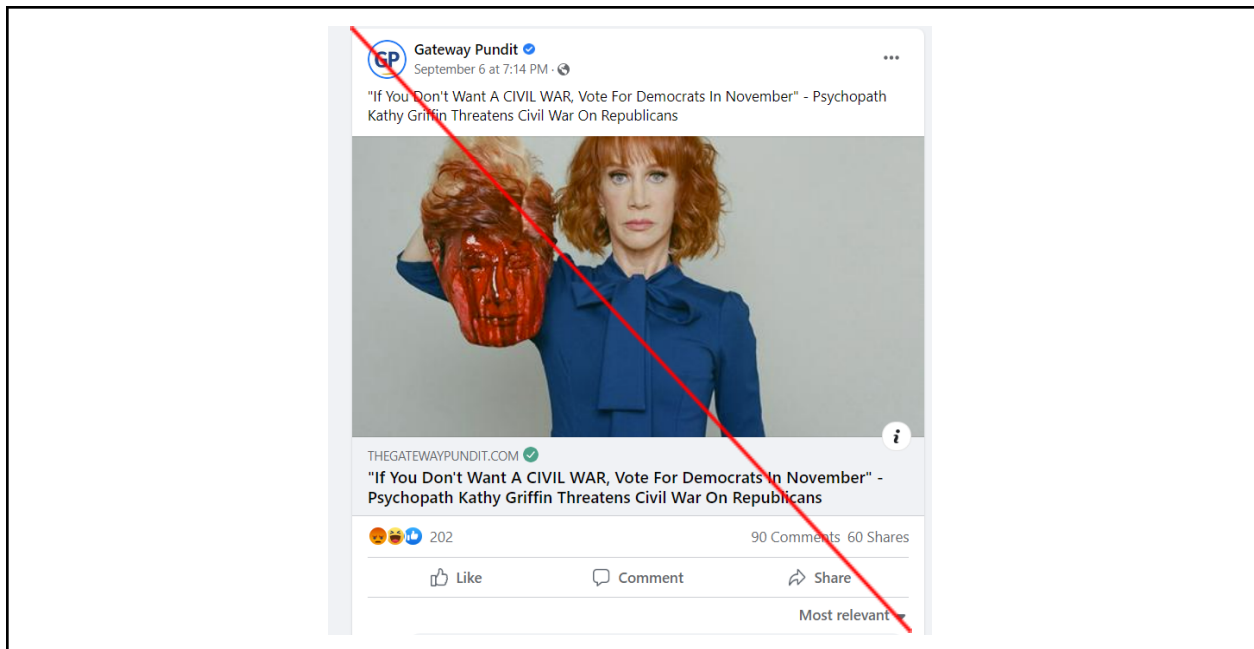
On September 6th, 2022, controversial American comedian and actress Kathy Griffin tweeted an encouragement to her followers to "vote for Democrats" if they wanted to prevent a civil war. Despite Griffin's efforts to later clarify that she was accusing Republicans of encouraging political violence, this tweet was read by many as an endorsement of violence:



*Left: Griffin's initial tweet. Right: Griffin attempts to clarify her statement, blaming the negative interpretation on MAGA supporters. Images courtesy of Junkipedia.org.*

This is not the first time Griffin has invoked violent rhetoric in her political statements; she came under fire for a similar effort in 2017 in which [she posed](#) with a mask of former President Trump's severed head.

The Gateway Pundit, a blog that frequently spreads misinformation, along with other similar accounts, used her post as vindication of several conspiracy theories, including the supposed politicization of the FBI :





*Above: Gateway Pundit centers Griffin's post in an article promoting conspiracy theories about weaponized political agencies. Images courtesy of Junkipedia.org.*

## What You Need to Know to Stop the Next Narrative!

*In this section, we're sharing smart reporting from around the web that tackles the data deficits driving today's stickiest misinformation topics. Have a tough question you can't find the answer to? Have you read something insightful we should share here? Email Kaitlyn at [kaitlyn@ati.io](mailto:kaitlyn@ati.io)*

What you need to know about...

...Biden's new monkeypox coordinator:

- **Who is Demetre Daskalakis?** In August, the [White House](#) announced the appointment of Dr. Demetre Daskalakis as the National Monkeypox Response Deputy Coordinator. Daskalakis has an impressive public health background, including most recently acting as director of the CDC's Division of HIV Prevention and previously as New York City's incident commander for Covid-19 response.
- **Why is he being criticized?** As [NBCNews](#) reported in a 2018 profile, Daskalakis is an out and visible member of the LGBTQ+ community. Recently, some social media accounts have criticized Daskalakis, sharing photos taken from his (then-public) Instagram profile, including many of him shirtless, showing his tattoos, and at events in the LGBTQ+ community. As the [Advocate](#) reports, at least one account claimed that he is a Satanist based (solely) on the appearance of pentagrams in some of his posts.
- **Is Daskalakis' LGBTQ+ identity important?** Epidemiologist and global health security expert [Jennifer Nuzzo](#) explains why trusted, credible messengers like Daskalakis are so important to a successful public health response.

...Kiwi Farms and why it was taken offline:

- **What is Kiwi Farms and why should I care?** As [Buzzfeed News](#) reports, Kiwi Farms was a notorious hate forum that is now offline. Cloudflare and other internet service companies pulled support for the site after a campaign against it led by streamer and transgender activist Clara "Keffals" Sorrenti. For years, Kiwi Farms users have organized harassment campaigns on the forum, resulting in their victims being stalked and swatted. [On the Media](#) provides excellent coverage of the story, talking to NBCNews senior reporter, Ben Collins.

...Tucker Carlson on monarchism:

- **Did Tucker Carlson praise monarchy and colonialism?** [Fox News](#) host Tucker Carlson used a monologue on his show to discuss the death of Queen Elizabeth II, calling out those who "gloated over her death" and praising British colonial rule. Many accounts celebrated the Queen's death, criticizing her role in British colonialism and its violent, extractive nature. Carlson claimed that British rule improved life for its subjects and that decolonization was a net harm. He criticized the U.S. departure from

Afghanistan, comparing it to British decolonization, saying the U.S. “left behind airstrips, shipping containers, and guns. When the British pulled out of India, they left behind an entire civilization.” Carlson’s Twitter post sharing the monologue called the Queen “the last living link to a truly Great Britain.”

...vaccine mandates for federal employees:

- **We’re still talking about vaccine mandates?** Indeed we are. Sen. Ted Cruz and other members of Congress have filed amicus briefs voicing their opposition to vaccine mandates for [federal employees](#) and [Navy SEALs](#). Sen. Cruz and Sen. Blackburn also introduced a bill to end [vaccine mandates](#) for children in Washington, D.C. public schools.

Situational Awareness

- **Keeping an eye on New York and polio:** Last week, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul [declared](#) a “state disaster emergency” over the emergence of vaccine-derived poliovirus in the state. According to the declaration, the emergency is set to last until October 9 and will allow the state agencies to assist localities in “preparing for, responding to and recovering from” the emergency.
- **Following up on one of long Covid’s most difficult symptoms:** [The Atlantic](#) explores an under-covered aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic: long Covid and, specifically, the brain fog that accompanies it for many people. How common is brain fog in Covid-19 patients and long-haulers? Ed Yong reports, “20 to 30 percent of patients report brain fog three months after their initial infection, as do 65 to 85 percent of the long-haulers who stay sick for much longer.” Yong’s reporting shares insights into causes brain fog, and what seems to be helping patients as they navigate life and recovery.
- **Looking into why people commit to conspiratorial beliefs:** Researchers from the [University of Kent](#) examine “Rabbit Hole Syndrome,” in which people get sucked into conspiracy theories and find it difficult to emerge.

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## What’s Next?

Thank you for everything you have done! If you would like to join us on a shift to fight misinformation like this you can sign up here: <https://www.mobilize.us/ati/event/493695/>

For the rest of September and October we will be prioritizing:

1. The 2022 Midterm Elections
2. The COVID-19 fall booster campaign