Navigating Information-Seeking in Conspiratorial Waters: Anti-Trafficking Advocacy and Education Post QAnon

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Individuals seeking out information about human-trafficking and anti-trafficking efforts are increasingly turning to social media as an informational source. However, a lack of traditional informational gatekeeping online has allowed for the rapid proliferation of misinformation via social media. This has been clearly evidenced within the realm of human trafficking by the spread of conspiracy theories instigated by the QAnon-led campaign #SaveTheChildren. Through in-depth interviews with members of the public and professionals involved in anti-trafficking activism we explore how individuals find trustworthy information about human trafficking in light of the public spread of misinformation. Our findings highlight the centrality of distrust as a driving force behind information-seeking on social media. Further, we highlight the tensions that arise from using social media as a primary resource within anti-trafficking education and the limitations of interventions to slow the spread of trafficking-related misinformation. This work provides contextual knowledge for researchers looking to better understand the real-world impacts of misinformation and looking to design better interventions into digital information disorder.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing → Human computer interaction (HCI)**

Additional Key Words and Phrases: social media; misinformation; trust; journalism; human trafficking

1 INTRODUCTION

Information-seeking is now a significantly digitized practice, with individuals commonly looking to online sources for information [72].

Given that digital sources vary dramatically in their informational quality, finding information online can be a fraught process. Internet users seeking information online may just as easily access low quality information—including misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories—as they may encounter authoritative information from high-quality sources. The difficulty navigating information online is compounded by the low barriers to entry for information providers, which allows individuals to cheaply and easily create credible-looking news and organizational sites that mimic the visual features of more authoritative information sources [80]. CSCW research has thus far looked to examine the increasingly pervasive spread of problematic information given a weakening of gatekeeping and widespread access to the tools needed to create and disseminate digital information [70] [44] [36].

Exacerbating the complexity of digital information-seeking, within the U.S. context, is a parallel (and interconnected) growth in distrust in institutional sources of information including the government [39], mainstream media [78], academia [53], and scientific research [37]. Distrust in traditional sources of information drives individuals to intentionally seek out alternative sources of information. This can be problematic in an era of information disorder [94], as individuals seek out information from low-quality, often biased, information sources, social media and networking sites [91]—spaces that are especially vulnerable to misinformation [2]. A lack of trust in traditional, institutionalized informational sources combined with the prevalence of misinformation online has led to the proliferation of problematic information that retains significant real-world impact including increases to vaccine hesitancy during the COVID-19 pandemic [24], the undermining of democratically-run elections in the U.S. [100], and the spread of conspiracy theories such as QAnon [30].

Researchers have coined the term "information disorder" to describe the pollution of the information ecosystem with misinformation (unintentional misleading information), disinformation (intentionally misleading information) and malinformation (true but weaponized information) [94]. Information disorder impacts information-seeking behaviors and outcomes in all realms, with acute impact with regards to politics, public health, and social issues. As individuals seek out vital opinion-forming or confirming information online, they are increasingly exposed to low-quality and manipulated information that undermines their capacity to make informed decisions and often reifies problematic societal structures such as racism [96], sexism [21] and transphobia [3]. This paper explores information disorder in a specific informational realm—human trafficking.

Human trafficking is both a pervasive social issue [87] and a contentious subject area [6]. While anti-trafficking activists all work towards the ending of exploitation, organizations differ in their diagnoses of the problem of human trafficking (i.e., the underlying social issues that make a person more vulnerable to being trafficked) and thus their proposed solutions to trafficking. Anti-trafficking work is complicated by the changing legal frameworks around sex work and prostitution [29], moral attitudes towards sex work, immigration, and an enduring legacy of "white saviorism" within non-profit anti-trafficking organizations [59]. Such contestation within the institutional space of anti-trafficking work consequently makes for a confusing information ecosystem filled with contradictory information as to the scope and nature of the problem of human trafficking and the best routes to its abolition.

Given that human trafficking (or more accurately, anti-trafficking), is an area especially vulnerable to misinformation, it is unsurprising that the topic has historically been the subject of widespread conspiracy theories such as Pizzagate [12]—a thoroughly debunked theory about an elite-run human trafficking ring operating out of a pizza shop—and the Wayfair Conspiracy—false claims that the furniture retailer Wayfair was engaging in child trafficking [26]. Such conspiracy

theories leverage moral panic around human trafficking, and child trafficking in particular [16], to suggest that societal and political elites are engaged in illegal and immoral exploitation. This paper focuses on one such conspiracy theory around human trafficking—the #SaveTheChildren movement associated with QAnon. We interviewed 18 anti-trafficking activists working on the issue during the peak of the QAnon-#SaveTheChildren movement in 2020 about their information-seeking and information production. Through 45-minute-long interviews, we looked to understand how individuals sought out and shared information about human trafficking at a time when the informational ecosystem was acutely polluted by misinformation and conspiracy theories about the issue. We asked 8 non-professionals (termed "everyday activists") to reflect on how they learn about the issue of human trafficking, the role of traditional and social media sources in this learning, and how they deem information trustworthy and worth sharing. Using an inductive analytical approach, we identified a range of themes across the interviews. To further contextualize these themes amidst the unique complexities of anti-exploitation work, we interviewed 10 professional anti-trafficking activists. Collectively, these interviews afforded us insights into the impact misinformed activism has on anti-trafficking efforts, the limitations, and opportunities for authoritative information-producers within this space, and the tensions around having social media as the central repository for information on human trafficking. This research contributes to a growing body of work on the shifting nature of informational gatekeeping within the digital information environment, specifically highlighting how an increase in the number and diversity of gatekeepers has diluted the traditional role of a gatekeeper with regards to information credibility.

Our findings highlight the real-world impact of misinformation about social issues including the diminishing of anti-trafficking resources caused by the need to fact-check misinformation, the reification of problematic "solutions" to trafficking that cause harm to survivors, and the difficulties of spreading authoritative information that is compelling to digital activists who distrust traditional informational sources. Such findings hold insights for future work into understanding the causes and outcomes of widespread distrust in institutions and the role of distrust in spreading misinformation. Further, our findings have practical implications for CSCW researchers designing tools to fact check online misinformation and to elevate authoritative content on issues that become especially vulnerable to conspiracy theories and misinformation.

2 BACKGROUND

In this literature review, we first discuss information-seeking on social media and how individuals seek and evaluate information they find on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. We then explore how changes in informational gatekeeping online have resulted in a proliferation of mis- and disinformation (broadly characterized as "information disorder" [94]). Further, we examine how knowledge of misinformation impacts evaluation of trust in information found online and how a weaponization and politicization of misinformation as a concept has further destabilized trustworthy information-seeking practices. Finally, we discuss how online misinformation spread via social media has complicated the work of anti-human trafficking organizations. Within this exploration we highlight the rise to prominence of conspiracy movement QAnon through its cooptation of anti-trafficking narratives and its use of the hashtag #SaveTheChildren.

2.1 Information seeking on social media

The networked nature of social media has afforded it a central place within digital information seeking as individuals can connect globally across different sites. The proliferation of the affordances of social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, among others, has extended

social media use beyond personal interconnection making it a central repository of public information and thus a useful point-of-call in information-seeking [28]. For example, Facebook users can join Facebook groups dedicated to their local neighborhood [14] to find out what's happening in their locality, query the platform for health-related information, such as information on childhood vaccines [20], search local businesses for consumer reviews and even directly ask their networks for answers or resources [51]. More broadly, social media users use hashtags and search terms to query social media sites' libraries of user-produced content, often accessing real-time information on emerging events [63].

Research by Oeldorf-Hirsch et al. explores the growing trend of status message question asking (SMQA) wherein social media users look to their networks for information rather than (or in addition to) using traditional search engines [55]. Further research has highlighted similar SMQA behavior on a range of social media sites including Twitter and LinkedIn [50]. Work by Morris et al. highlights how greater trust in friends and close networks drives individual's use of SMQAs within information-seeking [51]. The range of affordances of social media—from contact with close friends, interconnection with like-minded strangers and as a repository of public and often hyperlocal information—have thus made sites like Facebook, Instagram and others increasingly central actors within online information seeking.

However, research into assessments of trust and credibility in information found via social media reveals mixed outcomes for information-seekers. Morris et al. 's work on specific affordances like SMQA finds that information found through social media using such methods is seen as trustworthy as it comes from an individual's close network [51]. Trust in news media that individuals find via social media—for example in Facebook newsfeeds and Twitter links—has more mixed assessments. U.S. based surveys from Pew Research found that a majority of Twitter users maintained a generally positive opinion of the accuracy of the information they access via the social media site [46]. Conversely, surveys conducted by Pew prior to the 2020 U.S. Presidential elections found that around six-in-ten surveyed adults distrusted Facebook as a source for political and election news [60]. This echoes general distrust in the companies that operate major social media sites. Meta—parent company to Facebook and Instagram—has faced backlash over data security and privacy issues, as well as for its role in the spread of misinformation [38]. Further research is thus needed to better understand the role of a diversity of social media sites in information-seeking and how individuals navigate social media to find information in climates of distrust.

2.2   Informational gatekeeping

The rise of digital information-seeking routes has democratized knowledge by giving individuals low/no-cost access to a wealth of information sources. This disrupts the previous dominance of news media as the primary gatekeepers of public information. Work from communication and journalism studies contends with the shifting nature of gatekeeping in the digital age—highlighting how the proliferation of the Internet and digitized information has changed both who gets to be a "gatekeeper" of information, and what this gatekeeping looks like. Shoemaker and Vos define gatekeeping as "the process by which the billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a person on a given day" [73][74]. Traditionally, the role of informational "gatekeeper" was undertaken by mass media, and research into gatekeeping primarily looked to understand the internal processes within newsrooms that led to editorial choices over what stories were covered and how [76]. However, as direct access to a global network of information has become the norm for information seekers, the role of mass media as a primary gatekeeper of information has diminished. Consequently, researchers such as Justin Wallace argue that the rising importance of digital platforms as structuring powers of information

provision has put gatekeeping theory in transition [92]. Attempts to update theories of informational gatekeeping to account for the realities of a networked digital information environment have proposed the existence of a multitude of gatekeepers—from platforms whose algorithms curate and prioritize certain information, traditional power elites who maintain control over the framing of information, and audiences themselves in their personalization of individualized media diets [8].

      The role of informational gatekeeper relates not only to informational access but perceptions of informational quality. Jane Singer argues that as we move from a linear media system to a networked relational system, core conceptualizations of informational credibility including objectivity, professionalism and elite access are changing [75]. Trust in information and/or assessments of informational credibility are no longer concretely tied to professionalized practice or specialized access but are instead relational assessments [47]. What emerges is a complicated network of competing actors, producing, collating, or merely endorsing digital information in ways that structure access for information seeking audiences. In absence of the traditional image of a media gatekeeper—professionally trained, committed to ethical and objective information provision, and with elevated access to vital public information—a networked environment emerges, containing a multitude of information gatekeepers for audiences to choose between, diminishing the quality control aspect traditionally attached to the role. This retains impact on assessments of trust in *all* providers and curators of information, affording problematic information sharers the opportunity to claim a gatekeeping role (and by consequence, wrongfully assert informational quality) in addition to diminishing the credibility of professional, ethical information providers. Moreover, the expansion of competing gatekeepers with differing audiences and levels of power can serve to spread and exacerbate misinformation. For example, Jeff Hemsley explores the role of "middle-level" gatekeepers such as political bloggers who do not subscribe to the professional objectivity of traditional journalists but curate and remix online information using the affordances of social media to influence audiences [32]. Such novel "gatekeepers" can, either intentionally or unintentionally, use their position within online networks to propagate misinformation. Given the complexities of who gets to be a gatekeeper and perceptions of a weakening tie between informational gatekeeping and credibility, further research is necessary to understand how individuals seek and evaluate information in a networked environment. Further, in the context of seeking information about human trafficking, shifts in informational gatekeeping raise questions around who to trust—especially considering an increase in problematic information providers, i.e., those associated with ideological conspiracy theories like #SaveTheChildren, acting as information providers on social media.

2.3 Information disorder on digital platforms

The increasing prevalence of misinformation on social media sites is a significant driver of uncertainty for information-seekers. The global networking afforded by social media sites gives users access to increasingly large networks of information and individuals. Further, a shift in advertising revenues from traditional news outlets to social media sites has financially undermined traditional journalism, weakening its ability to act as an informational gatekeeper [44]. As a result social media sites have become both a starting point for individuals seeking information about current affairs, politics [13] and even health [54], despite being a repository of information of differing quality [1]. Further, information is uniformly presented within the affordances and style determined by social media platforms, complicating the ability of users to make judgements of its credibility using visual heuristics [81]. Researchers argue that this has led to a proliferation of "fake

news"—non-authoritative content that mimics the style and content of traditional, professional news media [80] [11]. However, as the term "fake news" has become weaponized within political discourse [83] [15] academic researchers have moved to use the phrase "misinformation" as an umbrella term for the diverse variety of misleading content that is shared online [94].

The problem of online mis- and disinformation has been labeled a critical societal issue by the public and by academic scholarship [93]. The impacts of misinformation are far reaching and multi-dimensional, holding consequences for individual behavior [9], public health [40] and widespread distrust in public institutions [56]. Further, the impacts of misinformation are differentially felt as misinformation has been weaponized to further problematic frameworks such as racism, homophobia, and transphobia. For example, misinformation around the origins and spread of Covid-19 amplified anti-China and anti-Asian racism [96]; misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccinations has reified ableist and anti-Autism narratives [40] and political disinformation campaigns have specifically targeted Black Americans to sow discord around election periods [27]. Research by Reddi, Kuo and Kreiss highlights how online propaganda spread through disinformation strategically targets identity-based differences to sustain hegemonic power structures and marginalize communities of color [65].

Despite growing levels of distrust, social media sites retain global membership in the billions, and users consistently look to the platforms for news and information [91]. One driver of this use is the presence of news organizations on social media. As the Internet has destabilized journalism economically, newsrooms have been forced to build a social media presence in order to maintain their audience popularity and find new routes to monetization [42]. Yet while most news outlets maintain a social media presence, users are also drawn to social media as an alternative to traditional news media, eschewing the social media pages of traditional news organizations to instead follow citizen journalists [47] and partisan news sites [5]. This reflects trends of growing distrust in news media [35], a trend that has been heightened by political attacks designed to undermine journalism as "fake news" [90]. This results in a complicated picture of information-seeking. Traditional sources of information have been forced to adapt to digitization, while also having their credibility called into question. However digital information sources face similar challenges to their trustworthiness, especially considering concerns over the spread of digital misinformation. There thus exists a need for CSCW researchers to better understand information-seeking behaviors and outcomes in a climate of informational distrust.

2.4 Finding trustworthy information about human trafficking

Anti-trafficking organizations use the Internet, and particularly social media, to educate the public about the diverse nature of trafficking and advocate for policy and legal changes to reduce vulnerability to trafficking and to aid in the detection and prosecution of traffickers. Digital communications strategies are central to the work of anti-trafficking organizations given the complicated nature of the problem and its historic media coverage [86]. Research into anti-trafficking work highlights two primary issues in the provision of trustworthy public information around trafficking; (1) a lack of reliable and accurate data on the nature and scope of human trafficking [22] and, (2) a lack of understanding within news reports on the factors that underpin victimization [34]. Reichert et al. argue that this results in significant gaps within public knowledge that present challenges to the prevention of trafficking [66].

Social media and the Internet provide opportunities for nonprofit organizations to directly communicate with the public to address gaps in public knowledge about their issues of concern [33]. However, digital communications tools similarly allow for non-professionals to circulate and amplify less authoritative information about human trafficking, further adding to knowledge gaps

[10]. Moreover, digital communications technologies are also being used by traffickers to evade law enforcement and perpetrate trafficking crimes [19]. In 2018, then President Trump signed the FOSTA-SESTA bill into law in an effort to disrupt online routes to human trafficking. The legislation was designed to cut down on illegal trafficking online by making an exception to Section 230 to allow website publishers to be prosecuted for posting advertisements for prostitution [67]. Critics of the legislation argue that the bill simply removes the ability of consensual sex workers to work safely and does little to reduce trafficking [85].

As such, there exists an uneasy view of the Internet as a positive technology in the fight to end trafficking [4]. This has been amplified in recent years by the rising popularity of viral conspiracy theories around human trafficking. Conspiracy theories about human trafficking are far from a new phenomenon. Urban legends about how to "spot signs" of trafficking have circulated offline for decades, with the Internet often giving them new attention, with a global audience. For instance, such rumors often argue that traffickers put zip ties or ribbons on the cars of women they see traveling alone to mark them as a potential victim for abduction. Despite continued debunking by local and national press, in addition to anti-trafficking organizations, such tropes reappear often and are spread across social media platforms as "warnings" to young women [95][43]. Contrary to the dominant "stranger perpetrator" narrative, many survivors are trafficked by perpetrators they know, who exploit vulnerabilities such as mental health concerns, poverty, and food insecurity, to create dependent relationships [62]. In order to counter misleading popular narratives about trafficking, professional anti-trafficking and governmental groups have put together fact checking materials that highlight the realities of human trafficking globally [62][88]. These materials debunk common myths such as the belief that human trafficking victims are always from poor non-US countries, that human trafficking is always violent and pertains only to sex trafficking, and that only women and girls can be victims of trafficking [52].

Trafficking-related conspiracy theories have gained new prominence because of the conspiracy movement QAnon. QAnon is an alt-right conspiracy theory that gained prominence on the image board 4chan, before spreading to more popular social media sites and gaining mainstream attention around the 2020 U.S. Presidential election [30]. The mainstreaming of the conspiracy theory has attracted significant attention within academic research, particularly due to its potential for offline mobilization [61]. Indeed, QAnon-related slogans and imagery were prominent in public gatherings including events on World Day Against Trafficking and even the January 6th insurrection in the U.S. Capitol [69]. Central within the canon of QAnon theorizing is the existence of an elite-run global child trafficking ring, drawing from widely debunked conspiracy theory Pizzagate [99]. QAnon followers began posting social media content about the theory under the hashtag #SaveTheChildren on prominent sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. By co-opting the hashtag for QAnon theories, supporters spread trafficking misinformation across platforms to new audiences. Critics argue that this co-optation can be seen as an intentional growth strategy and QAnon supporters "piggyback[ed] on the anti-human trafficking movement" to reach new, sympathetic audiences [68][10].

The public knowledge gap around trafficking identified by research exists as a prime opportunity for conspiratorial thinking to take hold. Further research into the movement's appeal highlights the moral panic that has often associated anti-trafficking campaigns [49] and taken up by QAnon proponents [89]. QAnon's #SaveTheChildren campaign paints a picture of trafficking as a "good versus evil" battle wherein supporters are always morally right and the opposition—global elite and Democratic politicians—will inevitably face a downfall. Consequently, arguing against the misinformation spread by the QAnon campaign puts communicators on the wrong moral side, even if they are debunking misinformation with authoritative fact-checks. Frustration over the

proliferation of misinformation and attacks on anti-trafficking organizations attempting to counter this misinformation led a coalition of anti-trafficking organizations to speak out publicly against QAnon. In an open letter titled "Freedom Needs Truth" anti-trafficking organizations decried anyone who "lends credibility to QAnon conspiracies" highlighting how the conspiracies undermined anti-trafficking efforts and actively harmed survivors [84].

The success of QAnon supporters in co-opting #SaveTheChildren hashtags across social media platforms manifests as extended support for the conspiracy theory itself from a broader audience, in addition to muddying the online information environment for those using social media as a route to learning about human trafficking. Information-seeking around human trafficking is thus fraught. A lack of trust in mainstream media and traditional sources of knowledge encourages the public to seek out information about human trafficking online. Yet digital spaces have been flooded with conspiratorial content related to the topic. While major platforms like Facebook and Instagram have attempted to stop the spread of misinformation by limiting the visibility of hashtags associated with #SaveTheChildren and QAnon [31] its success, and the lasting impact of distrust, requires further research. This paper looks to analyze information-seeking around human trafficking given its tumultuous history around misinformation. In doing so our work sheds light on the impact of misinformation on information-seeking behaviors and can inform further CSCW research into how to combat and mitigate digital misinformation.

3 METHODS

3.1 Semi-structured qualitative interviews

In-depth interviews generate significant data from which patterns, behaviors and processes can be identified and explored [25]. Qualitative interviews are particularly apt for uncovering the motivations and frameworks that drive individual behaviors and opinions [97]. Interviews were designed to gather insights on information-seeking around anti-trafficking and how individuals assess trustworthiness in the information they find. All interview protocols and recruitment practices were reviewed and approved by the University of Washington Institutional Review Board.

Initially the research design focused on public interviewees only, looking to interview lay people who talk about human trafficking and anti-trafficking on public social media pages. However, given the complexity of human trafficking—in relation to the diversity and scope of the issue and the complicated legal and ethical frameworks attached to anti-trafficking work—it was apparent during the course of public interviews that the research project would benefit from comparative insights from professionals working within anti-trafficking. Interviews with anti-trafficking professionals were designed to explore how anti-trafficking organizations work to produce and disseminate factual and useful information that reaches the broader public, and how misinformation impacts the effectiveness of professional anti-trafficking work. Put another way, public interviews were designed to illuminate information-seeking as it *actually happens*, with professional interviews reflecting on whether the realities of information-seeking around anti-trafficking spread accurate knowledge, and to identify the consequences of informational gaps should they exist.

Eight public interviewees—labeled hereafter as "everyday activists"—were recruited through the social media site Facebook. Facebook was chosen as the primary recruitment platform because of its "group" feature which allows individuals to create community around shared interests. While this allows for productive community-building, and has been especially useful for social movement organizing [98] and the sharing of news and information [79], Facebook groups have also been used to spread misinformation and conspiracy theories. Notably, internal

investigations from Facebook uncovered thousands of Facebook groups, totaling millions of members, associated with QAnon-related conspiracy theories [71]. Researchers identified five public Facebook groups related to anti-trafficking conversation by searching Facebook for the keywords "SaveTheChildren" "anti-trafficking" and "end trafficking." The five groups were selected for having similar group characteristics: between 1,000 and 5,000 members, U.S based, and regular posts (at least one daily discussion post). Potential interviewees were identified based on their membership and active posting in the selected groups. Researchers read through the current month's discussion posts to identify potential participants for recruitment. Researchers sent recruitment messages to active members of related Facebook groups asking if they would be willing to participate in a 45-minute interview with a research team exploring the #SaveTheChildren movement. Participants were informed they would be asked questions about media coverage of human trafficking, how they use social media to talk about the issue and how they find trustworthy information about trafficking. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, and the differing levels of involvement everyday activists have in anti-trafficking work, the potential pool of interviewees was limited. Further, given the positionality of the researchers (academics working in a public institution) we understood we would be unlikely to attract interviewees further along the conspiratorial spectrum, despite the ties between #SaveTheChildren, online conversation around anti-trafficking, and the conspiracy theory QAnon. The everyday activists interview group was made up entirely of female-identifying individuals, some of whom self-identified as survivors of sexual assault and human trafficking or felt drawn to the anti-trafficking movement because of a personal association with a survivor. Interviews lasted between 35 minutes and an hour and were conducted via Zoom. With the permission of the participants, interviews were recorded in order for anonymized transcripts to be made.

Ten professional interviewees were recruited via emails to anti-trafficking organizations based in the United States. Anti-trafficking organizations were identified either through geographic connections or through their involvement in the "Freedom Needs Truth" open letter written by anti-trafficking organizations to counter QAnon-related misinformation [84]. Professionals represented a range of anti-trafficking and anti-exploitation organizations (see Fig. 1) and generally held either leadership or communications positions. Professional interviews were conducted through Zoom, with transcripts made of the recordings. The interviews were semi-structured, focusing on the processes and difficulties of communicating with the public about anti-trafficking and the impact of misinformation about trafficking. We also asked interviewees to reflect on some of the themes and issues that emerged from an early analysis of the everyday activist interviews.

Professional interviewees—as agreed upon during the recruitment stage—are not anonymous as they undertook interviews as part of their professional work. Accordingly, interviewees are afforded credit for their professional insights, with their names credited in the analysis below. "Everyday activists", because of the non-professional and highly personal nature of their involvement in anti-trafficking work, are anonymized and referred to in the analysis solely by a number e.g., "Everyday Activist 1"

Participant	Organization	Type of Organization
Gwen Bouchie	Darkness to Light	Non-profit child sexual assault prevention
Ignacio Rivera	Heal2End	Non-profit child sexual assault prevention
Hyunhee Shin	Common Justice	Non-Profit supporting racially equitable responses to violence
Kyra Doubek	Washington Trafficking Prevention	Survivor-led trafficking prevention
Lois Lee	Children of the Night	Non-profit intervention and support for survivors of child sexual exploitation
Laura Hackney	Annie Cannons	Non-profit providing education and training in software engineering to survivors of trafficking and gender-based violence
Kyle Wood	WA Attorney General	WA Attorney General's effort to prevent and prosecute against human trafficking
Jake Roberson and Lisa Thompson	National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE)	Anti-exploitation and anti-pornography non-profit.
Dean Duncan	Project No Rest / UNC	Non-profit trafficking prevention
Amie Gosselin	10ThousandWindows	Anti-trafficking, anti-slavery global non-profit

Fig. 1. Professional interviewee details

3.2 Analysis

Researchers conducted a grounded thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. An initial team worked collaboratively over 4 weekly sessions to identify and discuss emergent themes from the two different interview sets. Researchers individually read through each transcript, and kept memos noting emergent themes across transcripts, comparative analysis between the separate interview sets, and highlighted any quotes that required further unpacking. Researchers then met together in weekly meetings to exchange memos and discuss emergent themes. During these weekly discussions, the lead researcher captured team agreement on shared themes and points of comparison and difference and created a codebook of themes. After the initial collaborative coding the lead researcher returned to the interviews to refine themes, collate direct quotations, and bring together comparative insights from researcher memos. The findings section highlights the most pertinent themes that emerged from this analysis.

4 FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts highlighted several themes related to mainstream media distrust, weariness around social media use and the costs of misinformation within the context of anti-trafficking work. We focus on four main insights that arose from the analysis and explore differences and shared concerns between everyday activists and professional anti-trafficking experts. (see Fig. 2). First (1), we highlight the centrality of distrust in traditional, institutional sources of knowledge (namely traditional media and non-profit anti-trafficking organizations) and how this distrust drives informational seeking via social media platforms. Second, (2) we explore the tensions that arise from seeking out information about human trafficking from social media. Finally, we turn to focus on the consequences of this muddled information space, including (3) how

anti-trafficking activism that is grounded in misinformation is limited and short-lived at best, and distracting and harmful at worst. Further, (4) we explore how current technical intervention efforts to stop the spread of misinformation, namely content moderation, have unintended and negative consequences for improving information-seeking around anti-trafficking.
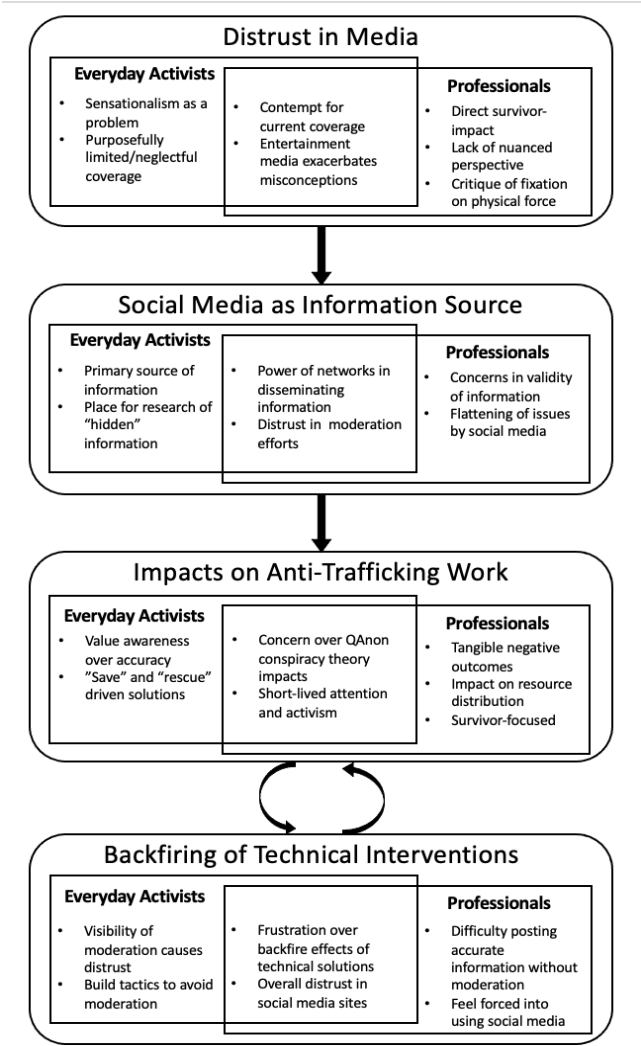

Fig. 2. Diagram summarizing central findings across and within interview groups.

4.1 Information seeking is complicated by a lack of trust in traditional knowledge sources

Common among both professional interviewees and everyday activists was contempt for traditional media coverage of human trafficking. Participants in both interview sets agreed that current journalistic coverage of trafficking was insufficient—both in the prevalence of coverage and, when trafficking is actually reported on, the quality of coverage. Prominent within interviews was the assessment that reporting was too often over sensationalized, focusing on the brutality and violence

of trafficking. Interviewees argued that while the brutality of trafficking is important to highlight, a hyperfocus on violence distracts from the totality of the problem and from an awareness of the services available for survivors. For everyday activists, this argument appeared most bluntly, with interviewees suggesting that mainstream media either ignored or under-reported issues on trafficking or, when they did cover stories of abuse, focused on the most extreme or violent cases, e.g.:

> You know the news; they love to just sensationalize everything. And yes, your child could be stolen from you at Walmart or Target, that could happen, but that's about 3% of these kids - Everyday Activist 8.

> We need the average human being to understand it [trafficking] and to understand what it looks like not on TV, not in these flashy circumstances - Everyday Activist 5.

While professionals agreed that mainstream media coverage was far from ideal, their reasoning as to why media coverage was lacking offered a more pointed critique than everyday activists— unsurprising given their professional orientation and depth of knowledge. Further, professionals recognized the utility of sensationalism for media outlets, highlighting that while sensationalism diminished informational quality it was a common tool for eliciting a reaction from audiences and getting them to care about anti-trafficking work, e.g.:

> I think the narrative I've observed over the years in the media has always emphasized physical force - Lisa Thompson, NCOSE.

> I don't want to be critical of the media, either, but there is a lot that the media gets wrong, I think our media attention span is short, and therefore the media ecosystem is very short. And I think it also seizes upon things we [the public] think are interesting, like swooping in and people getting arrested and so on - Kyle Wood, WA State.

Sensationalism, often involving descriptions or references to physical violence in stories about trafficking, garners attention as it makes people upset to hear something violent happening to somebody else. But it also makes people think that for something to be defined as "trafficking" it must rise to a certain level of physical violence, when the actual federal definition is very broad and also pertains to forced or coerced labor [88].

Unlike the everyday activists interviewed, professional anti-trafficking experts did not argue that mainstream media "ignored" or intentionally chose not to cover stories of trafficking. Instead, a professional lack of trust in mainstream media centered on how mainstream media covered trafficking, rather than a lack of coverage, and the routes professionals took to try (successfully or not) to alter the quality of news coverage, exemplified below:

> On the one hand I have seen positive transformation on how the media has told the story of trafficking and respecting the dignity of survivors' stories, but there is still this common thread of how stories are told. We often talk about economic empowerment, dealing with the root causes of trafficking, and those aren't really addressed in the media at all, it's still that kidnapping narrative - Amie Gosselin, 10ThousandWindows

> Reporters want to interview a trafficking survivor because they can get to the emotion of the story...but these people have been through a lot and have been exploited enough when they were

> trafficked, and then you're exploiting them again by asking them to talk about the horror they have experienced - Dean Duncan, Project No Rest.

These quotes highlight the frustrations professionals expressed about the actuality of media coverage, particularly how reporting techniques often led to re-traumatization for survivors. Media distrust for anti-trafficking professionals is thus rooted in the realities of media coverage of anti-trafficking, and has changed over time as, in their view, media coverage has improved. For everyday activists, however, distrust has two primary drivers; (1) an assessment of the sensationalist nature of media coverage (a view that is somewhat shared by professionals) and (2) an assessment that media coverage is purposefully or neglectfully limited—i.e., Mainstream news media either chooses not to cover trafficking or doesn't believe it is as important as other, more newsworthy, issues. While the reasons for a lack of trust in traditional news media may differ between groups, interviewees in both camps acknowledged the problematic outcomes of lack of trust—a lack of knowledge about trafficking among the general public and a tendency to look to social media to overcome this lack.

4.11 Popular culture depictions of human trafficking distort public knowledge. The main consequence of a lack of trust in mainstream media is seen clearly by *all* anti-trafficking advocates as being a lack of public knowledge about the existence of trafficking, what trafficking really looks like and routes to ending it. Compounding perceptions of a lack of authoritative information from traditional media is a shared agreement that entertainment media cements misperceptions about human trafficking. Interviewees expressed concern that fictionalized accounts of trafficking, notably the movie franchise "Taken", paint a picture of trafficking that is far from realistic. Further, a lack of trust in news media and failures of news media to cover the totality of trafficking reinforce, or at least fail to refute, this misinformed image of the issue.

> Even pop culture ends up influencing the narrative more than we realize just because there's a vacuum of information there. So when a movie like Taken comes out, for example, and everyone goes to see it because they're looking for a great Liam Neeson action film there's a subconscious effect that sort of reinforces [the misinformation] ...and so then in moments where the topic comes to the forefront it's much easier for misinformation to spread - Jake Roberson, NCOSE.

> There was a woman who came to a [survivor's] program that I was working at, and I told her, you know I was trafficked and she asked me from what country I had come from and I said "I'm an American citizen, I was born and raised in the United States" and she just looked at me. And I only realized why after watching the movie "Taken" and the movie "Priceless", even though they are great movies, that never happened to me, that's not the reality - Everyday Activist 1.

Interviewees thus express concern that the general public's vision of trafficking is wholly different from the actualities of the problem and that this gulf in understanding has real-world implications for those involved in human trafficking. Further, this distortion further feeds media distrust as even when the media reports on trafficking, and even in light of good reporting (as suggested by the professional interviewees), the public discredit the news coverage as it doesn't look like the images they see on TV or circulating on social media.

4.12 Lack of trust extends to other institutions, including non-profit anti-trafficking organizations. Given a lack of trust in mainstream media everyday activists did not prioritize traditional media sources in their own information-sharing online, nor did they view information they encountered online from traditional news sources as being inherently more trustworthy than other unverifiable

or less authoritative social media posts. Interestingly, this sense of mistrust extended beyond traditional media to also include questioning of anti-trafficking organizations. Several everyday activists noted the difficulty of finding accurate information online from anti-trafficking groups and when asked if there were any particular organizations they explicitly trusted interviewees tended to name local providers of services to survivors (notably church-based organizations) and the organization Operation Underground Railroad, commonly known as OUR Rescue[1], rather than any nationally recognized or governmental anti-trafficking groups. Fueling this sense of distrust for some everyday activists is the knowledge of divisions within the anti-trafficking space. Everyday activists recognized splits between anti-trafficking organizations over the correct routes to tackling the issue and were disappointed by internal divisions and public attacks, particularly those aimed at the one organization they deemed trustworthy—OUR Rescue.

> It's like sometimes they're [the anti-trafficking organizations] good, sometimes they're not. Operation Underground Railroad is fantastic, but right now they're being attacked. There's a lot of negative information out there about them, that I know for a fact is not true, because they're being attacked. - Everyday Activist 2

The professional organizations interviewed within this project expressed concerns about the popularity of OUR Rescue as the organization tends to portray human trafficking within a "rescue framework" that often focuses on sting operations where (typically white) men "swoop in" to "save" vulnerable others. Public divisions within the space thus complicate the public's image of who is a trustworthy source.

4.2 Distrust drives people to social media for information

General mistrust in both media and professional anti-trafficking groups as sources of authoritative information on human trafficking thus drove everyday activists to seek out information primarily through social media. The social connections afforded through social media were also important in cementing it as an information-seeking route as those seeking out information about trafficking could connect with similarly minded individuals and feel a sense of belonging, validation and that their education in the topic was leading to more fruitful activism. Further, everyday activists argued that they found vital information via social media that they could not find elsewhere and that even on social media they had to look for anti-trafficking information in certain places, like #SaveTheChildren and #EndChildTrafficking related groups, e.g.:

> I hear some things on social media, it's almost like they [the public] don't want to talk about it, I don't know if it's currently being covered up by maybe who's involved in this. I know I'm not a conspiracy theorist by any means, but it does make you start to wonder why only some [Facebook] groups talk about it and for other groups it's a foreign subject. - Everyday Activist 4

> [Speaking on not being able to find easily accessible information about trafficking cases] When the door is closed, you have to kick it open with your own questions, with your own resources. - Everyday Activist 3

Everyday activists thus saw a lack of coverage, and lack of a certain kind of information, not as evidence that they were looking in the wrong places but as evidence of media failure or an

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[1] Operation Underground Rescue (OUR Rescue) is a U.S. based nonprofit that focuses on global "rescue missions" to "save" children from slavery and human trafficking. The organization undertakes public fundraising to support covert rescue missions in which OUR Rescue teams conduct sting operations and work with local law enforcement to arrest perpetrators of trafficking and recover survivors [58]. OUR Rescue and its founder Tim Ballad have been investigated for inconsistencies around their stated methods and the number of survivors they purported to have rescued [45].

informational cover-up. Social media was therefore seen as a space to not only find information that was hidden elsewhere but as a vital space for posting and amplifying your own "research" around trafficking. Conversely, professional anti-trafficking experts expressed deep concern about the quality of information shared on social media, highlighting how responding to misleading information that circulates online was now a significant part of their communications strategies. Further, the tools afforded by social media to communicate fact checks also complicate how effective information sharing from authoritative sources can be.

> Sometimes it's [social media] a helpful equalizer for people who don't have the resources or formal infrastructure, that can be a great thing. But sometimes it really flattens the conversation as you can only say so much on an Instagram post...so it distorts people's ideas of what the work is, if all of their information about social change is coming from Facebook or Instagram or Twitter - Hyunhee Shin, Common Justice.

The flattening of communication around human trafficking on social media makes countering misleading information evermore difficult, especially in tandem with a tendency within social media discourse towards more sensational and even conspiratorial content. Professionals consequently showed concern over the use of social media for information-seeking purposes, pointing especially to the increasing prevalence of conspiracy theories such as the Wayfair Scandal as prime examples of what happens when discourse around human trafficking is flattened to fit the usual style and tone of social media posts.

> All this information being shared alongside #SaveTheChildren really made people think that children were getting trafficked inside of boxes of furniture, because that sort of reinforces the narrative [found on social media] and this understanding of what trafficking is. - Amie Gosselin, 10ThousandWindows.

4.2.1 Social media can't always be trusted, but the networks built on social media can. While everyday activists looked to social media to fill a perceived information gap, they also expressed caution over believing everything they saw on social media. However, the reasons for this caution were not tied explicitly to the highlighted professional concerns over a flattening of information or sensationalism of social media conversation. Instead, everyday activists tied a need for skepticism either to a general need to always "do your own research" or to a belief that social media companies were wrongly censoring anti-trafficking information.

> I used to always put "Save Our Children" and human trafficking on my stuff that I post, and I stopped because that would get by post taken down. - Everyday Activist 2

Several everyday activists made similar comments that their content, and those from other users within their networks, had been moderated by social media sites if it included information about human trafficking. This led everyday activists to question the extent to which the information they accessed via social media had been altered or changed either to avoid moderation or even by the platform itself.

Despite concerns over potential censorship, everyday activists did display trust in the groups and networks they established through social media and consequently the information about human trafficking they received through these groups. Professional anti-trafficking activists, however, expressed caution over this type of socially mediated credibility assessments arguing that this element of social media often resulted in individuals believing in misinformation about human trafficking simply because it was shared by a friend or influencer they follow online:

> [Speaking about an Instagram influencer] She's not a trafficking expert, she was an influencer, she was selling branded merchandise and sponsored content and then pivoted to doing this [anti–trafficking advocacy]. And that's often where people are getting their information about trafficking from, people like her. So it is challenging to know what is real and what isn't. - Amie Gosselin, 10ThousandWindows

Taken together, these quotes highlight the complications of seeking information about human trafficking through social media. From the perspective of everyday users, social media offers many positive benefits within this information-seeking, particularly due to the social element of information sharing and how users can build relationships with others who become trusted sources of information for them. Concerns arise, however, over the potential for platform intervention and how content moderation alters a sense of trust for everyday users. For professionals in the anti-trafficking space the pivot to social media as a primary source of information is concerning precisely because of this sociality, as it creates new markers of informational credibility that are tied to personal characteristics rather than informational quality.

4.3 The impact of misinformation on anti-trafficking work

During interviews we also asked all participants about the impact of misleading information about human trafficking. Interviewees in both groups expressed concern about the impact of the QAnon conspiracy theory on public knowledge about human trafficking. Several everyday activists looked to explicitly distance themselves from those who believe in and share information about QAnon arguing that the theory was a distraction from the real issues of human trafficking they preferred to share information about:

> What I do make sure to upload nothing about is, I think it's called QAnon, I don't want anything to do with QAnon, I give no attention to that, none whatsoever...they deserve no credit whatsoever, they're not a credible source...I believe that they are exploiting the issue and are actually doing harm to advocate for an end to human trafficking - Everyday Activist 3.

However, despite this separation, everyday activists often confirmed or at least mentioned conspiracy theories that emerged from QAnon and adjacent online conversations, this included mentions of trafficked children on the vessel that was trapped on the Suez Canal and conspiracy theories around Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi being involved in child trafficking rings. Accordingly, despite advocating for informational literacy when seeking out information about human trafficking via social media, it appears that everyday activists are not immune from believing in, or at least questioning the potential veracity of, digital misinformation narratives about trafficking. Moreover, two everyday activists, when questioned about the need to correct misinformation, argued that there may be some positives to the spread of inaccurate information about trafficking. The everyday activists suggested that, while misinformation may have its downsides, if the information served to raise awareness in the reader about the issue and that this awareness caused them to seek out further information, then perhaps misinformation wasn't always necessarily a bad thing.

4.3.1 Misinformation has tangible negative impacts for anti-trafficking work. Professional anti-trafficking experts, however, did not see a silver lining to the spread of misinformation about trafficking. Working front line on the issue, professionals highlighted how misinformation about trafficking retained real-world impact on their work and the fight to end trafficking. Echoing everyday activist concerns that misinformation was a "distraction", professionals spoke about how

national tiplines meant for reporting information about potential trafficking cases had been overtaken by individuals claiming to have evidence related to the QAnon theories or who believed they were the target of attempted trafficking related to "signs" gleaned from viral videos repeating urban legends of how traffickers operate. Further, professionals expressed concern that a misinformed picture of trafficking distracted public focus, putting attention and resources on the wrong solutions.

> It's the inequalities and vulnerabilities that traffickers use to get people into trafficking, so if you care about trafficking you gotta care about ending poverty, ending the patriarchy. You've got to care about making sure capitalism is more fair and that people don't get evicted. - Kyle Wood, WA Attorney General's Office

> A lot of the funding for anti-trafficking work was going towards the "rescue" and to raising public awareness, with this idea that if there are rescues and there's public awareness then the problem is solved, because that's what's driving trafficking in the first place, but it's definitely not - Laura Hackney, Annie Cannons.

These quotes echo the concerns of the consortium of anti-trafficking organizations who wrote the Freedom Needs Truth open letter decrying QAnon and its negative impact on anti-trafficking work [84]. Professionals thus see the impact of misinformation on their everyday work—through a need to fact check viral misinformation and a waste of time and resources on bogus public tips caused by belief in misinformation. Moreover, they explain how a redirection of public attention towards a "save" or "rescue" framework for trafficking moves vital funding away from the broad network of social and economic resources needed to reduce the vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit.

Finally, shared across interviewees is a sense that misinformation about trafficking—particularly that which paints the issue as part of a political conspiracy—results in only short-lived attention and activism. Everyday activists agreed that raising awareness was an important consequence of information seeking but argued that the role of social media was to equip information seekers with the resources to advocate for real change to the current status quo of human trafficking. Accordingly, interviewees expressed concern that overly sensationalist misinformation and explicitly political conspiracy theories around human trafficking would only attract attention for a short amount of time. Once information seekers realized the deceit of misleading information, they would either be turned away because the issue did not hold political relevance for them or be so distrustful of anti-trafficking information that they could not engage in activism.

4.4 Current technical interventions retain backfire effects

The emergent distrust in social media highlighted in 4.2.1 did not appear to diminish the use of social media sites as a source of information and community tied to anti-trafficking work. Instead, this distrust served to complicate the effectiveness of technical interventions to misinformation led by social media sites. As previously explored, everyday activists were angered that the information they shared, and the information the consumed from their anti-trafficking networks, often fell afoul of content moderation efforts deployed by Instagram and Facebook to slow the spread of #SaveTheChildren misinformation. Everyday activists believed the information they were sharing using anti-trafficking hashtags was factual and important and that moderation was a poor intervention as it was targeting the wrong content. Accordingly, the technical intervention attempts made to moderate #SaveTheChildren content retained significant backfire effects namely (1) increased distrust in social media sites, and (2) the creation of circumvention

techniques by everyday activists such as not using the hashtag. Indeed, during recruitment for this project, several respondents said they did not use the hashtag or phrase SaveTheChildren in order to not fall foul of moderation. Building on this sense of distrust, everyday activists were disappointed that intervention efforts disrupted their advocacy at the same time they are seeing social media being used by traffickers to recruit their victims. Everyday Activist 8 argued that "T*hey [social media companies] know that the pedophiles are using it [Facebook] at an explosive rate.*" The existence of intervention in anti-trafficking conversations and an inaction in targeting traffickers on their platform cemented an overall dislike of Facebook as an organization.

4.4.1 The unintended consequences of technical solutions for authoritative information sources.
Professionals working in the anti-trafficking space also expressed ambivalence towards social media sites, and echoed frustrations that extant technical interventions designed to mitigate misinformation had significant backfire effects. Professionals highlighted how attempts by Facebook to curb misinformation related to the QAnon-#SaveTheChildren campaign led the company to place limitations on advertising content:

> Because Facebook was trying to find a way to curb all the misinformation about trafficking, they required extra layers of additional information when trying to place advertisements about social issues…So here we are trying to put out accurate information and actually couldn't put ad spend behind it because we kept running into constant brick walls trying to get those advertisements published. - Amie Gosselin, 10ThousandWindows

Accordingly, professionals working in the space feel beholden to social media less because it offers them productive communication routes, or acts as a useful repository for them to host information about human trafficking, and more because it has become the central information source for people looking for information about trafficking and anti-trafficking efforts, and particularly because it is the space where the misinformation they need to counter is most prevalent - "T*he power of social media is really beautiful and very horrifying, we are actually starting a process of getting off of social media."* - Ignacio Rivera, Heal2End.
Technical interventions to limit misinformation around human trafficking not only appear limited (both professional and everyday interviewees spoke about the misinformation they still encountered on social media) but also retain unintended consequences including a cementing of distrust and the, perhaps unintentional, restricting of authoritative content.

5 DISCUSSION

In this paper we have explored how individuals navigate information seeking within climates of misinformation and conspiracy theories. We described how everyday people have turned to social media as a vital information source because of an increasing distrust in traditional sources of knowledge, in this case traditional news media and professional anti-trafficking organizations. We found that there exists significant tension around the use of social media as an information resource about human trafficking especially considering the pervasive misinformation that has spread around the QAnon-#SaveTheChildren movement. We also learned that current intervention efforts by social media to curb misinformation on this topic have had limited effectiveness, often causing unintended consequences that have limited the ability of professional anti-trafficking organizations to share authoritative information on the subject. Finally, because of significant distrust in social media sites, users have seen platform interventions like content moderation as attempts to "censor" conversation about human trafficking, further aiding the spread and believability of conspiracies associated with QAnon.

Through this analysis we have come to see the importance of addressing distrust in the countering of digital misinformation. Distrust drives individuals to seek out information from social media, despite public knowledge of the existence of digital misinformation around human trafficking, and concerns over the spread of trafficking conspiracy theories. Further distrust undermines attempts to correct misinformation, both from professional trafficking organizations through fact-checking, and through bad-faith assessments of content moderation efforts. The culmination of this is not confined to the digital world but instead holds tangible real-world impacts within attempts to address social issues like human trafficking. The following sections explore these elements in more depth.

5.1 Technical solutions to misinformation are not a fix-all solution

Both groups interviewed during this project expressed concern over the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories related to human trafficking despite the public efforts of social media sites like Facebook and Instagram to deploy technical interventions to slow the spread of misleading information [18]. What emerges is a recognition that the extant efforts by such platforms to decrease the visibility and spread of misleading content have been thus far insufficient. Despite flagging human-trafficking related hashtags such as #SaveTheChildren with messages prompting users to question the content presented, and despite removing QAnon-related content, misinformation and conspiracy theories remain rampant in the eyes of those most embedded within the human-trafficking space. Accordingly, average users who utilize social media as a source for information about human trafficking face a continued muddied information environment [10].

Further our analysis highlights how the currently deployed technical solutions to misinformation retain a diversity of backfire effects that further undermine the ability of social media to act as a productive source within information-seeking. Of particular concern is how attempts to curb misinformation have diminished the ability of authoritative sources, such as professional anti-trafficking organizations, to circulate fact-checks and other credible information about trafficking. Consequently, technical solutions have ended up exacerbating informational asymmetries [64]. Professional organizations are shying away from social media, despite recognizing the need to debunk viral misinformation, because of difficulties around having their content taken down or their advertising not accepted for publication simply because it is about human trafficking. Further, non-professionals similarly recognize the presence of content moderation of information and human trafficking but instead of refraining from posting about the issue are instead developing circumvention tactics to avoid content moderation [48]. This means that not only is misinformation, or at least unverified information, about human trafficking still proliferating on social media sites, but that professional, authoritative content about the issue is decreasing. To address the spread of misinformation, professional organizations must be afforded routes to collaborate with social media platforms to reduce the barriers they face in spreading authoritative information.

Further, a concentration on technical solutions fails to address long-standing cultural biases that make misinformation about human trafficking salient, and even attractive, to information-seekers. Analysis from the interviews highlights the dominance of popular cultural frames for human trafficking that distort the nature and causes of trafficking. Past academic research into the potential role of fictional sources in spreading misinformation is mixed. Recent research found no significant difference in suggestibility to misinformation between participants exposed to misinformation through list format than exposed to narrative story formats [23]. However, previous research from social psychology into suggestibility within eye-witness testimony found that participants were more susceptible to misinformation when it was presented

in a narrative [41]. While the comparative strength of narrative misinformation is debated, researchers concur that presenting information in a narrative form is generally persuasive, with narrative correctives even being a potential avenue for disrupting misinformation [70]. The findings highlighted in this study offer further nuance to the role of cultural narratives in supporting misinformation. In this case, misleading cultural narratives from popular fiction are further reinforced by online misinformation and conspiracy theories. Misinformation is made salient to audiences, or attracts audiences, because it aligns with the narratives espoused within popular fiction accounts of human trafficking and exploitation. Further, attempts by professional anti-trafficking authorities to counter this misinformation are met with resistance and result in distrust in legitimate organizations, because it disrupts established cultural narratives. While technical solutions may reduce the availability of the more extreme pieces of misinformation and conspiracy around human trafficking, it will not reduce the demand for, or belief in, misinformation that aligns with popular cultural and societal narratives of trafficking.

5.2 Addressing distrust is central to overcoming information disorder

The central concern across interviews is a sense of distrust in a number of key players within the digital information environment that have emerged as informational gatekeepers, including distrust in news media, social media and in professional anti-trafficking organizations. Trust in information sources more broadly is facing a crisis [35] and particularizing this crisis within the context of a contentious social issue highlights the links between distrust and a proliferation of misinformation. Within the context of human trafficking distrust is a key driver of digital information-seeking. Those looking for information about trafficking or routes to advocating against trafficking feel that mainstream media is an unreliable information resource [49]. In order to counter this deficiency, they look to online spaces like social media despite an awareness that these spaces contain misinformation and a sense of distrust in social media companies [38]. The distorted picture of human trafficking that has become the norm on social media consequently leads to a lack of trust in anti-trafficking organizations also, as users fail to recognize the information provided by anti-trafficking organizations as legitimate because it does not meet the misinformed vision of the issue they develop within online spaces [101].

Moreover, contentions over who to trust online represent larger shifts in informational gatekeeping within the digital era. An abundance of accessible information about human-trafficking affords information-seekers choice over what they choose to consume, and what they choose to believe in. This trust is not necessarily built on dependency—as was the case within traditional information environments where mass media acted as a primary informational gatekeeper. Further, gatekeeping is no longer tied to mass media norms of objectivity, professionalism and, as seen in the spreading of misinformation by influential gatekeepers, commitments to truth. Instead, gatekeepers emerge as points of influence within a competitive, overabundant, information environment because they can curate and remix information flows to make information easily accessible [82]. Everyday activists highlight the tensions of a multitude of informational gatekeepers, expressing distrust in some, namely social media platforms and in particular their algorithmic structuring of information. Importantly, this research highlights the trust information seekers place in mid-level gatekeepers, particularly those that use social media features like Facebook Groups, to establish network of influence, community relationships, and curate news feeds around certain topics. The popularity of these mid-level gatekeepers and the ability of audiences to choose between gatekeepers ruptures previous notions of gatekeeping tied to elite information access and informational quality.

Additionally, one consequence of growing distrust is a diminishing of the potential effectiveness of fact-checking, educational and even technical interventions. If users do not trust the source of the intervention, be it social media, anti-trafficking organizations, or news media, then they are unlikely to take on the intervention as legitimate. Within our data this manifested in several ways, primarily with a lack of attention given by everyday activists to the work of anti-trafficking organizations and in concerns (and conspiracy theories) around the true motivations of social media site's attempts to curb trafficking-related misinformation. This poses a challenge to tackling misinformation about human trafficking. In the absence of trust, even flooding digital information environments with authoritative information and fact-checking will not be effective at substantively altering misinformed views about the issue. Accordingly, those implicated in the spread of misinformation, and those impacted by misinformation, need to center considerations of trust and distrust within attempts to improve the quality of the information environment. Increasing trust in mainstream media coverage of human trafficking is a difficult task given its historic failures [34]. However, it is a vital endeavor for information-seekers to not feel forced to seek out information about trafficking in less-credible places. In tandem, social media companies need to address increasing distrust in themselves, and their sites, for their misinformation interventions to be considered in good faith. There exists a productive space for CSCW research in attending to issues of information distrust, with more research necessary to understand how distrust and trust underpin the spread of misinformation in a range of contexts. Further, CSCW researchers are well-positioned to conduct work around trustworthy systems, exploring how trust can be built in content moderation tools and other technical solutions to misinformation.

5.3 Misinformation has real world impact

In addition to capturing the role of distrust in the spread of misinformation about human trafficking, this research has also illuminated the real-world impacts of misinformation. Empirical research has looked to more accurately capture the range of impacts misinformation has in both offline and online context [93][7][9]. This paper adds to this growing literature by detailing the impacts misinformation has on both the general public looking for information about human trafficking and the organizations looking to combat the issue. Our interviewees surface a number of impacts, ranging from a tangible waste of vital resources to a more overarching societal impact of what happens when the public narrative on a topic is framed around misinformation. Changes to digital information environments are necessary to reduce the amount of wasted resources misinformation causes, for example in the flooding of tiplines with bogus tips related to viral hoaxes and the labor, cost and time involved for anti-trafficking organizations to debunk misleading statistics and narratives about human trafficking. Reducing the spread of such misinformation will reduce the need for such debunking and elevating the visibility of factual narratives around human trafficking should reduce the demand on phone hotlines.

Addressing the overarching impacts of misinformation on societal values and priorities, however, is far more complicated. Professionals lamented the dominance of "rescue" narratives within public awareness of human trafficking, especially as it reifies historically problematic orientations—i.e., White saviorism, sex negativity, and a demonization of sex work—that professionals within the space have worked hard to undo. In this way, misinformation not only brings to the fore novel misleading claims but also perpetuates long-debunked inaccuracies. Not only does the narrowed, historically inaccurate vision of human trafficking presented within QAnon-inspired misinformation narratives minimize the totality of the issue it also prioritizes certain responses to the problem over others. Professionals working within the anti-trafficking space look to address the diverse range of vulnerabilities that expose individuals to potential

trafficking, for example food insecurity, poverty, and toxic gender roles. However, the rescue-framework promoted within the misinformed online conversation prioritizes the solution to human trafficking as "rescue." It is therefore unsurprising that one of the few professional organizations, OUR Rescue, which advances the rescue framework gained significant financial support during 2020 when misinformation around trafficking peaked [57]. In contrast, other professional organizations spoke about the financial difficulties they experienced during the same year because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Attending to these complications as consequences of misinformation is vital but highlights the difficulties of documenting the broad range of impacts of digital misinformation. There thus exists a need within research to pursue community-embedded and qualitative research projects that document and analyze the impact of digital information technologies on the communities that use and are impacted by them.

6 CONCLUSION

Social media sites have become a central part of information-seeking in the digital environment. However, a lack of traditional gatekeeping online makes these spaces vulnerable to the spread of misinformation. This paper research highlights one particularized context in which this informational battle is taking place—in the pursuit of information around human trafficking. We find that despite widespread acknowledgement that social media spaces had been flooded with misinformation and conspiracy theories around human trafficking because of the QAnon-related #SaveTheChildren movement, anti-trafficking activists still prioritize social media in their information-seeking and sharing efforts. This is primarily driven by distrust in traditional sources of knowledge including traditional news media and professional anti-trafficking organizations. We highlight how this distrust drives information-seeking online and the tensions that arise when seeking information about human trafficking in informational climates of distrust and misinformation. We discuss the real-world impacts of misinformation within this context and the limitations of overcoming misinformation in the absence of trust in information providers. Further, we highlight how misinformation holds a multitude of roles. Within anti-trafficking work misinformation is often a symptom of long-existing problematic frameworks of misunderstanding gender, sex work and exploitation. However, the spread of misinformation holds causal consequences, exposing information seekers to misleading narratives that shape their understanding of the causes, exact nature, and necessary solutions of exploitation.

We see this body of research as having practical implications for CSCW researchers looking to understand the effectiveness and potential unintended consequences of attempts to combat misinformation. Further, this work adds to a much-needed empirical account of the actual impacts of digital information disorder. However, continued research into misinformation within CSCW and related disciplines must contend with the ethical implications of exploring problematic information. Research that aids understanding of *how* misinformation is made salient to audiences risks similarly aiding problematic information sharers. While this should not deter CSCW researchers from undertaking necessary research into mis- and disinformation, there exists a need for a continued conversation within the discipline on ethical research methodology and the clear presentation of academic knowledge that considers the potential for academic knowledge to be weaponized.

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