

December 15, 2021

Dear Irene.

I hope this finds you well.

I am writing in response to an email I received from the HKS Misinformation Review account on Thursday, Dec. 9 in which I was informed that the article that I co-authored – Disinformation creep: ADOS and the strategic weaponization of breaking news – would be retracted.

The article in question, subject to six months of peer review and drafted to follow the written policies of the HKS Misinformation Review, focused on the activity of Twitter users using the ADOS hashtag before the 2020 presidential election. The article as drafted answers the Review's call for "serious, but concise analyses of contemporary misinformation issues" with "clearly stated, real-world implications."

Our piece, action research that informed of-the-moment inoculation strategy, was used by Black-led advocacy organizations across the Philadelphia area, effectively defeating ADOS calls to boycott the election. The communities we worked with and our institutions view this effort as a clear win over racist, antidemocratic misinformation attempts. We stand by our efforts and learnings, and welcome any efforts to improve our work. As such, when we were alerted to questions about the paper in September – after months of peer review *and an ADOS-led Twitter storm targeting HKS* – my co-authors and I promptly responded.

Unfortunately, we have received no response to our communication from HKS. Until now, when, instead of working with the authors to resolve any new found questions, we were told simply that our piece would be retracted.

I am reaching out one last time to HKS and the full Misinformation Review board to respectfully ask that you reconsider this action – both for the sake of HKS's reputation and, even more importantly, for the authors, journalists, researchers and academics from nondominant race, gender, class or ethnic backgrounds who will suffer significantly from this cruel and unnecessary action.

A journal for misinformation needs to be able to handle the possibility of becoming the target of bad actors. This whole situation reflects a failure of the Review to handle its basic mission of publishing timely, peer-reviewed articles on misinformation. Misinformation and disinformation are by nature pernicious and self-sealing. So when a journal that is supposed to explore it becomes the target of the same misinformation playbook, and submits to those actor's demands, it demonstrates a failure to effectively navigate exploration of and respond to misinformation. This paper passed peer review and the Review accepted the paper so accountability for any inaccuracies must be jointly shared between journal and author. As such, we invite you to work with us to resolve any outstanding questions.

Further, by indicating that the paper was disavowed, rather than giving its authors a full and explained opportunity to correct any flaws and working with us to do so, you are sending a dangerous signal that the Review, HKS and Harvard as an institution will not offer the support and protection that future scholars would need to explore this kind of topic should they become the target of coordinated action.

Instead of retracting our piece, we hope the Review will send a clear message that you:

- Stand with your authors and scholars when they are the target of clearly coordinated action, and specifically name the Black academics here who are subject to a racist, public misinformation campaign.
- Clearly and publicly articulate a process in place to ensure that HKS can effectively review and vet articles on topics that are controversial.
- Work *with* the author team to update the paper and bring it in line with clarified standards.

As news of this has spread through the whisper network, questions have been raised about if the Review can withstand attack or whether it will bow to the pressure of extremist groups, why the article was accepted in the first place if it is so poor and if it is customary for the Review to retract and then humiliate authors – placing their careers in jeopardy.

The power dynamics between the Review and the author team ensure that this is not a fair fight, and the Black scholarly community are outraged. Undermining the work of Black female scholars without explanation and without taking accountability not only has the potential to end careers and cause grave personal harm, but it makes the field significantly less rich, the research anemic and causes deep harm to all people asking difficult questions, looking for truth and wrestling with controversial ideas – all ideas we understand are central to both HKS and Harvard as an institution.

We hope you take our concerns into consideration and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

*Mutale Nkonde*

Mutale Nkonde

This letter represents my views only