senteeism (missing a day or more of school) can reduce chronic absenteeism. (The next best intervention appears to be the use of truancy mentors and social workers; that costs about 50 times as much.) The following year, he replicated the pattern of results with 28,000 families, and a year later with 20,000 more in Chicago, as well as in 10 districts in California. The work appears in a paper, currently in press, in Nature Human Behavior.

Schools are paying attention. The federal government’s new education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, has led at least 36 states to select student absenteeism as one of the metrics on which their educational quality is evaluated. In turn, these states have made absenteeism one of the metrics on which school districts are evaluated. Rogers, who has done research studies with about 2,000 schools and colleges around the country, suddenly found that there was tremendous demand for help implementing such programs.

His first instinct was to help districts implement the program themselves, but “none managed to do it at scale with fidelity.” Nor was his research lab equipped to offer such services. He therefore co-founded a for-profit company, In Class Today, staffed with professionals, to help school districts around the country implement the program. The company has found that it can reduce chronic absenteeism (missing a day or more of school every two weeks) by 10 percent to 15 percent. “Obviously, this doesn’t solve the problem,” says Rogers, “but it is insanely cost-effective, easy to implement, and frees up resources” to tackle other causes of absenteeism.

Why are the postcards so effective? Continuing research revealed that the biggest push for action came not from the social comparison, but from “correcting parents’ beliefs about how many days their kid has missed.” Others have found that text messaging this information has no effect on absenteeism, Rogers reports. But the postcard becomes a social artifact, Rogers explains, something that is shared with others in the home. “We have started adding messages—‘Please show this to Johnny’—to try to encourage this virality,” he says. Parents love it, and the program even has spillover effects to siblings. In households that receive the postcards, “everyone attends school more.”

~JONATHAN SHAW

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The Disinformation Dilemma

In the discussion of how Russian operatives manipulated public opinion during the 2016 presidential election, it’s easy to overlook how their malicious goals were easily advanced thanks to tools originally designed to further the economic interests of leading Internet companies like Facebook and Google.

Dipayan Ghosh, a fellow at the Kennedy School’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy who previously worked at Facebook on privacy and public policy and consulted on the Clinton campaign, spent the months immediately following the election researching how Russian disinformation campaigns had used tools such as search engine optimization, behavioral data collection, and social media management software (SMMS) to spread and promote “fake news” widely online. He teamed with Ben Scott, a senior adviser to the nonprofit Open Technology Institute at New America and a fellow adviser to the Clinton campaign, to raise awareness about these abuses by publishing a paper, “Digital Deceit: The Technologies Behind Precision Propaganda on The Internet,” with New America in January.

Disinformation agents were fundamental-
compile every click, share, and search query into a user profile. One way to do this is by using a “cookie,” a piece of data that tracks users’ activity in order to predict their preferences and interests. Advertisers use these inferred preferences to show users advertisements in line with those interests, like hiking boots instead of high heels. It seems a harmless, mutually beneficial marketplace, in which users are exposed to the kinds of content that they want to see and advertisers are able to generate revenue.

But Ghosh says that this practice of constant mass data collection also provides ample opportunities for disinformation agents to manipulate users’ experiences in the political landscape. Location data collected through apps and sites, for example, can be used by a disinformation campaign to determine where a voter lives, in order to tailor ads to races and hot-button issues for that specific region.

After using Internet data to determine what kinds of propagated messages might speak to specific audiences, disinformation campaigns can also synchronize their efforts across platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram through the use of SMMS. Such software helps brands schedule and select the kinds of content they wish to promote to certain audiences. Ghosh emphasizes that these tools are not inherently malicious—they help advertisers connect with consumers with less effort and more frequent success by reinforcing messages across media. But a political disinformation agent could just as easily use the software to push a fake story on multiple platforms while simultaneously tailoring each iteration of the story by using data on what is most likely to persuade specific audience segments. In cases like these, SMMS makes disseminating destabilizing rumors and sensationalized stories faster and easier.

One of the easiest ways to detect manipulation of search results from providers such as Google is to watch for instances where content from less credible sources ranks above that from well-established outlets. Foreign agents in 2016 used so-called blackhat (as in old Westerns) search engine optimization techniques to understand, replicate, and ultimately trick Google’s algorithm into promoting their propagated content to the top of search results. Ghosh says there’s a scale issue in fighting such challenges. Even if Google wanted to “throw its entire security team at this problem” it couldn’t, because “the number of black hat SEO attacks per security person at Google is just not a ratio in Google’s favor.” For this reason, he encourages companies to adopt “bug-bounty” programs that financially reward people outside the organization who can figure out ways to push disinformation through the existing system—thus pinpointing loopholes and security issues that companies can fix. “It’s throwing money at the problem,” Ghosh says, “which is really something we have to get more comfortable with doing.”

He and Scott offer a number of technical solutions to help ensure that SMMS companies, Internet platforms, and advertisers head into the 2018 and 2020 elections with more control over misuse of their digital toolkits. But in the effort to promote policy change and push Internet companies to implement better security processes, Ghosh believes primarily in the power of public opinion. “The best way we can raise awareness” about how “the threat of disinformation can linger on these platforms, and surface at the most critical times in our national history, is by talking about and writing about it,” he says. “I’m talking about the pitchforks coming out.”

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REVERBERATIONS OF BONDAGE

Slavery’s Southern Legacy

WHEN Avidit Acharya, Matthew Blackwell, and Maya Sen were assistant professors at the University of Rochester, they got to talking over lunch about politics. What made the United States more conservative than other Western democracies? Within America, what made the South more conservative than other regions, especially on race-related issues? And what explained differences within the South? Take the 2008 presidential election. Barack Obama won next to zero support from white residents of Greenwood, Mississippi and its surrounding county, who are among the most conservative voters in the country; he won 57 percent support from white residents of the Asheville, North Carolina area, long considered a progressive enclave.

The researchers argue that chattel slavery caused political divides that still exist in the South. White people living in counties where slaveholding was more prevalent tend to be more conservative and more hostile toward black people. Greenwood, set on the alluvial plain of the Mississippi Delta, became a major cotton producer in the nineteenth century; by 1860, enslaved people made up 68 percent of its population. Asheville, meanwhile, started as a trading outpost within the Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains, and in 1860 only 15 percent of its population was enslaved. “It’s not simply that more conservative people live in these areas—these are more conservative areas because of their past,” they write in their new book, Deep Roots: How Slavery Still Shapes Southern Politics.

“ This is a break from what research in political science and public opinion might tell us,” acknowledges the introduction Blackwell, now an assistant professor of government at Harvard, says that usually in political science, “Objects of study are paired closely in time.” Studies will link local opinions on affirmative action to an area’s current demographic makeup, for example, or support for the Whig Party in 1860 to cotton exports from that decade. In contrast, their study investigates processes that unfolded over more than a century and a half.

Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen took historical data about slaveholders and enslaved people from the 1860 census and mapped