

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS ROLE IN THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

If you're still weary from the 2020 presidential election, you'd better steel your nerves. Midterm election primaries are practically upon us.

The season begins on March 1 in Texas. There's a break until May, when a dozen states will hold their primaries. June is the busiest month; it's when voters in California and 17 other states will cast ballots.

When midterm elections finally take place on Nov. 8, Americans will choose 469 members of Congress: 34 in the Senate and 435 in the House of Representatives. Democratic control of one or both chambers could change.

As we are apt to say about elections of late, there's a lot at stake this fall. And as we've seen in campaigns since Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton in 2016, social media will have a role to play — like it or not.

During that contest, we learned about Russian bots: anonymous political “commentators” linked to the Russian government that operate according to programmed instructions.

The bots spread false information and divisive political content on Twitter, Facebook and other platforms. They relied on getting an emotional response from everyday people who would share the posts — and their outrage — with others.

Facebook later estimated that as many as 126 million Americans had been exposed to Russian-backed misinformation during the campaign. And Twitter admitted that more than 50,000 Russia-linked accounts had used its service.

Both platforms took the unusual step of notifying people who liked, followed or shared any of the posts — but well after the election.

There's no question that since 2016, social media has become omnipresent in our lives. We shudder at stories of its destructive effects on children and teens, radicalizing young men and demoralizing young women.

Government has responded: Just last week, The Kids Online Safety Act was introduced in the Senate. It requires tech platforms to implement new controls for

kids and their parents and to make changes that prevent the promotion of certain harmful behaviors.

We've learned that social media played a big part in the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Hundreds of thousands of posts have been examined by prosecutors in the criminal investigation. More than proof of crimes being committed, the posts provide invaluable evidence of the defendants' intent.

Considering the 2016 election shenanigans and Jan. 6 insurrection, we might conclude that social media has been detrimental to democracy. But we've also seen that social media can aid democratization, as it did during the Arab Spring, which began in 2010. Across the Middle East and in North Africa, people mobilized to speak out against government corruption and economic stagnation, demanding change. The desire for democracy was on full display.

It's why the National Conflict Resolution Center, as part of its “A Path Forward” initiative, is host-

ing a virtual conversation next month called “Social Media and the Future of Democracy.” We will talk about ways to tip the balance, so social media becomes more of a force for good — and what more the technology companies, advertisers and our government could be doing.

Our panelists will include Aza Raskin, a creator of the 2020 Emmy Award-winning movie “The Social Dilemma” and co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology, a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to reimagining our digital infrastructure; and Katie Harbath, chief executive of Anchor Change, a company focused on issues at the intersection of technology and democracy.

The event will be moderated by Dr. Mary Anne Franks, professor of law at the University of Miami School of Law. Franks is an international expert on the intersection of civil rights and technology.

And while it's easy enough to turn to the tech companies or government to solve the social media “problem,” the panel will

also explore what each of us — as consumers of social media — can do. As Bret Schafer, an analyst at the Alliance for Securing Democracy, told Mother Jones, “Social-media users need to be aware of their role in information laundering. If a user retweets, emails, or posts information taken from a less-than-credible point of origin, they now have become the new ‘source’ of that information for friends, family, and followers.” That comes with a lot of responsibility.

If you care about the future of democracy in our country, be sure to join us on March 10.

The National Conflict Resolution Center will host “Social Media and the Future of Democracy,” a free, virtual event, on March 10 at 5 p.m. PST.

For information or to register, visit ncrconline.com.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit ncrconline.com.

HOSPITAL • Demolition challenging since houses, businesses, roads are nearby

FROM B1

The project also will include 10,000 square feet of commercial space, including a breakfast café, a bodega-style market, collaborative workspace, a restaurant and “sky-bar” lounge.

The demolition work is challenging, said Hammond, because the project is an infill development surrounded by homes, businesses and major thoroughfares. “We're taking down large buildings while being sensitive to noise and working hours and trucks on the road.” Neighbors have been very patient with the construction impacts, she said.

Buildout of the project will occur in four to five years, said Hammond, depending on market conditions, and the project will employ more than 300 construction workers. Integral is investing hundreds of millions of dollars in the project, she said.

Another challenge during demolition, Hammond said, was safely removing hazards such as underground storage tanks, lead paint and asbestos from the site.

Crews will dismantle the tower one floor at a time, using such equipment as the tallest high-reach crane in Southern California, which has a 129-foot working height, weighs 220,000 pounds and can cut 1-inch steel plates at a height of 109 feet, Hammond said.

Adam Finestone, interim director of community development with the city of Escondido, said the demo work has proceeded smoothly, with no major issues or complaints. The developer has a point of contact for the public re-



The Palomar Heights project, taking the place of the old hospital, is hoped to revitalize this area of downtown Escondido, encouraging more restaurants and other businesses.

garding such issues as noise and dust.

Currently, city staff is reviewing plans for grading and infrastructure, and conducting regular inspections as the project progresses, Finestone said.

Once completed, the project is expected to boost the economic fortunes of the downtown area, he said. “We're really excited to have this new development and addi-

tional feet on the street to provide customers and hopefully revitalize the area.”

Dan Farrow, senior director of facilities operations with Palomar Health, which operated both the old and new hospitals, recalls visiting his mom at the central Escondido hospital campus when she worked there as a nurse and he was under 10 years old. Three of his sisters also worked there as nurses. In

1991, Farrow took a job at Palomar Hospital, helping to maintain equipment at the aging building.

He has mixed feelings at seeing it go. While it served the community well as a health care hub for decades, in later years it became a challenge to keep all of its equipment working.

“I have so many memories of growing up there,” Farrow said of the old hospital. “It was historic in

what it did, and I think it did it very well.”

“That (hospital) really served its purpose,” he said.

Retired cardiologist Doug Moir, who lives near the construction site and has been watching the demolition progress every day, said he can't help feeling nostalgic as the old hospital comes down. He practiced there for 37 years, his son was born there and he even had two knee replacement surgeries at Palomar Memorial Hospital, as it was known.

The hospital was a source of pride for its staff and the greater community, Moir said.

“It was a comfort to know that we had a resource close at hand for any (health) issue that arose,” Moir said.

“This was the people's hospital. For 37 years, it was a major part of my life.”

Even though most of the hospital's functions were transferred to the new campus in 2012, some services remained at the old hospital site, including COVID testing, vaccinations and treatments during the pandemic. Moir and his wife, Margaret, volunteered at the COVID clinics.

Despite his warm memories of the old hospital site, Moir said the new development will be good for the city, and serve as a magnet for new restaurants, entertainment venues and other businesses.

“Anything that puts people downtown is good for the community,” he said. “In that sense it's a win-win for the entire community.”

Tash is a freelance writer.

RACING

FROM B1

Saturdays, loud vehicles can also be heard, Sheridan added.

“We can't hear each other because the cars are zooming by,” she said.

Residents say they have been accosted by drivers who they ask to slow down, and the increase in reckless driving has led to traffic collisions — including a recent head-on crash — that residents say make walking or biking along the road dangerous.

It's not just in Scripps Ranch, San Diego Police officials say.

“Citywide we are seeing an increase in the number of reckless driving and street racing complaints from our community members,” said Sgt. Greg Minter, with the San Diego Police Department's Traffic Division. “I'd say it's pretty even across the whole city, from up in the northwestern area ... all the way down to the border. It's really everywhere.”

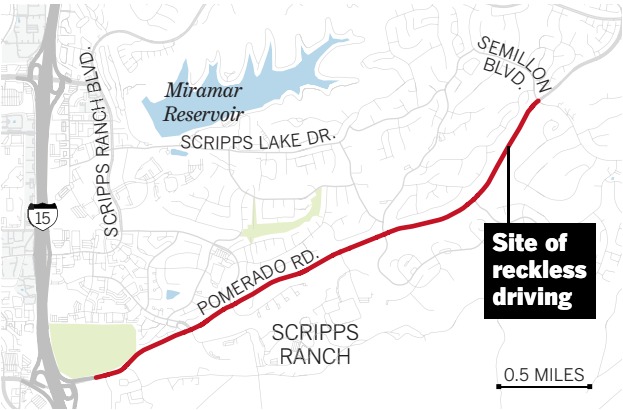
Residents in the College Area, Bay Terraces and Poway, among others, have reported an increase in reckless driving on social media and to local officials.

The police department received 1,136 calls for reckless driving or street racing in 2018 citywide; each year since, that figure has increased, to 1,605 calls in 2021. So far this year, the department has received 146 calls.

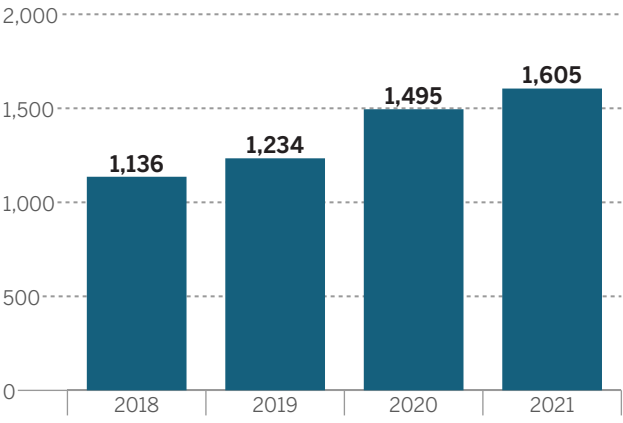
Minter said the depart-

Reckless driving in Scripps Ranch

Concern over extremely loud vehicles and high-speed racing has the San Diego Police Department dealing with increased calls reporting reckless drivers.



Calls reported citywide



Sources: San Diego Police Department; OpenStreetMap

ment definitely noticed an increase in street racing since COVID, and although he's unsure of the exact cause, he theorizes that drivers had more free time

and were looking for ways to entertain themselves during quarantines.

“And it's not just us,” Minter added. “It's everybody in the county. It's really



Some community members of Scripps Ranch are concerned about the racing on Pomerado Road.

across the nation.”

In October, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a law aimed at cracking down on illegal street racing. The law will add up to a six-month suspension of a driver's license for offenders. It will go into effect in July 2025.

Similarly, lawmakers in Georgia, New York, Mississippi and Arizona are considering measures to combat street racing.

Minter said the San Diego police department has been working with other law enforcement agencies across the county to address illegal street racing and is using a California Office of Traffic Safety grant to fund overtime for officers to conduct enforcement.

If residents complain of loud and excessive vehicle exhausts, he said, officers can issue citations to drivers, who then are required to

get their vehicles inspected by California state “referees.”

State referees, who are typically located at community college campuses, are authorized to verify if vehicles are compliant with the state law requiring vehicle exhausts be under 95 decibels.

Drivers who participate in sideshows or “takeovers” — which are when drivers take over intersections to gather for illegal street racing and stunt driving — will face misdemeanor charges, which can result in imprisonment for 90 days, fines of \$1,000, 40 days of community service and a six-month license suspension, Minter said.

Their vehicles also can be impounded and stored for 30 days, and owners are then required to pay storage fees ranging from \$1,800 to

\$2,000, according to police department officials.

On the evening of Christmas Day alone, 13 vehicles were impounded after the police department responded to 911 calls from community members in Mission Valley and University City reporting takeovers, police said.

For all of 2021, the department impounded 114 vehicles. So far this year, 30 vehicles have been impounded, according to officials.

Quinton Grounds, a community representative for Councilmember Marni von Wilpert of District 5, said her office has been working with residents and the police department to find solutions and coordinate a response, such as increased patrols, which community members have been asking for.

“Mostly what we're trying to do is give them the resources they need to take care of the matter,” Grounds said of the police.

However, matters on Pomerado Road, which longtime residents say has always been a popular spot for racers, have only continued to get worse, they said.

“It's a bad situation,” Sheridan added. “Something needs to be done.”

To report reckless drivers, residents can call 911 or make a report online at sandiego.gov/police/crimereports/startaccess.

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HOMELESS

FROM B1

or other alternatives were available.

Shelters began accepting new clients again as COVID-19 dropped last week, and enforcement of laws against illegal lodging and encroachment resumed Monday.

The police tactic is considered progressive enforcement because people are giv-

en warnings and offered shelter beds before being cited.

Homeless advocate Michael McConnell, who was at the encampment each day this week, called the police action “aggressive enforcement,” with several police vehicles arriving at a time and officers warning people that they would be arrested if they stayed.

“It's obvious to me they're going to clear the area,” he said. “They don't mind that there's 100 camps across the

city, but for some reason they don't want them there.”

McConnell said he counted about 35 tents Friday morning and said the number had decreased by that afternoon.

James Flynn, the manager of Walter Andersen Nursery just off Sports Arena Boulevard, estimated there were about 50 tents on the site early Friday, with about 100 people still living there. McConnell estimated 50 people were still there.

“I've seen a big reduction in tents, but it's still pretty bad,” Flynn said.

Flynn added that some of the tents that remained on the site appeared dilapidated and possibly abandoned, and he saw people sorting through items that had been left behind.

He also said he was encouraged that the city was taking action at the site and trying to find shelter for people who had been living in desperate conditions.

“I know they couldn't do it all at once, but it's definitely going in a positive direction,” he said. “I do see a little bit of hope there.”

Cathy Kenton, chair of the Midway-Pacific Highway Community Planning Group, said she was unaware that the number of tents on the street had reduced, but called it welcome news.

“It's good not only for the community, but for the folks who have been living out on the street who hopefully have

found a safer location,” she said.

McConnell said he saw a few people cited, at least one arrested, and several people who took offers for shelter.

He was skeptical about whether those who agreed to a shelter bed would remain there, and he recalled seeing one woman who agreed to a shelter early in the day return to the encampment later.

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