

Resisting Disinformation: How Not to Misinform

LWV OF MICHIGAN



Welcome!

I'm Ellen Wehrman of the League of Women Voters.

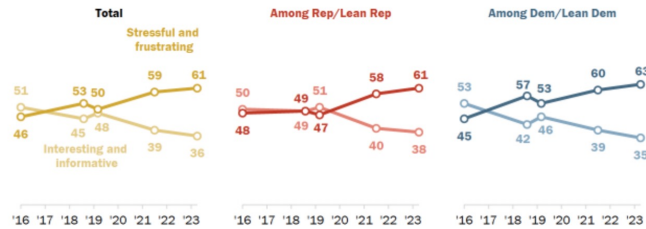
Thanks for being here today to learn tips for Resisting Disinformation.

We will go over:

- what dis- and misinformation are
- why people spread disinformation
- how disinformation works
- why it sticks
- when to respond
- and how to respond

Americans increasingly say political conversations with people they disagree with are 'stressful and frustrating'

% who say that talking about politics with people they disagree with is generally ...



Note: No answer responses not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-11, 2023.
"Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics"
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

"Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics"

Source: News Literacy Project
https://newslit.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Are-you-influenced-or-informed_webinar-031424.pdf

Misinformation vs. Disinformation

--False or otherwise misleading information--

Disinformation:

Created and shared on purpose for:

- Politics
- Pranks
- Money

Misinformation

Shared unwittingly to:

- Affirm one's affiliation ("tribe")
- Affirm one's identity



What is the difference between misinformation and disinformation?

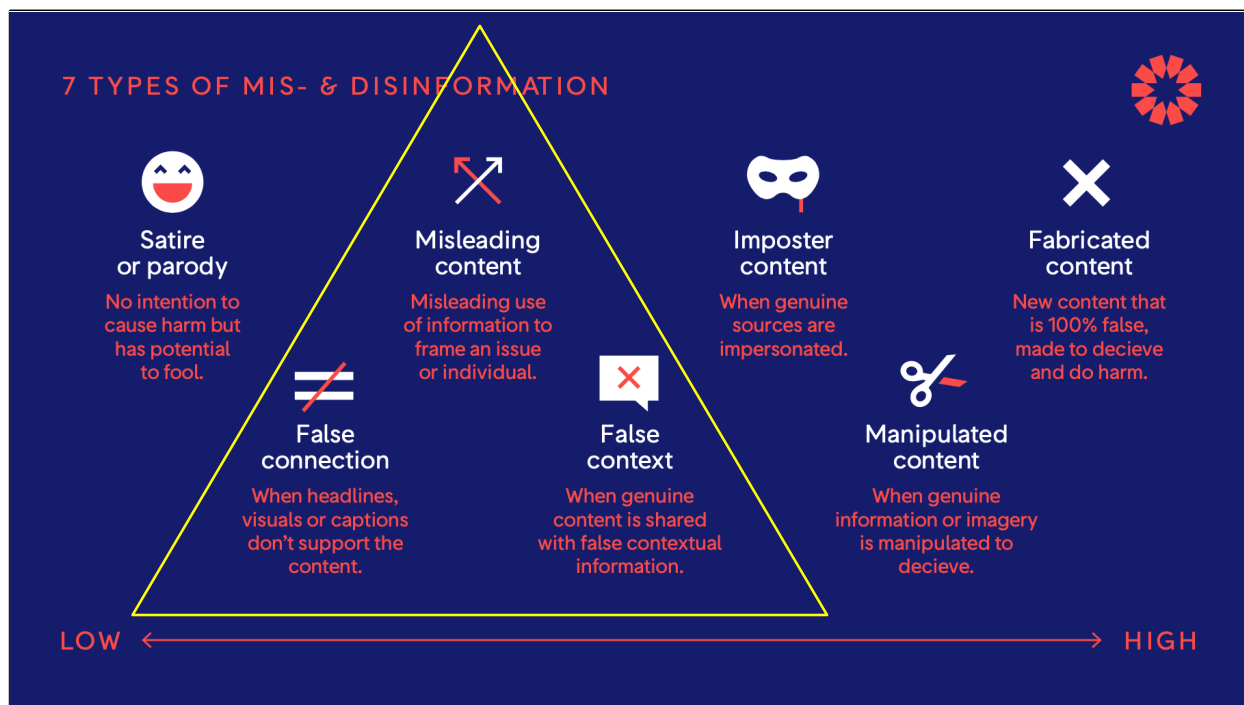
Both have to do with false or misleading information.

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You can think of disinformation as coming from the producers—they create and spread false information. Misinformation is when people share that disinformation, not knowing it is false. So it is the difference between producers and sharers.

Why produce false or misleading information? It is important to consider possible purposes, because pointing out the motivation is key to debunking disinformation.

- Some disinformation is designed to help someone retain or gain political power.
- Some disinformation is spread by pranksters who thrive on attention or enjoy chaos.
- Some disinformation generates revenue by gaining likes or shares, or by promoting sales.
- Why share misinformation?
 - Affirm affiliation – this is my team!
 - Affirm identity – this is who I am!



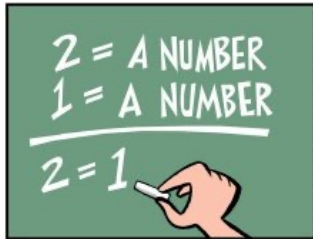
False or misleading information comes in many forms.

Here you see 7 types along a continuum of intent to cause harm, running from low at the left to high at the right.

- At the low end, a satirist likely does not mean to cause harm. However, someone who misses the satire may unintentionally cause harm by sharing the satire as genuine.
- We will talk in more detail in a minute about the next 3 types--false connection, misleading content and false context.
- Imposter content is when the creator pretends to be a source they are not.
 - A common source for this is using a source name and look that are very similar to a real or trustworthy source
- Manipulated content is when genuine information, imagery, or video are manipulated. For example: Slowing down video to make the speaker seem drunk, or editing a photo to exaggerate the subject's features.
- At the far end of the continuum is wholesale creation of false content.

[Source: First Draft (now defunct) <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/>]

Disinformation Tactics



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Half-truths
Biased narratives
Misleading argument
Logical fallacy
Lack of context
Conspiracies
Appeals to hatred or stereotypes
Outdated information

Here are some of the tactics used to produce the 3 types of disinformation that lay more in the middle of the continuum:

- false connection
- misleading content
- false context

A false connection can be created through a misleading argument or logical fallacy.

- The graphic shows a logical fallacy—just because 2 and 1 are both numbers, does not mean $2 = 1$.

False context can be achieved with outdated information or just a lack of context altogether.

Misleading content could be half-truths, biased narratives, conspiracies or appeals to hatred or stereotypes.

Election misinformation in 2024

Themes

Mental acuity
Corruption
Voter fraud
Immigration
"Grassroots" support
(astroturfing)

Tactics

False context
Sheer assertion
Doctored photos
AI voice cloning
AI-generated images
AI-generated video

The News Literacy Project

Source: News Literacy Project

https://newslit.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Are-you-influenced-or-informed_webinar-031424.pdf

WARNING

**The following images contain:
disinformation, conspiracies, and
other forms of problematic
content.**



Before we proceed, please be warned that the next few slides are real examples of online messages with problematic content.

As you look at and think about each example, please keep in mind that they risk misleading you **right now**.

As we go through the examples, think critically to understand how and why they are misleading.

Tactics

Missing Context

When images, quotes, statistics, or ideas are shared without important contextual information, their significance can be manipulated.



Follow

Illegal aliens are FAR more likely to commit Federal Crimes based on statistics. They are 7% of the population, yet they commit:

- 72% of DRUG POSSESSION
- 33% of MONEY LAUNDERING
- 29% of DRUG TRAFFICKING
- 22% of MURDERS
- 18% of FRAUD



4:28 AM - 6 Aug 2018

653 Retweets 703 Likes



Messages with missing or false context are widespread. The missing context turns something true into something misleading.

This message says, “Illegal aliens are far more likely to commit federal crimes based on statistics.” It states non-citizens are “7% of the population, yet they commit ...22% of murders.”

These statistics are accurate for the year they were shared and are backed up by government data.

Missing context, however, makes this post misleading. It gives data only for “federal crimes.”

These types of charges are rarely prosecuted at the federal level. If we look at criminal prosecutions at all levels of government, non-citizens are a much smaller percentage of the total for the listed crimes.

Without context, statements like this can be both true and exceptionally misleading.

Tactics

Faulty Logic

Logical fallacies come in many forms:

- False equivalence
- Red herring
- Straw man
- Slippery slope
- Appeal to authority



Faulty logic, or logical fallacies, usually come in the form of an argument that jumps to a wrong conclusion.

In this case, we see a meme that uses a false equivalence argument to question the legitimacy of mail-in voting. It suggests that mail-in voting is the same as self-certifying that you have been vaccinated. It is illogical to compare the two, but this message exploits potential skepticism with one to critique the other.

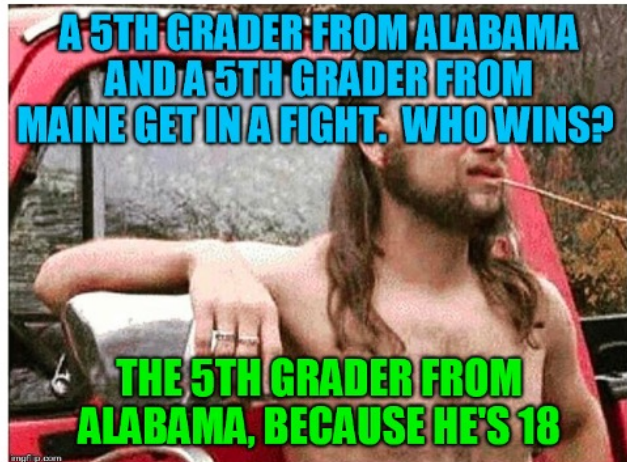
Other common logical fallacies are a red herring or a straw man argument. They misdirect your attention away from a real problem to an invented one.

Break down the arguments you see. Consider the substance of the argument, and the motivation of speaker. Then take a step back and consider whether the underlying premise is valid.

Tactics

Hate and Dog Whistles

Attacks based on identity and stereotypes can often be subtle and coded.



This viral meme doesn't use any overtly derogatory language, but it implies that white people from Alabama (or the Deep South in general) are uneducated and backwards.

References to stereotypes and attacks on specific populations may be overt or subtle. When they are subtle, we call them "dog whistles." This is a reference to whistles that dogs can hear, but humans cannot. A hateful message is conveyed in a covert manner.

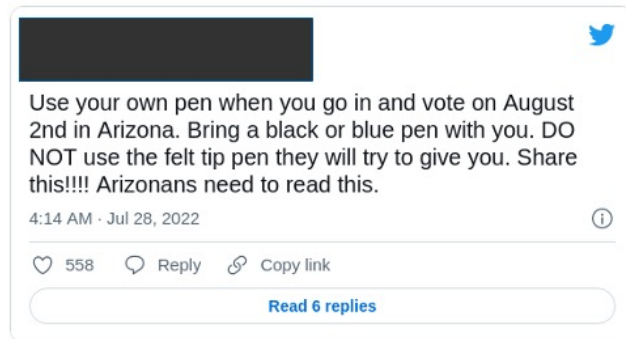
Pay careful attention to messages that refer to specific identities. See if they invoke stereotypes.

Tactics

Conspiracy Theories

Innuendo is a powerful vehicle for amplifying paranoia and fear.

Conspiracy theories often deliver or imply extraordinary explanations for mundane situations.



If you see a claim that a situation is the result of decisions by powerful people with ulterior motives, that is the sign of a conspiracy theory.

Often it is the more outlandish conspiracy theories that are highly publicized, but many mundane conspiracy theories also circulate. They blame politicians, organizations, and other powerful individuals for every kind of problem society faces.

When you see mention of specific powerful people in connection with world domination or other sinister activities, exercise skepticism.

Analyze misinformation

Tropes

- Outrage!
- Fear!
- Conspiracy
- Denialism
- Enemies

Trends

- Disasters
- Protests/crowds
- War
- Celebrity deaths

Tactics

- Screenshots
- False context
- Doctoring
- Fabricating
- Impostor posts

The News Literacy Project

Source: News Literacy Project

https://newslit.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Are-you-influenced-or-informed_webinar-031424.pdf

What Makes Disinformation Stick?

- Matches Our Biases/Fears
- Appeals to Emotions
- Offers Easy Answers
- Repeats—Again & Again



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We are most likely to believe disinformation when it fits our existing biases or plays to our fears.

Disinformation usually appeals to emotions. If we are riled up, we are more likely to respond or share online, which is often the goal of those who post such material.

Disinformation provides easy answers to complicated problems. It can be reassuring to find a simple explanation for a complex, nuanced situation. It can be easier to consider something “good” or “bad,” rather than allow it to be ambiguous or unresolved in our mind.

No matter if something is true or false, the more we hear or see it, the more we think it must be true.

Next we’ll go into a bit more about how disinformation is so “sticky.”



What Makes Disinformation Stick

Motivated Reasoning

Content that reinforces our existing bias is easier to believe and accept as true.

We are predisposed to believe ideas that align with our political beliefs, social values and attitudes about people and organizations.

Our biases condition us to rationalize or ignore things that don't align with our views.

We have to keep in mind that just because we want something to be true, doesn't mean it is.



What Makes Disinformation Stick

Emotional Appeals

Content that appeals to our emotions rather than reason triggers our reflexes and we can jump to conclusions not supported by facts

Misleading messages may make us angry, fearful, happy or proud.

When a message triggers a strong emotional response, take a step back and consider why the message makes us feel that way, and if those emotions are clouding our critical thinking.



What Makes Disinformation Stick

Easy Answers

Big and confusing problems that are explained with easy answers offer us a shortcut that bypasses our critical thinking skills.

Many misleading messages rely on easy answers to get you to jump straight to a particular conclusion.

Whether it is about an investment opportunity or disinformation, the same advice applies: “If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.”

When someone embraces a false belief ...

- They may or may not genuinely believe it to be true.
- Falsehoods can be a “performative” aspect of identity — and provide people with comprehension, control and community.
- They therefore may have a strong emotional connection to their beliefs.
- Institutional cynicism can prevent them from trusting many credible sources.
- In extreme cases, they may see themselves “at war.”

The News Literacy Project

Source: News Literacy Project

https://newslit.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Are-you-influenced-or-informed_webinar-031424.pdf

Strategies for Action

When in doubt: DO NOT ENGAGE!

If you engage:

--Structured Conversations

--Counter Messaging



When you encounter disinformation, the default action is NOT to engage.

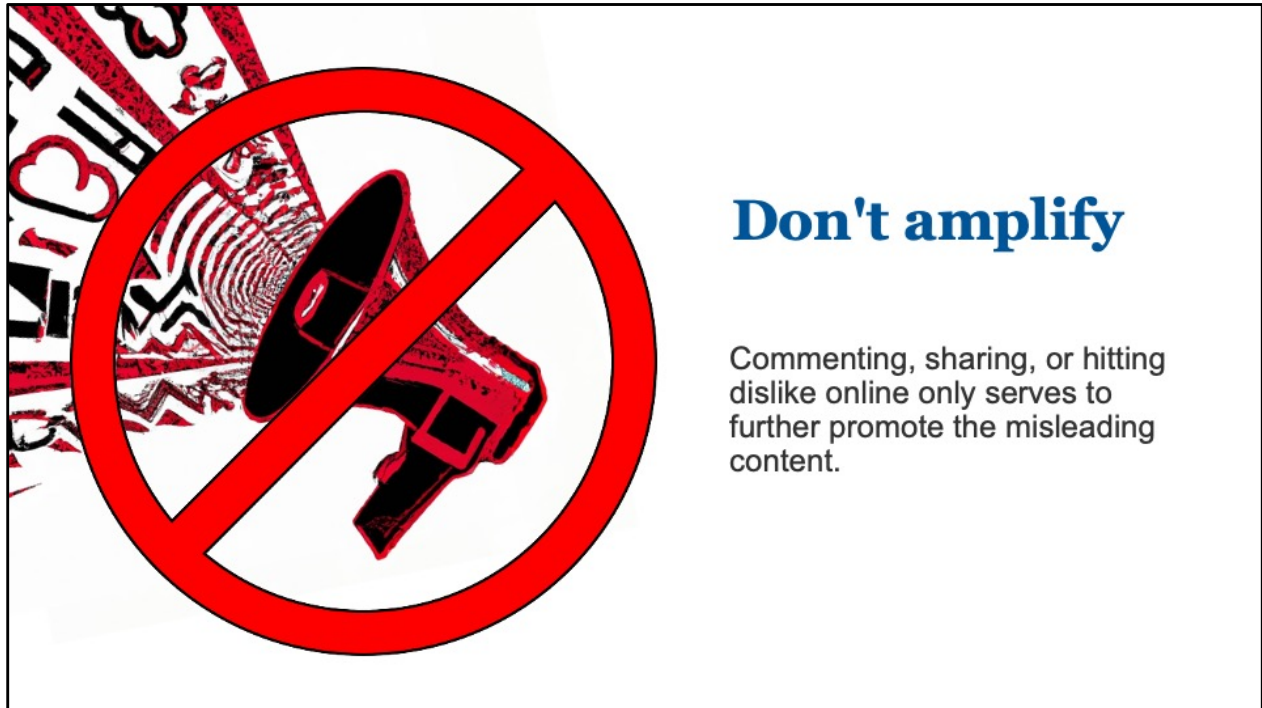
As we noted at the beginning, engagement can serve the purposes of those purveying the disinformation—giving them power or attention, or earning them profits.

And remember, the more something is repeated, the more it seems true. Even when we repeat something to say that it is false!

There are some situations when you may want to respond to disinformation:

- When communicating online with one other individual or in a small, closed group
- When interacting in person with another individual

In those cases, you will want to draw on the techniques of structured conversations and counter messaging.



A reminder before we talk about responding to disinformation:

It is crucial NOT to respond online by sharing, commenting on, or clicking a reaction to disinformation.

Online interaction boosts the reach of a piece of disinformation.

The last thing you want to do is help more people see something they wouldn't have seen otherwise--as you try to squash or debunk it.

Don't argue

Creating a defensive posture pushes someone deeper into their corner and makes it harder to communicate



When you are in a situation to engage with someone about disinformation, here are some suggestions about what NOT to do.

Don't argue. People usually respond with defensiveness. As they defend the disinformation, the more they tend to believe the disinformation.

Don't repeat the language of the falsehood

Language has power, and we shouldn't cede that power by using the terminology created by disinformers.



When it is appropriate to engage with someone, don't use the language of the people who created the disinformation.

Using the terminology of disinformers helps to normalize the misleading and harmful ideas.



When interacting, show respect and caring.

Embarrassing or ridiculing a person will make them feel badly about themselves and cause them to resent you.

Those negative feelings will not move them away from a belief in disinformation.

Don't contradict with **ONLY** a fact- check

Fact-checks are important, but when you share them without context or more discussion, they can reinforce distrust in the source.



Fact checking is a valuable and needed tool for countering disinformation.

By itself, however, it may backfire.

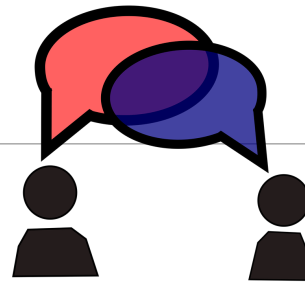
It may strike someone as condescending to be told, “No, I have the truth; you’ve been fooled.”

Or, a fact check may reinforce the person’s belief in the disinformation.

Much disinformation includes skepticism of the institutions that offer fact checking.

If someone already mistrusts academia or the mainstream media, for example, a fact check from a professor or major news outlet may feel like confirmation of their mistrust in such institutions.

Structured Conversations



1. Listen to understand beliefs
2. Affirm common values
3. Explain motives--politics, pranks, profit
4. Share how you got to your conclusions
5. Provide “Truth Sandwich”
6. Affirm relationship

Ok, so how does one respond effectively to disinformation?

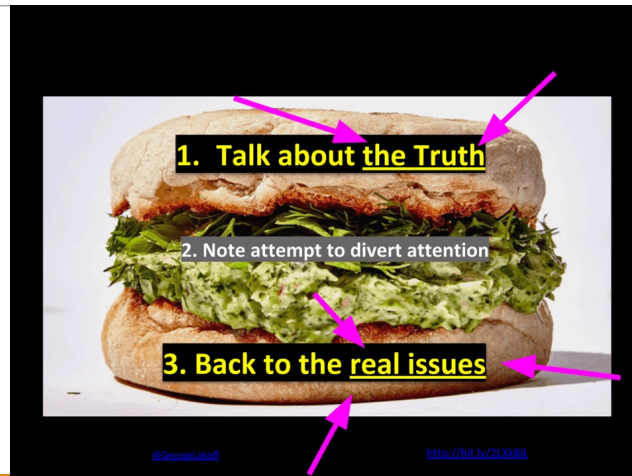
Remember that this is for when you are:

- communicating online with one other individual or online in a small, closed group
- or interacting in person with another individual

In those cases, use a structured conversation.

1. First, listen with empathy. This means not thinking about a response, but listening without interruption--to understand the person’s feelings and what they have lived through.
2. Then affirm the pertinent values you two (or the small group) have in common.
3. Next, briefly describe what may motivate the spread of disinformation—politics, pranks, profit.
4. Share why you feel as you do about the disinformation—be honest and vulnerable about your feelings and values.
5. Then offer a “truth sandwich,” which we’ll go into next.
6. Finally, affirm your relationship, even if the two of you still hold widely divergent viewpoints.

Counter Messaging



Counter messaging works well when we provide a “Truth Sandwich”—one not filled with facts, but with values.

We start at the top of the sandwich.

1. Make a statement about the general topic and our shared values.

For example: We all want secure and accurate elections.

2. Then, without repeating the disinformation, state who is spreading it about this topic and why.

People seeking political power try to divide us by attacking our election process.

3. For the bottom of the sandwich, state a positive vision for the future with regard to the topic.

The security of our election process makes me optimistic about the future of

our democracy.

Remember “**PEP**”

Patience

It’s going to take time

Empathy

Respect their beliefs

Persistence

Don’t give up

The News Literacy Project

Source: News Literacy Project

https://newslit.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Are-you-influenced-or-informed_webinar-031424.pdf

Resources & Thanks

- League of Women Voters: [Misinformation Guide](#)
- Office of the US Surgeon General: [Misinformation Toolkit](#)
- Union of Concerned Scientists: [Countering Disinformation in Your Community](#)
- George Mason University: [Debunking Handbook 2020](#)
- [News Literacy Project](#)
- Progress Michigan trainings: request at www.progressmichigan.org



To learn more, here are key sources for this presentation. They offer guidance and more information.

Special thanks to the Algorithmic Transparency Institute and Progress Michigan.

Ready to Resist Disinformation?



I hope this presentation has helped you feel more prepared to identify disinformation, to understand why it's good not to share it, and to know when and how to respond.

Thank you for listening!

Four tips for staying informed in 2024

**1.
Be intentional**
about news and
information
about the
election.

The News Literacy Project

**2.
Analyze
misinformation**
tropes, trends
and tactics.

**3.
Reflect on
potential
biases**
in news ... and
in you.

**4.
Act as a
trusted
intermediary**
for family,
friends and
others.

Source: News Literacy Project

https://newslit.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Are-you-influenced-or-informed_webinar-031424.pdf

✓9 for news media literacy

Misinformation in an Election Year

Prof. Sue Ellen Christian
Western Michigan University Presidential Innovation
Professor in Communication 2021-2024
Presentation for the League of Women Voters of
Michigan April 24, 2024

1. Check the headline: Does it match with the article text?
2. Check the author: Is there a byline of a real person?
3. Check the date: Is this a current issue or event?
4. Check for humor: Is it a joke or satire?
5. Check the website: What do reputable sources *off the site* say about it? (lateral reading)
6. Check your biases: Do you believe this because you agree with it?
7. Check the context: Are all sides presented?
8. Check the sources: Are they experts?
9. Check the image: What does a reverse image search reveal?

Source: Misinformation in an Election Year, presentation resources
<https://lwvwm.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/SChristianResourceSlids4-24-24.pdf>

How to Spot Mis- and Disinformation

- Access multiple outlets from multiple viewpoints (Ground.news; AllSides.com)
- Assess bias and reliability (mediabiasfactcheck.com; Ad Fontes; AllSides.com)
- Fact checking websites (factcheck.org; snopes.com; politifact.com and others)
- Reverse image search (TinEye; Google Images)
- Amnesty International's YouTube DataViewer (<https://citizenevidence.amnestyusa.org/>)

Misinformation in
an Election Year

Prof. Sue Ellen Christian
Misinformation in an Election Year
Presidential Innovation
2021-2024
if Women Voters of

Screenshot

Source: Misinformation in an Election Year, presentation resources
<https://lwvmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/SChristianResourceSlids4-24-24.pdf>

How to speak up without starting a showdown

Six best practices for talking to friends and family about sharing falsehoods online

News Literacy Project

A future founded on facts
newslit.org checkology.org

1. Be civil

Use an empathetic and respectful tone. Avoid being judgmental or simply telling someone they are wrong. If a person replies with aggressive or sarcastic language, don't respond in kind.

2. Take your time

Firing off a knee-jerk response might be tempting, but pause and take a step back. Do your homework. Research the claim and find reputable fact-checking organizations or credible expert sources to share, which assess above is key to effectively correcting misinformation online.

Remember Two links are tougher to dismiss than one.

3. Find common ground

Try putting yourself in your friend or loved one's shoes. Why might they have posted that? Did they have good intentions? Consider pointing out shared concerns or feelings in your response.

Remember Misinformation exploits our fears and values to elicit an emotional reaction. But you can also focus on these underlying principles to establish your own good intentions in reaching out.

4. Lay out the facts

Rather than simply posting a link to a fact-check, clearly summarize the main findings of the debunk first, then add the link.

Remember Don't let the conversation get derailed by unwarranted attacks on fact-checking organizations. Leading with the evidence and sharing links to more than one fact-check example can help you avoid being drawn into a fight about the organization itself.

5. Public or private?

Decide how you want to post your response. Public comments can reach a bigger audience, but a private message may be more appropriate in some situations.

Tip Even if you opt for a private message, you can still leave a comment calling the original post into question (e.g., "Heavens, I'm not sure about this one.")

6. Be patient (and persistent)

Remember Research shows we're more likely to believe fact-checks from people we know. View fact-checking as an ongoing debate rather than a fight to "win" at all costs. Even when someone seems unconvinced, calling out problematic content over time can plant a seed of doubt and prompt loved ones to work through important questions. While one corrective reply may not stop friends and relatives from sharing misinformation, consistently speaking up can help them think twice before sharing.

Remember Online trolls are not interested in honest debate. Don't waste your time responding to their insults or chasing their moving goalposts. Be willing to walk away.

Getting started: Some helpful phrases

"Oh, I saw this and it really caught my eye. It could be true, too. But..."

"Figuring out what's true online can be so overwhelming. But I did some digging and thought you'd want to know that it looks like this is misleading..."

"Here, this image/meme/article is kind of shocking, but I'm skeptical that it's real..."

"Do you know where this information came from? I've not found out about this?"

"This image looks like it may not actually be what it seems. Here is a link to another version of the image, which shows something different. What do you think?"

"I know we're all trying to be extra cautious because of all the bad information circulating on [shared subject]. Here is what I found..."

Resources consulted:

"What Do You Do When Family Or Friends Share Misinformation On Facebook?" (Meredith Wherry, HuffPost)

"How to Talk to Friends and Family About Misinformation: (Don't Please Feel Guilty)" (Paula West, News Literacy Project)

"Don't Just Tell Them to Fact-Check Your Friends, and Explain on the Conversation" (David Perine, HuffPost)

"Introduction to Online Communication: Understanding Online Communication" (L. Anita Biele and Emily Wang, Washington Post)

"Common Sense to Talk to Friends and Family About Misinformation" (Charles Wenzel, The New York Times)

Source: News Literacy Project
https://newslit.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Are-you-influenced-or-informed_webinar-031424.pdf

IN BRIEF

News Literacy Project

News media bias

People across the political spectrum often feel that "the media" is biased against their beliefs and values. But what counts as bias in news? And why do so few people feel that news coverage is slanted in their favor?

Here are six tips to help you think clearly about this nuanced and complex topic:

1

Differentiate news from opinion

The standards of quality journalism call for news reports — also called "straight news" or "hard news" — to be as fair and objective as possible. News columns, editorials and op-eds are not produced to be objective — they're supposed to express an opinion.

The *New York Times* news division strives to avoid bias, but its opinion editors do not.

2

Think about bias as a spectrum

Nothing humans produce can be entirely free of potential bias, so do news media too. Think about bias in news as a spectrum (from as free from bias as possible to as biased as possible).

3

Ask yourself: Compared with what?

When you encounter allegations of bias — whether identifying generalizations about "the mainstream media" or more targeted claims about a specific news organization or piece of reporting — **keep these questions in mind**:

- Biased compared with what?
- Can I point to an example of information that is better, more accurate and more helpful?

4

Recognize your own biases

Our own preconceptions can cause us to be responsive to certain types of news coverage, make assumptions about the motivations of journalists, or trigger biases for what to include and exclude coverage in "biased" if it challenges our ideas and beliefs. Though it may seem that bias in news is a balanced and deliberate, the reality is that it's made more often unintentional and open to debate.

5

Be wary of media bias charts and ratings

Bias charts and rating systems seem to provide an easy way to assess bias in news, but **few offer context, nuance or transparency**.

Some popular media bias visualizations are based on small samples of coverage that include opinion pieces alongside news reporting. They also involve comparing credible news organizations to sources that support polarized, ideological and conspiracy theories. This means ratings that journalists, hyperpartisans and conspiracy theorists are all part of the same community of practice. They're not.

6

Think about bias in terms of types and forms

Break through the hype and political divisions around the issue of bias by looking at your initial perceptions. What type of bias do you think you're seeing? And what have you seen it taking in coverage?

7

Think you've spotted an example of biased news?

Double-check your initial perceptions by asking: What would "fairness" news about this subject look like? If your perceptions of bias are accurate, you should have concrete ideas for how a news report could be made more impartial.

8

Public feedback makes journalism better

If your initial perception of bias in news coverage holds up under scrutiny, tell something! Share your thoughts with the reporter or social media to write a letter to the editor.

9

Different types of bias ... can take different forms in coverage

Agenda bias: Journalists' judgment is influenced by the importance of an event or development as an important story.

Corporate bias: Business interests of a journalist — including themselves and the parent company — influence coverage.

Ownership bias: News outlets showing an other-bias — such as culture or economic ones — affect news coverage.

Neutrality bias: A journalist or news outlet may not be in a position to report on a story that the coverage misrepresents the facts.

Partisan bias: Journalists' own political views affect news coverage.

Balance of fairness and balance: The bias to present all relevant information or to avoid or downplay an issue in an accurate and objective way.

Proximity bias: News report is perceived and reported.

Reporting: The news and perspectives presented relevant and important enough to be included in news story.

Story selection: What a news organization chooses to cover or focus on.

Tone: The words and phrases used to describe the person, place or event being covered.

The News Literacy Project

Source: News Literacy Project

https://newslit.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Are-you-influenced-or-informed_webinar-031424.pdf

News Literacy Project

A future founded on facts

newsli.org

How to know what to trust

FIRST

1. Be aware of your emotions.

2. Pause.

3. Decide if it is...

NEXT

USER-GENERATED CONTENT	AN UNFAMILIAR ORGANIZATION SOURCE	A RECOGNIZED STANDARDS-RAISED NEWS SOURCE
Check the comments. Has anyone provided evidence that the claim being made isn't true (or that it is true)? Read the post carefully. Does it cite reputable sources or actual evidence to support its claim? (Remember: Bad actors often try to pass off unrelated photos and videos as "evidence" for their false claims.) Search elsewhere for the claim. Does it appear in other user-generated forums? Have other accounts shared identical posts? Have quality news outlets or fact-checking organizations written about this? Investigate the source. Can you tell where this claim originated? If not, how visible are other posts shared by this account? Does the account seem responsibly run, or is it devoted to amplifying divisive, inflammatory content?	Check the comments. Has anyone flagged this source or provided evidence that the claim being made isn't true (or that it is true)? Turn the headline into a question, then search. Copy the headline into a search bar adding a question mark at the end. Have reputable news outlets or fact-checking organizations written about this? Search for the name of the source. Are there credible results that identify it as unreliable? Can you determine if it is a satirical or entertainment site? Is there evidence that it is a state-run news outlet? Analyze the source. Does the website include disclaimers that its content is not to be taken seriously? Do other items on the site look suspicious? Does the site contain original reporting, or simply commentary? Are there numerous grammatical and/or spelling errors?	Check: News or something else? Is this a straight news report or something else, such as an opinion piece? (Remember: Opinion journalism doesn't try to be unbiased.) Look for obvious problems. Is there anything in this report that seems "off" to you? Does it use loaded language, or contain other signs that it's unfair? Look for other coverage. Are other credible standards-based outlets reporting the same thing? Evaluate the reporting. Are the people, documents and other sources cited in the report generally considered reliable? Have the details been clearly verified, or is the story still developing?

4. Take 60 seconds to...

5. Consider the claims.

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Source: News Literacy Project
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