



Election Integrity Project

Responsible Reporting Toolkit

Covering misinformation and disinformation



Written by Howard Hardee, produced by Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism and the Center for Journalism Ethics in collaboration with First Draft and with the support of Craig Newmark Philanthropies.

Don't repeat the myth: A local reporter's toolkit for covering mis- and disinformation on social media

By Howard Hardee

We're all guilty of spreading some level of misinformation.

An obvious example is your uncle sharing a widely circulating but completely false claim that holding your breath for 10 seconds is a DIY test for COVID-19. (It's not — don't retweet that.) But reporters who embed misleading tweets from politicians about mail-in voting without providing context or correction also promote falsehoods.

I've spent this year learning about how it's on everybody to help clean up the social web. In February, I began a local [social media-monitoring project](#) with First Draft, an international organization that helps journalists identify and report on disinformation. With fellows representing Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin, we're focusing on swing states where a few thousand voters could make the difference in this critical election year.

With backing from the [Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism](#) and the [Center for Journalism Ethics](#) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I'm helping launch the [Election Integrity Project](#), an effort to develop resource kits for journalists and news consumers — and counteract efforts to strip voters of their power in Wisconsin.

Misinformation:



Thomas Kennedy
@tomaskenn

Photo taken in Wisconsin. This is happening right before our eyes. They are sabotaging USPS to sabotage vote by mail. This is massive voter suppression and part of their plan to steal the election.



7:16 PM · Aug 14, 2020 · Twitter Web App

76.9K Retweets and comments 118.3K Likes

This viral photo was presented as evidence of “massive voter suppression,” but in fact depicts a company in Hartford, Wisconsin, that [regularly refurbishes mailboxes](#).

Exploring the fast-paced, facts-optional and sort of sticky-feeling world of the social web can be an overwhelming experience for any reporter. And that was before COVID-19 and the killing of George Floyd upended the country and opened a torrent of related rumors, conspiracies, hoaxes and hyperpartisan content.

The good news is that people tend to trust local sources of information. As a recognizable local reporter, you have the public's good faith on your side, and by monitoring social media for potentially harmful falsehoods, you have a way to create important service journalism on its behalf.

You're also not alone. Reporters interested in the intersections of journalism, democracy and technology have a wealth of resources at their disposal, including this guide for monitoring the social web in your backyard.

I. Measuring the 'tipping point': Deciding when to report on information disorder

This is the most difficult question for reporters covering information disorder: When is the right time to run a story? Unfortunately, there aren't many easy answers.

Most disinformation doesn't warrant professional media coverage because the risk of amplifying the underlying message outweighs the benefit of reporting. Though it may seem counterintuitive to hold off while false and misleading information is circulating, it's wise to wait until it's clear that a large audience will be absorbing the message. In other words, content has to reach the "tipping point."

"Reporters need to be thinking very critically about what they're choosing to cover," said Nora Benavidez, a First Amendment and voting rights advocate with PEN America. "Think to yourself, 'What am I giving oxygen to?'"

A falsehood arguably reaches the tipping point if it has moved beyond the online community in which it originated; attracts more attention than usual for a specific page or account; gets picked up by an establishment media outlet; or is shared by a public figure with a wide digital reach.

But there's no universal formula. As experienced journalists know, each story and surrounding circumstance is different, and so much depends on the audience. Judging the tipping point is a much different exercise for a local newspaper than it is for The New York Times.

"The first thing to consider when making this kind of calculus is to consider what kind of harm you're dealing with," said Whitney Phillips, an assistant professor of communication and rhetorical studies at Syracuse University. "Some falsehood is silly; some is just sort of baffling; and some is threatening to somebody's life and safety. So, being really confident that the information is not abstract, that it affects people's lives and can be weaponized, is really important."

That criteria could be met quickly if the information disorder pertains to, say, medical advice during a pandemic. If a rapidly spreading falsehood has the potential to cause extraordinary harm — like the notion that injecting disinfectant is a treatment for COVID-19 — that could justify publishing with urgency, Phillips said.

The second major factor to consider: To whom is the information relevant? Or, more bluntly, who cares?

"As long as the information is only relevant and particularly harmful to the community where it originally emerged, you want to let it stay there," she said. "If nobody else is affected, interested, or harmed by it, all that reporting is going to do is make sure more people are brought into the conversation. You want to wait until the information is relevant to people outside of that community."

When measuring the tipping point and weighing whether it's time to report, restraint can be critical. Here's how to weigh your decisions.

Consider the “Trumpet of Amplification.”

Disinformers often use a bottom-up strategy to amplify their false and harmful claims, relying on amplification from traditional media to help their messages spread.

Disinformers pollute social media by planting misleading or fabricated content, hoping to dupe journalists that look at online sources for their stories. Having their manufactured rumor featured and amplified by an influential news organization like the Washington Post, Politico or FactCheck.org is considered a serious win. In many cases, we are the target.

That's where a theoretical model developed by First Draft called the [Trumpet of Amplification](#) comes in. It holds that disinformation often starts on the anonymous web on platforms like 4Chan and Discord before moving onto closed messaging apps like Signal and WhatsApp. From there it spreads to conspiracy communities on Reddit or YouTube, and then onto the most mainstream social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. At this point, it's often picked up by the professional media, with some piece of false information embedded in an article or quoted in a story without verification or context.

Disinformation can be reported on at any point along the Trumpet of Amplification, but that doesn't mean it should be.

Flag bad influencers.

Disinformation also spreads from the top down when it comes from elected representatives or other influencers with vast social media followings.

The worst offenders on social media — those with wide and responsive audiences who use their megaphones irresponsibly — are like apex predators who depend on the broader ecosystem to survive, Phillips said.

“They are able to exploit the attention economy, and the way that algorithms function, and journalistic amplification,” she said. “The lions, tigers and bears depend on literally everybody else to do what they do.”

Misinformation:



Dan O'Donnell

May 28 · 🌐

President Trump is right: Mail-in ballots have been used to commit massive vote fraud for more than four decades. Here's a brief history of some of the most notorious cases.



NEWTALK1130.IHEART.COM

A Brief History of Mail-In Vote Fraud | News/Talk 1130 WISN | Dan O'Donnell

👍👎 409

40 Comments 524 Shares

Claims of fraudulent mail-in ballots are rampant on social media, despite all forms of voter fraud being exceedingly rare in the U.S., [according to NPR](#).

For example, a state legislator using official channels to compare COVID-19 to the common flu and characterize wearing masks as “taking a different viewpoint,” rather than

a public health precaution, may present an opportunity for journalists to fill in the facts without amplifying the misleading information.

If bad influencers are pushing disinformation in your area, take a screenshot and save the URL. Consider it evidence that may inform your later reporting.

Watch for overperformance...

One metric reporters can use to measure the tipping point is “overperformance,” which means more engagement — i.e, likes, shares and comments — than usual for an individual account or page.

The overperformance feature on CrowdTangle makes it easy to tell when a specific post is getting more traction. Overperforming posts on social media accounts that already have high engagement are particularly interesting to savvy digital reporters, especially if the content is misleading or pushing a false narrative. That means lots of people are interacting with bad information.

...and platform jumps.

If you see highly inflammatory or potentially dangerous information in a niche community on a platform like 4Chan, but nowhere else, it's advisable to watch and wait. There's no need to feed a malignant rumor that may wither on its own.

More concerning is information disorder that starts on niche back channels and makes the jump to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or TikTok. But it's still not a slam-dunk case for a reported story. Look for indications that the content has taken on a life of its own.

“You know you're in trouble when you start seeing community spread, if you can't trace the origin of a particular infection and it's just kind of out in the wild,” Phillips said. “It's really once a story reaches community spread that it might become necessary to report on it. As long as it's traceable and you can see where it began, then it might not have hit that point yet.”

It all depends. If circulating content poses a direct threat to public health and safety, or a disinformation campaign is directed at a vulnerable community, waiting for evidence of greater community spread could be harmful.

“Rules of thumb like considering harm, considering the tipping point, considering community spread, they are a habit of mind that can help newsrooms and individual reporters think about what kinds of consequences their reporting might have beyond whether or not it's ‘a good story,’” Phillips said.

II. ‘I’m not immune here’: Understanding why disinformation is so difficult to debunk

Some efforts to fact-check false or misleading information can be ineffective simply due to the way our brains are hardwired.

In what's known as the continued influence effect, misbeliefs tend to persevere even after we've been presented with contradictory evidence. Comedian and HBO host John Oliver copped to being as susceptible as anyone else during an episode of *Last Week Tonight*, “Coronavirus: Conspiracy Theories.”

“I’m not immune here,” he says.

“Embarrassingly, there’s a part of me that thinks the [British] royal family had Princess Diana killed. I know that they didn’t because there’s absolutely no evidence that they did. But the idea still lingers.”

A separate theory called motivated reasoning suggests that we don’t process information objectively, or with the aim of being correct, but rather filter out information that doesn’t align with our pre-existing beliefs. So, if your family and friends are opposed to wearing masks to prevent the spread of coronavirus, they may be more inclined to reject articles about the effectiveness of masking.

The theory helps explain why debunk-style articles can be limited in terms of updating people’s beliefs, said Jianing Janice Li, a PhD student and Knight Scholar of Communication and Civic Renewal at UW-Madison.

“The theory basically suggests there’s tension between wanting to be accurate and altering one’s prior sense,” she said. “It underlies all kinds of human reasoning, particularly in the political realm.”

With the cognitive deck stacked against them, how can reporters set the record straight?

Here are a couple of promising strategies.

Fill data voids.

Readers run into [data voids](#) when “a wave of new searches that have not been previously conducted appears, as people use names, hashtags, or other pieces of information” to find answers to their questions, according to Michael Golebiewski and Danah Boyd of

Microsoft.

A data void appeared in Wisconsin days before the April 7 primary election. Gov. Tony Evers indicated he would deploy the Wisconsin National Guard to help at the polls, which was cited as evidence of a military-enforced quarantine lockdown by bad influencers with ideological motives.

With false rumors spreading online, the National Guard released a statement clarifying its role in the election and enforcing the state’s Safer at Home order. By doing so, the guard effectively [worked with local media to fill a data void](#), in which web searches would have turned up false or misleading information on the subject.

Getting ahead of rapidly spreading rumors isn’t easy but can be done. Start by anticipating the sorts of mis- and disinformation your audience might encounter ahead of a scheduled event like an election. Think of questions or keywords readers might pose to a search engine, look up existing content relating to these questions, and fill the gaps with vetted information that is easy to find with a search. ([Google Trends](#) shows questions people are asking locally.)

A newsroom could produce, for example, a story focusing on the workings of election administration to clear up local confusion.

“Try and anticipate misunderstandings around mail-in balloting, or polling hours, or mask and social distancing rules,” said Victoria Kwan, a London-based standards and ethics editor for First Draft. “If there are basic questions that government officials haven’t answered, or the answer is kind of mushy, that kind of area could be ripe for mis- and disinfo.”

Inoculate or “prebunk.”

If disinformation spreads somewhat like a virus, why not try inoculating the population in advance? That’s the idea behind the emerging practice known as “prebunking.”

Prebunks let people know in advance that they might be misled, rather than writing corrective stories after the fact. It could be an up-front warning intended to prevent specific disinformation from sticking in peoples’ minds, or a public service piece about practicing healthy skepticism in general.

One could alert audiences to the common tactic of using photos out of context, and advise using a [reverse-image search](#) if they suspect an old photo is being presented as an original.

“Or you could say that experts are being quoted who aren’t real, who aren’t experts in the field, or that sometimes there’s imposter content that says it’s from CNN, but it’s not,” Kwan said.

A small nudge could be enough to get people to watch out for inaccurate information, said Sijia Yang, an assistant professor at UW-Madison who studies message effects and persuasion on digital media.

“Just remind them to pay attention or think through what is likely to be accurate or what is not,” he said. “Even some minor reminders seem to at least temporarily enhance peoples’ [eye] for what is right and what is false.”

Explain the strategies employed by agents of disinformation, rather than focusing on specific examples of false content. It’s like giving

someone a compass so they can navigate the turbulent seas of social media on their own.

“You can issue specific fact checks, but what might be more effective is to teach people about those general misinformation techniques,” Kwan said. “To me, that’s more useful. If you can identify those techniques, you can apply that to a wide range of different topics, whether it’s climate change or COVID-19.”

III. Lead with the truth: How to handle misinformation in your reportage

Information disorder gains energy from a variety of sources, similar to a hurricane, Phillips said. One cannot point to a single gust of wind as being responsible for the storm.

“You can theoretically talk about every social media engagement with a source, or talk about the types of news stories that get written, or you can talk about social media algorithms,” Phillips said. “You can kind of abstractly refer to all the different elements that go into amplification. But in fact, in reality, in practice, amplification is the consequence of all those things happening simultaneously.”

Indeed, the highly complex, engagement-based way disinformation is promoted on social media is problematic for the reporter seeking to stop or slow the spread of information disorder, Phillips said. But there are a handful of ways reporters can avoid feeding the storm.

Don't repeat the myth.

Misinformation can acquire power through repetition, creating an illusion of truth.

“Repetition and increased exposure should be minimized to the greatest extent possible,” Yang said. “I guess the tricky thing would be how to make the headline interesting and attractive without mentioning or minimizing the notion of misinformation.”

Affirming facts is generally less risky than retracting or refuting myths. And leading with the truth is always imperative when handling falsehoods in a reported piece — especially so with headlines.

Many social media users only read the headlines of most stories they share. Given that short window of attention, reporters and editors should strive to convey their story's core message and avoid the temptation to lead with the claim they're trying to debunk.

“If you're phrasing the headline like, ‘Does eating garlic prevent COVID-19?’, but the actual text of the article says, ‘No, it doesn't,’ well, you only see the headline on social media,” Kwan said. “Most people aren't going to click on it, and those two things are definitely going to get lodged in some people's minds.”

Here's an easy rule of thumb: Don't restate falsehoods in headlines.

Avoid giving bad actors more attention.

Here's another: Don't amplify false narratives by linking directly to problematic content.

“Sometimes it's very hard to talk about something without pointing to it,” Yang said. “Certainly, you don't want to repost the original misinformation. You don't want to provide a URL linking people to the YouTube or social media post. But sometimes not mentioning it at all is not feasible.”

So, it's OK to describe the content, but don't give bad actors more exposure by pointing people their way. Explain in the story why it's important to not amplify the message, and why you're not including a link.

If a visual example of the content is essential to the story, use a screenshot. An alternative approach is creating an archive of multiple examples using a [tool such as the Wayback Machine](#) and directing readers to it instead of the bad actor's Twitter account. It could also be useful to use a [screen-grabbing tool like Evernote](#).

Report for the people.

If you want your fact-checking to be as useful as possible, keep in mind that the overwhelming majority of Americans don't follow politics as closely as you do, said Lucas Graves, a journalism professor with UW-Madison who authored the 2016 book *Deciding What's True: The Rise of Political Fact-Checking in American Journalism*.

Many people may only tune in for a few months ahead of an election. Ask yourself: What might they be confused about?

“Fact-checking, at its best, is a form of public service journalism,” Graves said.

Tell the whole story.

Narrative-based debunks are more effective than simple corrections in debiasing beliefs. Tell the full story behind the misinformation, providing as much explanatory detail as possible. Explaining *why* something is wrong is more effective than simply stating that it is untrue.

Decrease ambiguity, embrace simplicity.

All news reporters should be striving for clear and concise explanations. This is especially true for fact-checking. Simple language is more effective in helping people update their beliefs than complex language.

Gray areas are notoriously tricky. When a fact-check refutes an entire statement, rather than only part of it — giving an ambiguous judgment like “mostly false” — people are more likely to accurately update their beliefs.

“Be as simple as possible while also providing the evidence,” Graves said.

Consider the source, avoid partisanship.

Perhaps it isn’t surprising that the source of misinformation affects how much people believe it. But it’s a good practice to avoid emphasizing political aspects of debates or individual bad influencers.

Research shows that fact-checks are shared and retweeted on a partisan basis, making it important for reporters to avoid appearing like another person with strong opinions on social

media.

“As a journalist, it’s not something you can really do anything about,” Graves said. “You can’t help the nature of political discourse on social media, but you don’t want to make it any easier. You want to be as clear as possible. The content of your fact check will have the greatest chance of being persuasive no matter which conversations it’s pulled into.

“Be as nonpartisan and nonrancorous as you can be,” he said, “while recognizing that you’re going to get pulled into partisan and rancorous debates.”

Though reporters can’t control whether their story is diverted into deeply partisan channels on social media, they can avoid highlighting the partisan identity of the person who made the false claim.

Point to expert sources.

Since the source of information is so critical to a news reader’s perception of credibility, strive to find expert sources for your corrective story. Perceived expertise and trustworthiness shapes whether a piece of information is accepted.

In the realms of science and health fact-checking, pointing to expert sources and consensus findings has shown overwhelmingly positive effects. Doing so significantly increases individuals’ acceptance of corrective messages about genetically modified organisms and flu vaccines on social media, for example.

Research has also shown that using the weight of evidence — documenting

scientific consensus rather than striving for a “false balance” — is effective in correcting misperceptions about the safety of vaccines.

Show, don't tell.

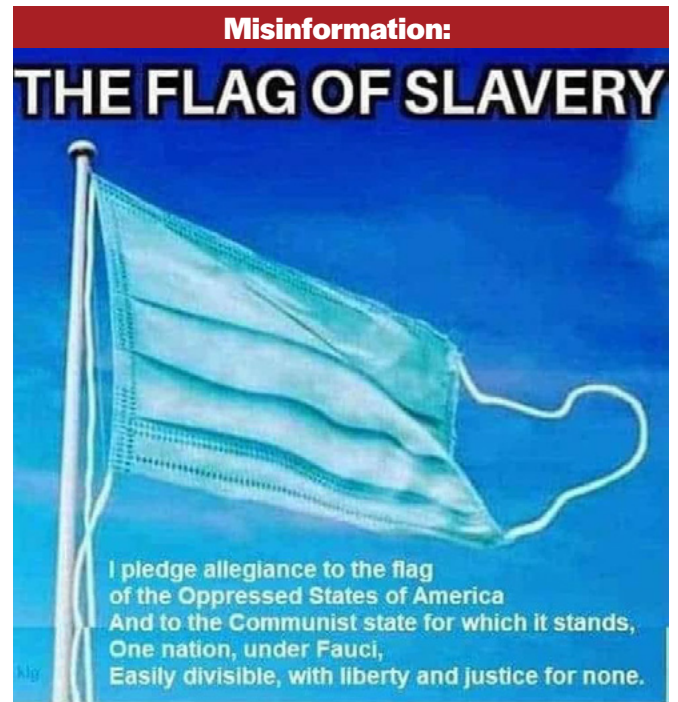
Effective use of design elements and graphics to illustrate the point of a corrective story can be powerful. Though research is mixed on the subject, some studies have found that presenting data in charts and graphs in a corrective story is more effective than texts relating the same information.

Providing a visual of a group of scientists to illustrate the presence of scientific consensus in the safety of vaccines has shown to be effective in reducing misperceptions.

“Images and videos are more easily recalled by people,” Kwan said. “It’s important for newsrooms to think about how they can push debunks and prebunks in visual formats, and not just in text.”

Using videos with narration, regardless of whether the content is humorous, is more effective than longform texts in correcting misinformation, likely due to people’s perceptions that the videos are more interesting and less confusing.

“There’s evidence that well-designed video fact-checks can be persuasive,” Graves said. “Some of these short videos really walk through a claim and the reasons why it’s true in this simple narrative way, very often when using animations. They’re certainly easy to understand, and pretty compelling.”



This meme comparing a basic public health precaution to slavery is one of many to have made the rounds in the private Facebook group Wisconsinites Against Excessive Quarantine.

Of course, for cash-strapped newsrooms, producing a high-quality video debunk may not be in the budget. Visuals can also be ineffective or counterproductive. Sometimes that’s because what’s compelling isn’t the best means of correction.

“With people trying to debunk the [false] link between vaccines and autism, you see a lot of visuals of syringes being injected into a crying baby’s arm,” he said. “It’s babies and pain and all these cues that will get attention. But the thing is, it’s likely to be conducive to anxiety and fear, especially among parents. The question is, ‘Do these visuals help with correction?’ That’s a big question mark.”

Yang recommends sticking to visuals that represent the core argument of the corrective piece and aren’t strictly meant to attract attention.

IV. Being part of the solution: Acting responsibly on your social media accounts

As much as modern reporters are encouraged to cultivate social media followings and engage with people on multiple platforms — which can also boost their visibility in the community and future career prospects — they're offered little guidance on how to conduct themselves online.

"A lot of reporters are working to make a name for themselves, and part of what that means is essentially starting to build a personal brand on social media," Phillips said.

So, it's very possible for journalists to amplify false narratives to their sometimes sizable social media followings.

Journalists can think they're removed from their subjects and documenting events in a totally unbiased way. But they're never fully separable from the stories they write or the social content they produce, Phillips said. Even the most "unbiased" response can boost amplification.

"I would give the same advice to reporters as I would to every citizen, which is that we are all part of amplification," Phillips said. "It's very easy to think that because we're commenting critically on something, we're standing somehow outside of the story we're responding to. In these hyper connected environments online, all of our actions feed into the energies that fuel these storms."

Reporters shouldn't feel discouraged from interacting with their social media audiences. It's in their nature to speak up and be in the thick of important discussions. But they can take precautions to avoid giving life to conspiracies, rumors and speculation.

Provide context, including what's unknown.

Social media is full of decontextualized content, from old articles shared as if they're new to real photos presented as evidence of something unrelated. You don't want the content you create or promote to add to the confusion.

"So much of online discourse is distorted by a lack of context," Graves said. "It's really easy for your work to be taken out of context or show up in conversations that you didn't expect."

Context is always a critical consideration for reporters. But given the head-spinning pace of news in the digital age and the fleeting attention users pay to their social media feeds, context is often lacking all around.

"Providing context is extraordinarily important, but we're limited with what we can do as a story is unfolding," Phillips said. "The call is to kind of slow down and wait until you're sure, but that runs up against this journalistic idea of reporting things as they happen."

As an antidote, make a practice out of telling your audience what you don't know about the unfolding situation: *This is not yet confirmed. There's a possibility what we're seeing isn't really what's happening. Stay tuned for more details.*



This viral meme that circulated in Wisconsin in August draws false equivalencies between the H1N1 virus and new coronavirus, leaving out [important context](#).

Yang also recommended acknowledging when there's genuine uncertainty surrounding an issue, like conflicting public health recommendations about wearing masks at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"You didn't want to say, in the early stages, that asking people to wear a mask is misinformation because it would be hard to turn it around once the recommendations change," he said. "That's partially true of any complicated issue; it is uncertain."

Don't write disdainfully of anybody's beliefs.

Reporters might think they're helping their audience understand misbeliefs by mocking people who harbor them. Taking a snide, sarcastic or patronizing tone with someone who shares problematic content can backfire

and come across as mean-spirited.

False claims about cloth masks forcing the coronavirus up everybody's nose may be a bit out there, but you can still strive to demonstrate kindness and empathy while offering corrections.



Containing the false claim that microchips were being delivered via COVID-19 nasal swabs, this meme was shared in Wisconsin among vaccine and 5G network skeptics.

If you try to be funny, stay on message.

Whether people are more receptive and less argumentative when factual information is presented with a bit of humor is a new area of research.

It may be helpful, in some cases, to add a dash to your social media posts, or even your reported stories. Taiwan, for example, has [recruited professional comedians](#) to produce fact-based refutations of myths and hoaxes about the coronavirus.

But it's easier said than done — we're not all *Daily Show* material — and you risk distracting from the main message.

"A lot of jokes wouldn't be relevant information," Yang said, "and that means taking people's attention away from the core argument."

Using humor to deliver facts also depends on journalists knowing their audiences, Li said. You could risk alienating people with a joke that doesn't land right.

Don't always assume laughter is the best medicine and remember that satirical content is often manipulated or presented as if it's real journalism. If you choose to use humor, know your audience and keep the message on point.

Spar with misinformed users cautiously.

As dedicated defenders of the truth, it can be tempting for reporters to confront somebody who is spreading false information on social media, particularly if it relates to their reporting. But it probably won't work.

"Factual argumentation isn't super effective when responding to people's belief systems," Phillips said. "We think that people are coming into their beliefs because they're weighing options rationally and employing logic, and therefore, to convince them otherwise, all you have to do is throw some facts at them. But that's not how people respond to information, and that's not how people arrive at their beliefs."

Engaging in an online argument also risks exposing the misleading message you're trying to debunk to a broader audience.

"If people see a reporter taking something seriously enough to respond to it," Phillips said, "they'll think there must be something there, because why would the reporter be talking about it at all?"

If you feel obligated to fact-check on the fly, be cautious.

"It's easy to make a mistake or miss some other reading of the claim," Graves said. "The advantage of having written a full-fledged fact-check, and then being able to link to it on social media, is that you've done the work. So, you know the details and you're pretty confident in your assessment. It can be risky if you haven't done the research."

It's a different situation if reporters encounter a falsehood related to their beat. In that case, they may feel confident in responding to bad influencers in real time. Just don't get in a shouting match. Joining the cacophony of voices only adds to the problem.

"You want to make it as nonconfrontational as possible," Graves said. "You don't want to get recruited into partisan mud-slinging online. Try to phrase your response in a way that resists being mischaracterized and misrepresented."

On the precipice: Diving into the head-spinning world of information disorder

Before you start monitoring the social web, you'll want to know how to describe what you're seeing. Here are some key terms illustrated with local and national examples.

Information disorder

The tangle of lies, conspiracies, rumors, hoaxes, hyperpartisan content, falsehoods and manipulated media that occupies the social web is collectively known as information disorder. It's an umbrella term adopted by First Draft and other organizations to effectively replace "fake news," which has in recent years been commandeered by bad actors to discredit real journalism, and also used by consumers to describe news that casts their preferred political party in a negative light.

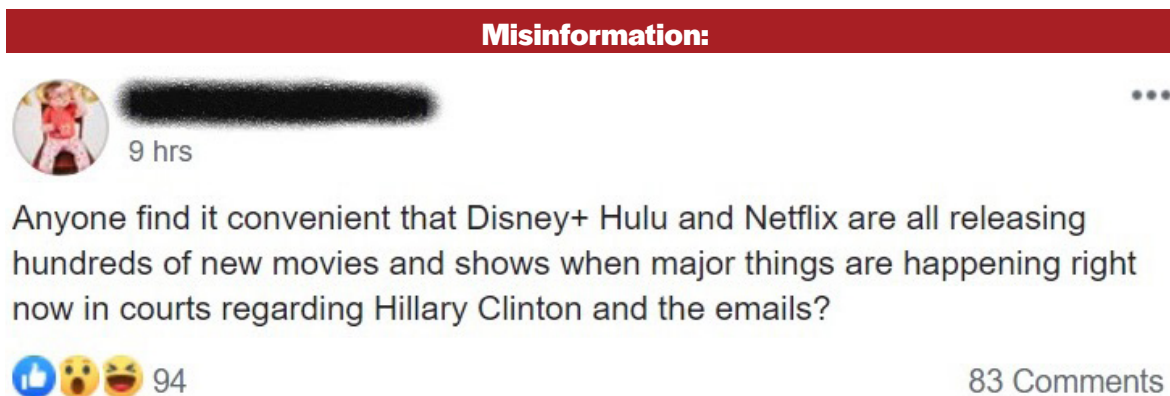
Information disorder encompasses:



This classic example of visual misinformation was Photoshopped to make it look like a shark is swimming along a flooded highway. It often appears on social media during hurricanes throughout the U.S. and has [become a running joke](#) in the storm-chasing community.

Misinformation

Spreading misinformation is the act of unknowingly passing along a falsehood, regardless of intention. People will often share it because they're trying to help, not realizing it's false content. A post from the private Facebook group Wisconsinites Against Excessive Quarantine demonstrates how a baseless conspiracy theory can germinate.



Misinformation:

VERY IMPORTANT ALERT!

A COVID-19 🟢 sensor has been secretly installed into every phone.

Apparently, when everyone was having "phone disruption" over the weekend, they were adding COVID-19 🟢 Tracker to our phones!

If you have an Android phone, go under settings, then look for Google settings and you will find it installed there.

If you are using an iPhone, go under settings, privacy, then health. It is there but not yet functional.

The App can notify you if you've been near someone who has been reported having COVID-19 🟢

👍👎👤 21

13 Comments 340 Shares

In July, a debunked rumor that tech companies had installed a COVID-19 sensor onto people's smartphones without their permission made the rounds in Wisconsin. This example of disinformation appeared intended to increase suspicion of Apple and Google's efforts to create a contact tracing tool for mobile devices.

Disinformation

Unlike its oblivious counterpart, disinformation is deliberately and maliciously false. It's produced and proliferated with the intent to deceive, make money, wield political influence, and cause chaos. A widely circulated meme appeared on several different channels in Wisconsin.

Malinformation

Reality-based information that is weaponized to cause harm is called malinformation. Revenge porn qualifies as malinformation, as do leaked emails.

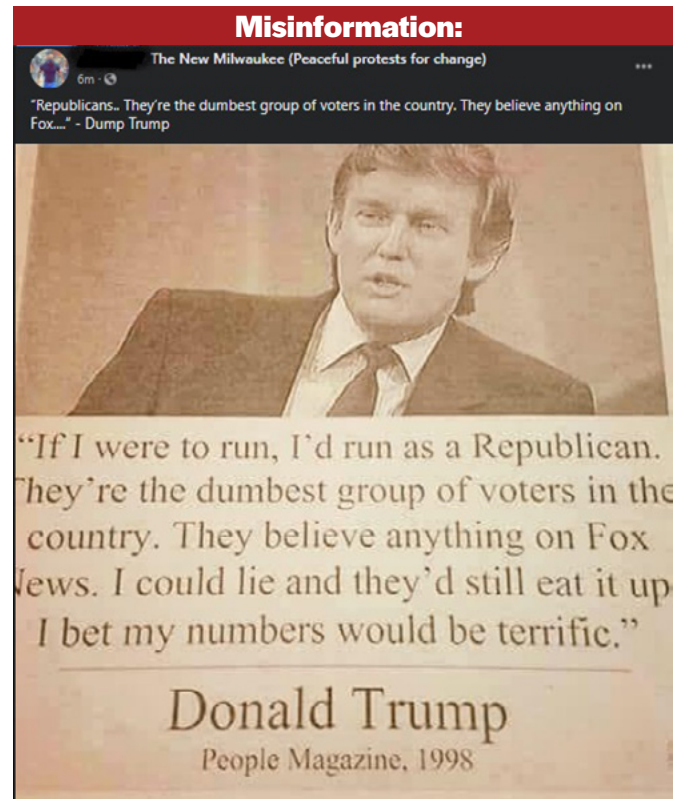
The seven forms of mis- and disinformation

You're likely to see some forms of information disorder more than others. Bad actors are increasingly spinning, reworking and recontextualizing existing and often true content. The following categories were developed by First Draft to describe different forms of information disorder.

1. Fabricated content

Completely made up stories, photographs and videos are considered fabricated content.

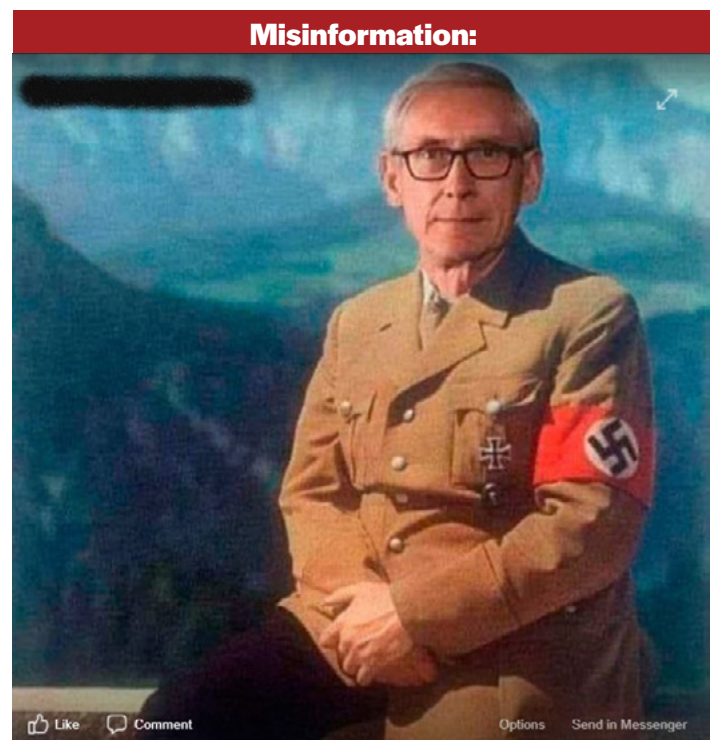
This meme containing a totally made-up quote [falsely attributed](#) to President Trump appeared in the public Facebook group The New Milwaukee (Peaceful protests for change).



2. Manipulated content

This is when genuine content is altered. Most often applied to photos or videos, this kind of disinformation is much harder to detect than its text-based relatives, and includes highly deceptive deepfakes.

Cheapfakes — another form of manipulated content created with more basic tools — are more common and easier to spot. Take, for example, this photo of Gov. Tony Evers' head imposed onto the body of Adolf Hitler.



3. Imposter content

The impersonation of genuine sources, such as news publications or government agencies, is known as imposter content.

Here's a message that circulated in Wisconsin at the beginning of the coronavirus quarantine, falsely claiming that the National Guard would be mobilized to enforce a lockdown. It contains telltale punctuation and capitalization errors, but also uses the National Guard and Homeland Security logos for an added air of authority.

Misinformation:

Homeland security is preparing to mobilize the national guard.

Preparing to dispatch them across the US along with military.
they will also call in 1st responders.

they are preparing to announce a nationwide 2 week quarantine for all citizens,
All businesses closed.

Everyone at home.

They will announce this as soon as they have troops in place to help prevent looters and rioters...

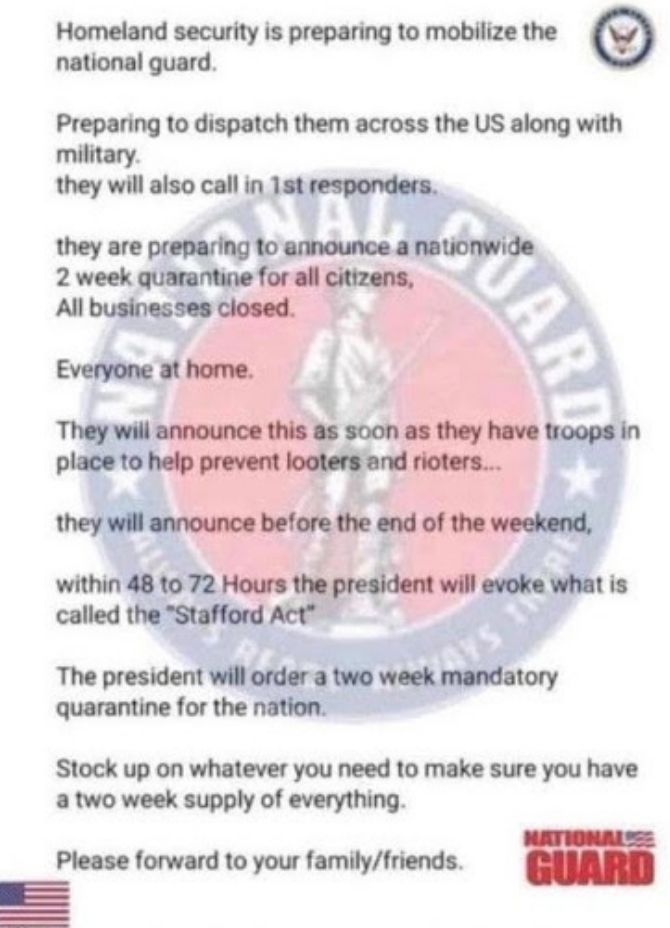
they will announce before the end of the weekend,

within 48 to 72 Hours the president will evoke what is called the "Stafford Act"

The president will order a two week mandatory quarantine for the nation.

Stock up on whatever you need to make sure you have a two week supply of everything.

Please forward to your family/friends.



Misinformation:

 Wisconsinites Against Excessive Quarantine

WOW just WOW!



MADISON.COM

In Tony Evers' administration, modest raises for some supervisors, larger ones for top officials

831 372 Comments

posted on Wisconsinites Against Excessive Quarantine, drawing outrage that Evers would approve raises during an economic crisis. But the story was almost exactly a year old. This was an example of a real story being used out of context to evoke extremely emotional responses and sow political division.

4. False context

One of the most common forms of information disorder is false context, in which genuine information is presented with false contextual information. This includes sharing old news articles as if they're recent — a common tactic adopted by the agents of disinformation — and misrepresenting photos taken in other countries as depicting a local protest.

In May, an authentic story from the Wisconsin State Journal about Gov. Tony Evers giving raises to members of his administration was

5. Misleading content

False context's close cousin is misleading content, which contains a kernel of truth, but also details that have been reformulated or recontextualized in deceptive ways.

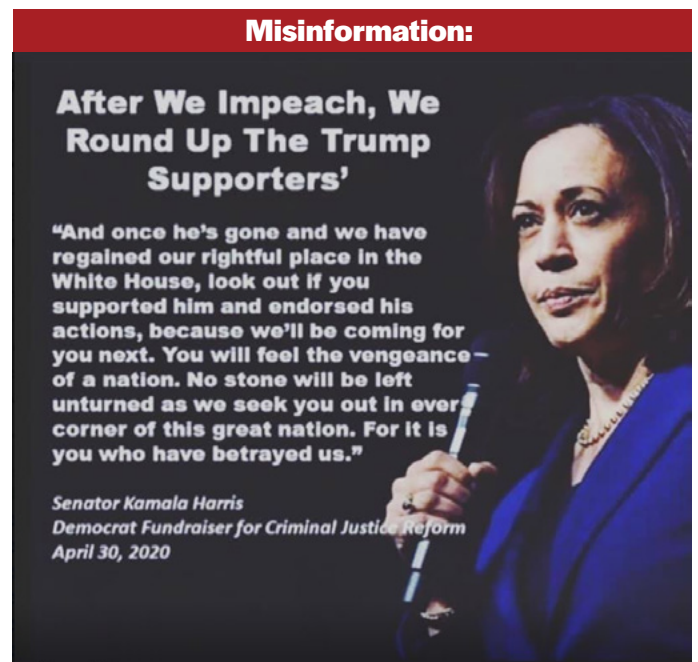
This post from Wisconsin-based radio talk show host Vicki McKenna misrepresents data from the Department of Health Services by leaving out the critical context that COVID-19 case and death projections were based on a scenario in which the state did not close most businesses or widely adopt social distancing measures.



6. Satire or parody

Usually not intended to cause harm, satire or parody still has the potential to fool people if it's mistaken as serious journalism, which becomes more likely as a satirical piece is shared repeatedly and becomes farther removed from its original source.

For example, the conservative satirical website bustatroll.org [published a story](#) with the headline "Kamala Harris: 'After We Impeach, We Round Up The Trump Supporters.'" A meme presenting a quote from the story as if Harris really said it at a fundraiser appeared on the Facebook page Wisconsinites Against Excessive Quarantine, drawing outrage from several commenters.



7. False connection

This is when headlines, visuals or captions don't support the actual content of the piece. A good example of false connection is click-bait, which often lets users down by failing to deliver promised content.

News organizations are guilty of pushing false connections when they publish photos that don't demonstrate what they claim to. Early during the COVID-19 pandemic, photos of crowded beaches in Jacksonville, Florida, purported to show a lack of social distancing. But many national reports featured old photos — and even some taken at other beaches.

Misinformation:

 **WESH 2 News** 
19 hours ago · 546,630 Likes

VIDEO: People flock to beaches in Jacksonville after they were reopened on Friday.



94K +88.7K Post Views 456.2K Total Views

121x   3,571 +3,530  2,273 +2,265  4,717 +4,705

Misinformation:

 **First Coast News** 
22 hours ago · 389,256 Likes

VIDEO: Jacksonville made national headlines yesterday for the partial reopening of beaches. Unfortunately, many of those reports carried old photos and videos of crowded beaches causing many in the U.S. to ask, 'what in the heck is going on down there?' Here's drone video of what it actually looked like. Stay safe!



42.6K +36.1K Post Views 289.4K Total Views

122x   2,242 +2,196  1,082 +1,068  7,918 +7,904



Look fishy? Look into it: The basics of monitoring and verification

Now that you know how to classify the ceaseless deluge of information on the social web, you're probably wondering how to watch for it. Monitoring is visually intimidating — there's a lot of content to sift through — but gets easier as it becomes part of your newsgathering routine.

Remember, it's not your job to single-handedly scrub the most pollutive information from social media. You can't report on everything you find, and nor should you.

"There's just so much misinformation out there, you couldn't possibly hope to conquer it all," said Victoria Kwan, a London-based standards and ethics editor for First Draft.

Tweetdeck and CrowdTangle are powerful tools for setting up social media searches based on keywords; all you need to get started are Twitter and Facebook accounts.

Tweetdeck is searchable with Boolean queries, making it easy to run advanced searches. Here's a search string for monitoring conversations about mail-in ballots and election security in Wisconsin:

(Wisconsin OR Madison OR Milwaukee)
AND ("mail in ballot" OR "vote by mail" OR
"absentee ballot" OR "election fraud" OR "fake
ballots" OR "postal service" OR USPS OR "vote
by mail" OR "voter fraud" OR "voter registries"
OR "vote-by-mail" OR "mail ballots" OR "mailed
ballots" OR "ballot envelope" OR "counterfeit
ballots" OR "postpone election")

This search will find content about voting in Wisconsin and its two most populous cities. It also casts a wide net by using a variety of similar keywords. And it could be tweaked in a variety of ways, from changing the geographic focus (i.e., "North Woods") to including Election Day keywords such as "long lines" or "voting delays."

Maintain a list of keywords relevant to your beat and continually incorporate relevant information as it appears. Think creatively about the language used on social media, including slang, common misspellings, abbreviations, and inflammatory language that is likely to appear in evocative posts with high engagement.

Check out First Draft's [guide to Boolean basics](#) for more on keyword operators and how to format your searches.

But don't make the classic reporter's mistake of only looking at Twitter. For monitoring hyperlocal conversations and pages on Facebook, Instagram and Reddit, use CrowdTangle, which isn't searchable with Boolean queries. Crowdtangle offers a series of live displays rounding up information posted on social networks, and also includes an "overperformance" metric that shows the posts with the most engagement, which will come in handy later.

The five pillars of verification

After you've spent some time monitoring the social web, you'll start developing a radar for content that just doesn't look right. Maybe it's a chart depicting public health data you suspect has been manipulated, or a Twitter account with an odd-looking profile picture and a high volume of posts. In any case, you'll want to establish a process for verifying fishy-looking accounts.

There are [five pillars of verification](#), according to First Draft:

1. Provenance

Is the content you're seeing the original account or article? Determining provenance helps explain the motivation and context behind the problematic content.

2. Source

Who created the original content, or took the photo, that you're attempting to verify? There's a difference between who captured the content and who posted it, and the strongest verification comes from identifying the original source.

3. Date

When was the content created? Knowing when a photo was uploaded to Twitter is one thing, but knowing when it was taken provides greater context.

4. Location

Where was the account established, website created, or image captured? Was the location tagged in the post? If so, does it make sense for the account holder to have been in that place?

5. Motivation

Why was this content created? Short of asking the original source directly, it's usually impossible to say for sure. But you can look for clues. Was the post created by a known activist or agitator? Are they affiliated with a government or corporate organization? Or are they part of an online community with ideological motives?

Embracing digital tools

Imagine that you're an old-school investigator pinning leads to a cork board, finding dead ends and exciting insights — except a wide range of digital tools are at your disposal.

Run a simple search

The first step is the most basic, but can get overlooked: Google it. Copy-paste the names of account handles, suspected faux news websites or individual bad actors into a search engine. Also, check the underlying claim of the content before you start digging into why, where and by whom it was created.

Think backward

Run a reverse-image search with [TinEye](#) if you suspect an old photo is being presented as an original, or if an account's profile photo looks suspicious. The RevEye browser extension for [Chrome](#) and [Firefox](#) allows you to right-click on a photo and perform a search on multiple platforms. For example, this image of a postal worker removing Trump signs was shared in the public Facebook group Western Wisconsin Conservatives, and presented as evidence of active vote suppression in Wisconsin. However, a reverse-image search reveals that the image originally appeared in a 2016 article about a postal worker in Townsend, Delaware. The image isn't new or relevant, but is presented as if it's both.



Get meta

Timestamps on social media posts tell you when a file was uploaded, not when it was captured. One way of determining when an image was captured is uploading it to [Jeffrey's Exif Viewer](#), which will show you the file's metadata — time, date, camera settings, device information and sometimes even GPS coordinates.

Beware of bots

Are you sure the Twitter user that's posting inflammatory content around the clock is a real person? It could be a bot with an itchy Twitter finger. Check by using a tool such as [Botometer](#). To view Twitter analytics like an account's posting frequency, use [Twitonomy](#).

Set up a toolbox

Make sure you've bookmarked all of your favorite tools before you begin a mad dash to verify an account. But don't get too attached, either. These tools are always changing and disappearing, and none are entirely foolproof.

Know when to move on

Certainty is hard to come by when it comes to online verification. You're more often collecting clues rather than establishing hard facts. If you find yourself consumed by an hours-long, borderline obsessive quest to verify a piece of misinformation, consider whether it's worth the time and effort.

Use transparency tools

Facebook has a [transparency section](#) on most pages that shows the date of the page's creation, previous name changes, the page owner's location by country, and sometimes even their name and phone number. The transparency section also includes a link to the page's listing in Facebook's [Ad Library](#). Similarly, a database of promoted tweets and video ads is searchable at Twitter's [Ad Transparency Center](#). But don't just rely on the platforms themselves for information: NYU's [Ad Observatory](#) and Center for Responsive Politics (OpenSecrets.org) provide additional information on online political advertising, including coding by topic, ad objective or tactic, and targeting information. NYU's AdObserver.org is a plug-in tool that your audience can install to safely volunteer information about how they are being targeted by online ads — information not made public by social media platforms.

Pick up the phone

It's easy to lose sight of old-school reporter's techniques when you have so many digital tools at your disposal. If you find a phone number or email in the "about" section of somebody's Facebook page — more common than you might expect — give them a call or direct message, and potentially save a lot of time.



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Election Integrity Project

