

NAVIGATING A SEA OF DISINFORMATION

Disinformation: Background Information

This document provides an overview and key definitions on the topic of disinformation, as well as some steps your nonprofit can take to get active in the fight against it. For additional context and information, we will be sharing two resource lists at the end of the workshop.

Online deception is already a multimillion dollar global industry and disinformation, more particularly, it is a rapidly [growing emerging economy](#). Broadly speaking, US-based companies (in Silicon Valley) are the greatest profiteers of disinformation while political and social institutions are rapidly losing the public's trust.

In [Source Hacking: Media Manipulation in Practice](#), Joan Donovan and Brian Friedberg identify four main techniques of to hide the source of the false and/or problematic information being circulated:

1. **Viral Sloganeering:** repackaging reactionary talking points for social media and press amplification
2. **Leak Forgery:** prompting a media spectacle by sharing forged documents
3. **Evidence Collages:** compiling information from multiple sources into a single, shareable document, usually as an image
4. **Keyword Squatting:** the strategic domination of keywords and sockpuppet accounts to misrepresent groups or individuals

These strategies are often used simultaneously; while each technique is effective on its own, their ultimate value comes from “buy-in from audiences, influencers, and journalists alike.”

Here's an [excellent podcast episode](#) featuring Brandi Collins Dexter and Brittany Packnett Cunningham, discussing some of the public policy options being discussed to improve today's situation.

In September 2020, Tim Kendall—Facebook's former director of monetization—gave [testimony](#) before Congress that offered insight into how to understand social media's negative impact on democratic values and institutions. He compared social media to the tobacco industry: both have focused on increasing the capacity for addiction. “Allowing for disinformation, conspiracy

theories, and fake news to flourish were like Big Tobacco's bronchodilators, which allowed the cigarette smoke to cover more surface area of the lungs," he stated.

How Disinformation / Disinformation Policy impacts communities:

According to the Technology and Social Change research team at Harvard's Shorenstein Center, communities of color are frequently impacted by racialized disinformation campaigns, which employ the strategic use of falsified racial or ethnic identities and/or focus on race as a wedge issue. These tactics were [used against communities of color in 2016](#) to [suppress their votes](#) and electoral power. In 2020, campaigns intent on suppressing the Black vote used what scholars call "[disinformation creep](#)."

Brandi Collins-Dexter, senior campaign director at Color of Change, [researches how Black online communities create and maintain norms of engagement](#) across social networks. In observing how safety and protection from harassers, trolls, and over-stepping journalists is negotiated across different online communities, her work demonstrates that maintenance of internal norms of discussion is an important factor when addressing disinformation. Where there are no community moderation rules, disinformation thrives. When communities spread disinformation out of concern and/or fear, approaching individuals with "an ethic of care" can neutralize growing tensions in the group. If this fails, then moderators should consider removing posts or accounts.

Black women are 86% more likely to be the victim of hate-speech online than white women. They are consistently the most likely to be attacked, mimicked in gifs or bots (digital blackface), or censored. In an [interview with Brittany Packnett Cunningham](#), Collins-Dexter noted that white nationalism has long been a part of Silicon Valley's early history in the 90's. Not only has the technology it has created allowed for hate speech, disinformation, disinformation to shift online, but political polarization has long been part of its very business-model: the more arguments, "hot takes", and hate spread online, the greater the filter and the greater the echo-chamber. It is little wonder, then, that Richard Spenser once said that a typical white nationalist is a white IT tech guy in khakis.

What Civil Society & Non-Profits can do:

Harvard's Technology and Social Change lab developed [six strategies for countering disinformation](#) and hate speech online. They are:

1. **Connected Communities:** simply organizing an information campaign to correct or combat disinformation is not an effective strategy as it "undercuts the possibility for communities to collectively learn, counter, and adapt to disinformation." Instead, any response should be grounded in facts about the impact and harms of different disinformation trends.
2. **Fact/Fallacy/Fact or "The Truth Sandwich":** Disinformation is typically spread in short, memorable, and pithy slogans (think: vaccines cause autism). To rebuke these statements, you need to interrupt the impulse to remember something so 'sticky' AND replace it with something true. The truth sandwich model does this, either by replacing the disinformation with a fact or by highlighting the political agenda of the group pushing the lies.
 1. E.g., replace with fact: "Vaccines don't cause autism. While the myth persists that vaccines cause this condition, doctors across the globe have proven that vaccines do not cause autism and are a benefit the whole of society."
 2. E.g., highlight the political agenda: "Vaccines don't cause autism. This myth is perpetuated by anti-vaccine activists and does not line up with scientific facts about public health. Doctors across the globe have proven that vaccines do not cause autism and are a benefit the whole society."
3. **Prebunking:** misinformation and disinformation is often predictable. Prebunking is an offensive strategy whereby you anticipate what mis/disinformation is likely to be repeated by politicians, pundits, or provocateurs at key events and being prepared with a response based on fact-checks.
4. **Distributed Debunking:** Battling it out with disinformation spreaders online often makes dis/misinformation gain more traction within search and trending algorithms because these technologies cannot tell the difference between truth and lies. When misinformation becomes mainstream and triggered responses from key figures (politicians, newsworthy groups etc.), then an organized, strategic response is often necessary. Debunks should include a link to a reputable source and follow the models of the "truth sandwich" or "humor over rumor"
5. **Localize the Context:** Disinformation is always local and civil society organizations are the best placed to provide context. When debunking misinformation or disinformation, it is important to bear the local community in mind and to share insights with journalists. Knowing and misinformation/disinformation impacts a community, online and offline, is critical information for journalists covering a particular beat.
6. **Humor over Rumor:** Misinformation tends to trigger emotional reactions and confirmation bias. It thrives in environments that are filled with outrage, fear, and anger,

especially when these environments share the same political and/or cultural views (aka echo-chambers). Humor over rumor is a community strategy: humorous rebuttals of misinformation attach themselves to the misinformation so that they are found everywhere the rumor is spreading. In short, by making fact-checks funny, they are more likely to go viral.