

What you need to know about **DISINFORMATION**



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Misinformation vs. Disinformation: What is the difference?

Misinformation refers to any false or inaccurate information, which is spread or communicated in any form, regardless of whether or not it is meant to mislead or deceive others. Although 'misinformation' has become a more commonly used term in recent years (especially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic), misinformation as a practice has in fact existed throughout history – for as long as people have made up stories for one another, shared false rumors and gossip, or exaggerated reality for the sake of entertaining others.



Disinformation, on the other hand, refers to false information which is deliberately spread, for the purpose of misleading or deceiving others. In other words, disseminating disinformation is the act of knowingly (and purposefully) spreading misinformation. Examples of disinformation include propaganda and 'counterfeit' news (i.e. websites or social media accounts that pretend to be a well-known brand or person), as well as any conspiracy theories or pseudoscientific reports developed to deliberately share false or misleading information with others.

Where does disinformation come from?

Disinformation can originate from individuals, or from groups of people (such as organizations, or agencies) – and their initial reason(s) for sharing false or misleading information can vary greatly. Some of the most commonly documented purposes for disseminating disinformation include sharing it for the purpose of: changing people's views or behaviors; influencing public opinion to achieve political or economic gain; obscuring or covering up the truth; and/or affecting the reputation, level of trust or credibility held by a certain person, company, or agency.



Disinformation may reach audiences through any number of sources – including those they trust the most.

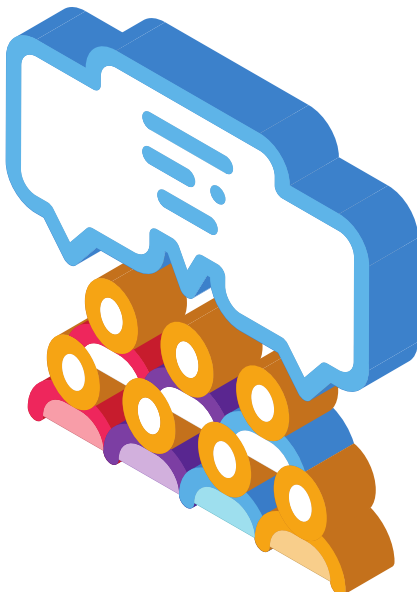
How is disinformation spread?

Disinformation can be spread using a variety of methods – from websites and social media, to physical publications, broadcast media, and even word of mouth.

In many cases, false information that begins as “disinformation” (i.e. produced with the deliberate intent to deceive) can then be shared widely by others as “misinformation” – since subsequent ‘sharers’ may believe the information themselves, and not know that it is false or inaccurate, so they share it forward, and thereby play an important role in increasing its overall reach.

In this sense, disinformation may reach audiences through any number of sources – including those they trust the most, such as the social media accounts of close friends and family members, work colleagues, or local media reports (produced by journalists who are either in a rush, unable to effectively fact check the details of the story, or report on the story without providing enough necessary context or ‘balance’ for audiences to develop well-informed opinions about the topic at hand).

And the opposite can also happen: Misinformation that was not originally developed with the intent to deceive can later be co-opted or shared by others who wish for that (false) information to spread widely. For example, a public figure may share an incorrect statistic or opinion which, when they say it, they believe to be true. Even if that person later amends their statement or corrects a mistake they made, others may continue to share the original (incorrect) statement, with the purpose of sharing that false information widely.



Why is disinformation so effective?

Disinformation is often carefully designed so that its intended audience cannot easily detect that it is inaccurate. It can be produced in a high-quality manner (using flashy websites, or professionally edited video, for example), and it can even be crafted so that it appears to be spread by influential individuals or trusted “experts”. Additionally, disinformation is frequently designed in a way that plays on our emotions, taps into our fears, or creates a sense of urgency – pushing us to share the misinformation further, or take certain actions right away. These types of tactics have made it increasingly difficult for audiences to tell what is true and what is false... and the more disinformation that exists, the more important our role is as journalists – to ensure that audiences continue to have access to timely, accurate information, which they know they can trust.



So, how can disinformation be identified?

One of the most important skills that any journalist can possess is the ability to “fact-check”. To separate what is true, from what is false, or merely an opinion. This skill is also very important when it comes to identifying disinformation – and determining what details (and how) to share with an audience. Here are just a few of the strategies and techniques that journalists use when identifying and/or considering possible cases of disinformation:

Consider the source. Where did the information come from? How was it shared? And what is the original source of the information? Sometimes information can become misinterpreted, taken out of context, or deliberately “twisted” through continuous sharing – so it is always important to check that any information you are considering actually matches what was shared or published by the original source.

Bring in the experts. When considering a specific claim or case of possible disinformation, aim to compare it against the best evidence available. Consider information released directly by trusted academic publications or government institutions, or engage with known experts who specialize in the subject area. Ask them to comment directly on the information (giving them appropriate time in which to reply!), and consider whether their own response matches the original claim you are considering, or not.

Prioritize your efforts. Just because a statement was (reportedly?) made by a politician or other public figure, does not mean that it is true or accurate. However, the more influential a person is, the larger their potential audience also is. So, when it comes to prioritizing what potential disinformation to “fact-check” first, you might consider prioritizing your “fact-check efforts” to cover statements or information that is either shared by influential actors, and/or widely circulating among your target audience – using your research, data analysis, and/or interview skills to break down such claims, and develop stories which provide your audiences with additional context and reliable information on those same topics.

When (& how) to report on disinformation about COVID-19

As is the case when something is new, and – let's be honest – has the potential to be really scary (i.e. poses a threat to our personal health, safety, or security), people have a lot of questions! That is a natural response. Unfortunately, when something is new (such as COVID-19 was, when it was first identified in 2019), there is not always a lot of information and/or answers to our questions immediately available – because research is still being conducted, or the situation is continuously evolving, or governments are still trying to formulate their own responses to the situation. And it is often in the presence of these types of “information vacuums” that misinformation (such as rumors) or disinformation (such as deliberate falsehoods) tend to gain their strength, because they offer to feed our collective need for information – any information – to answer our most pressing questions.

This is something we have, by now, all experienced when it comes to COVID-19. Often, in the case of addressing specific “information needs” (for example, people needing to know if there is an effective treatment for the disease) misinformation and disinformation have circulated widely, long before any factual information – beyond “we don't know yet” – is actually available.

For journalists, who are constantly striving to report on developments to help address their audiences' key questions and concerns, it can be extremely difficult to determine what information – including potential misinformation, and/or disinformation – to include in reporting efforts. Particularly when it comes to actually addressing cases of disinformation, there can be a struggle in how to do so in a way that is responsible.

For example: Do you highlight cases of disinformation in your reporting, in order to help debunk them? Or does that potentially spread the disinformation further, by providing it an additional platform?

On the other hand, if you “ignore” or leave out any mention of disinformation in your reporting, are you missing an opportunity to provide your audience with the tools necessary for them to determine what is accurate or false for themselves, should they come across similar disinformation in future?

As you may have guessed already, there is unfortunately no universal ‘easy answer’ when it comes to navigating this struggle. However, here are a few rules of thumb which we urge you to consider whenever reporting on potential disinformation about COVID-19.



Additional tips for reporting on disinformation about COVID-19

1

Again, prioritize your efforts. If you look for it, there is endless mis- and disinformation circulating in regards to COVID-19. So where to start? Think about your own audience, and their specific information needs – try to find out what types of disinformation are most commonly circling in their own communities (which may signify a priority need for it to be addressed), and consider what decisions they are currently making, which may be greatly impacted by disinformation. Prioritize your efforts based on these factors.

2

Do no harm. When developing your reports, consider the possible implications that including or otherwise addressing specific cases of disinformation might have. Could including such a falsehood in your report cause potential harm? If yes, what steps might you take to safeguard against that harm? For example, let's say you are developing a story on COVID-19 treatments, and you wish to invite experts to respond to a misleading claim made by a public figure about an unproven drug's effectiveness in "curing" the disease. Applying the principle of "do no harm", you may decide to simply refer to the claim by mentioning when and by whom the initial claim was made – instead of actually linking to the original claim or playing a recording of it 'on loop'. Remember, the point is to inform your audience with the facts regarding the claim – not to spread disinformation further by encouraging more people to 'see it for themselves'.

3

Present the facts. When it comes to mis- and disinformation, it is not enough to simply say "this is not accurate". If you feel that addressing a specific case of disinformation is important for your audience, then aim to do so in a way that not only identifies or acknowledges a claim to be false, but – most importantly – also presents your audience with the correct information to de-bunk that claim. Even if this involves having a trusted expert confirm that a certain piece of information is "not yet known", at least your audience has received the facts, as they are available at that time.

4

Don't sensationalize! Sensationalism is one of the main factors that gives disinformation its strength – as disinformation is often designed to feed into people's fears and uncertainties, or create a sense of panic. Don't be part of the problem. COVID-19 is enough of a "sensational topic" on its own – you do not need to add exaggerated headlines or manufacture unwarranted urgency to attract people's attention to stories on this issue. Rather, concentrate on providing your audiences with facts that respond directly to their own information needs, and they will be interested in finding out more.