

LWVMI Presentation: Resisting Disinformation
September 2024
SCRIPT FOR FULL VERSION (23 SLIDES)

Slide 1

Welcome!

I'm _____ 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

Slide 2

What is the difference between misinformation and disinformation?

Both have to do with false or misleading information.

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 disinformation? We may share to affirm our affiliation or identity.

Slide 3

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.
- Manipulated content brings to mind the slowed down video of Nancy Pelosi that made her seem drunk.
- 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/>]

Slide 4

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.

Slide 5

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.

Slide 6

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.

Slide 7

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 the speaker. Then take a step back and consider whether the underlying premise is valid.

Slide 8

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.

Slide 9

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.

Slide 10

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 misinformation is so “sticky.”

Slide 11

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.

Slide 12

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.

Slide 13

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.”

Slide 14

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.

Slide 15

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.

Slide 16

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.

Slide 17

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.

Slide 18

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.

Slide 19

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.

Slide 20

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.

Slide 21

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.

Slide 22

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.

Slide 23

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!