Misinformation

Misinformation thrives on social media where anyone can share almost anything they choose, and attention spans are short. Here's a quick guide to help you understand what misinformation is and how to recognize it.

Why do people share misinformation? **?**

Many people share misinformation unknowingly and sometimes with good or altruistic intentions — whether to articulate their perspectives, warn others away from danger or join others in trying to make sense of the world around them.

But some research suggests that some people also knowingly share things they suspect are false — whether to damage "the other side" in a political debate, get social media likes and shares, or conform to their ideological identities.

Bad actors — such as hyperpartisans, trolls and even foreign agents — create and share disinformation to cause division and confusion, to promote political interests and points of view or for financial gain.

Mis- and disinformation are fundamentally exploitative in nature, often targeting our most deeply held values and beliefs to **elicit a strong emotional reaction** that overrides our more rational thought processes.

Watch out!
While the emotions most often elicited by mis- and disinformation are fear, anger and outrage, more agreeable emotions like curiosity and hope are also used to bypass our cognitive defenses.

Misinformation:

Information that is misleading, erroneous or false. Misinformation is generally shared — and sometimes created — by people who are unaware that it's inaccurate. This is the best term to use when the intent of the creator or sharer is unknown.

VERSUS

Disinformation:

A subset of misinformation that is deliberately created or shared with the intention to misinform and mislead others, usually to achieve a desired ideological, political or financial result.

Remember: The intent behind the creation or amplification of false information is often impossible to determine.

Types

Adapted from First Draft's seven types of mis- and disinformation, created by Claire Wardle.

Misinformation can be categorized based on what makes it false or misleading. The following five types are commonly found online:

False context
An image, video, quote or other piece of content is presented in a new, false context that changes its meaning.

Imposter content
Content — such as a fake tweet from a public figure, or a fake ad — that falsely uses a well-known name, brand or logo to fool people into believing that it is authentic.
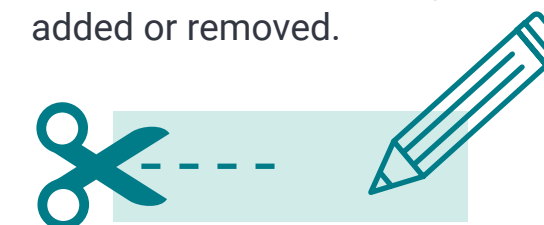
Fabricated content
Misinformation that is entirely made up, such as computer-generated imagery or entirely fictional reports presented as "news."
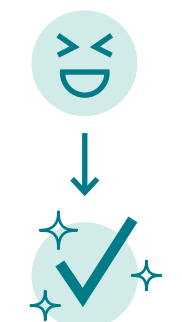
Manipulated content
Photos, videos, graphics and other types of content that have been "doctored" in some way, such as having one or more elements artificially added or removed.

Stolen satire
A specific type of "false context" misinformation in which all or part of a piece of satire is presented as authentic.

Red flags **WATCH OUT!**

If you see these common misinformation themes and "rumor cues," proceed with caution:

Phrases

- "Let that sink in"
- "The media won't report this"
- "Make this go viral"
- "Do your own research"
- "There are no coincidences"

Patterns

- Manipulated text on signs or t-shirts
- Doctored "amazing" nature or space photos
- Photos of protests and crowds
- Screenshots of articles with no links

Your best defenses

1. Checking out unfamiliar people and sources
2. Glancing through social media comments for replies that call a post into question
3. A quick internet search using key terms from a questionable post

Key resources

- "Misinformation" lesson from NLP's Checkology® virtual classroom
- NLP's weekly email newsletters: The Sift® (for educators) and Get Smart About News (for non-educators)
- NLP's Viral Rumor Rundown blog
- First Draft website
- The Media Manipulation Casebook