# 10 TIPS FOR REPORTING ON DISINFORMATION

Disinformation, or false, unverified information intended to deceive, is not new. But the ubiquity of digital platforms means it can spread faster and farther than ever before.

For journalists, disinformation presents a unique challenge; while they are guided by the mission of exposing wrongdoing to hold power to account, they are also one of the most common targets of disinformation campaigns. Without realizing it, journalists can amplify disinformation simply by doing their jobs: reporting on it. To minimize this risk and adhere to their other mission of helping readers make sense of the world around them, journalists should turn to the following tips when reporting on online disinformation.

## 1. ASSESS WHETHER A "TIPPING POINT" HAS BEEN REACHED

Any time you report on disinformation, you are necessarily amplifying it. To avoid giving oxygen to problematic content, run a "tipping point" test and determine whether the content has extended beyond the core group of people discussing it. If disinformation is contained to a niche online community, like an anonymous message board, the "tipping point" hasn't been reached; reporting on it, even to debunk, will only serve to give it more eyeballs and legitimacy. If disinformation has spilled over to a wider audience—perhaps spreading to multiple platforms or reaching a high level of online engagement—it likely has reached a "tipping point" and merits coverage.

## 2. REACH OUT TO EXPERTS (BUT ALSO BECOME AN EXPERT YOURSELF!)

Disinformation tactics are always evolving, and adversarial groups are constantly looking for new ways to manipulate journalists. It is crucial, therefore, to consult experts who have studied disinformation and media manipulation—especially if you're struggling with whether or not something has crossed a "tipping point." Even better than consulting experts, however, is to become an expert yourself. Shortly after the 2017 French presidential election, which was rife with disinformation and targeted leaks, social media intelligence company Storyful called on newsrooms to designate a "4chan correspondent." The job title never really took off, but the logic behind it still holds: disinformation should be its own beat, and newsrooms need to devote resources and training to whoever is tasked with specializing in the ever-changing landscape.

## 3. PRACTICE STRATEGIC AMPLIFICATION

When reporting on disinformation, it's imperative to weigh the costs and benefits of amplifying a particular voice, perspective, or incident against the broader public good. Any time you tell a story, you are picking and choosing which details to include, which people to interview, and which angle to take. In other words, you are always amplifying certain elements of a story and leaving out others. Strategic amplification asks you to make those same editorial calls when writing about problematic content, but in the context of what will serve the public good, rather than simply attract the most readers. Journalists have a long history of approaching coverage in this way; in the 1970s, for example, many journalists refused to cover the KKK's events, while others reframed stories to include perspectives of the hate group's victims. Today, you might similarly practice strategic amplification by foregrounding your reporting on the impact disinformation has on a particular community, as well as what the factual information is, instead of what the purveyors of the problematic content have to say.

## 4. DON'T SPECULATE OR INFLATE THE IMPORTANCE OF A SINGLE EXAMPLE

There is a big difference between a widespread, coordinated disinformation campaign and a few instances of problematic content. When you report on the latter as if it's the former, you run the risk of tipping off adversarial groups to vulnerable targets (e.g. a person, a policy, an event) and undermining public trust in those subjects. Similarly, stories that speculate or blow lone instances of disinformation out of proportion can add momentum to a burgeoning disinformation campaign and attract more bad actors to the cause. There will always be isolated cases of individuals trying to sow doubt in our trusted institutions. But not every attempt is evidence of "another 2016"—i.e. a carefully-laid plot to deceive huge swaths of the population and undermine our democracy. And, more importantly, not every attempt is successful. Speculating about how severe or widespread disinformation-related threats to something might turn out, and then pointing to a single example as evidence, makes it more likely that a lone instance of disinformation will snowball into a legitimate campaign down the road.

## 5. AVOID HEADLINES THAT REPEAT DISINFORMATION OR FRAME IT AS A QUESTION

Repeating a lie won't ever make it true, but it might make people believe it is. Research shows that when headlines containing a falsehood are repeated, people are more likely to believe them—even when they're labeled as contested by fact checkers. That's because familiarity can be, as Yale scholars Gordon Pennycook, Tyron Cannon and David Rand note, "an attractive stand-in" for truth. It's also because of the way our memories work—i.e. generally not that well. As psychologist Roddy Roediger said in a 2017 interview with *Vox*, "When you see a news report that repeats the misinformation and then tries to correct it, you might have people remembering the misinformation because it's really surprising and interesting, and not remembering the correction." And that's assuming people even read the full report. Since research has shown that most people share news on social media without ever reading it, it's even more important to avoid publishing headlines that contain disinformation or present it as a question.

## 6. VERIFY

When incorporating user-generated content into your reporting, it's important to employ verification tips and tricks, such as those outlined by First Draft News. These include using visual clues to identify where an image or video was taken and running manipulation tests with reverse image search tools like TinEye, Google Reverse Image Search, and the RevEye Reverse Image Search browser extension. You can also turn to social media metadata to spot red flags that, when taken together, could indicate manipulation and coordinated inauthentic behavior. A metadata analysis might include searching for handles and screen names on other platforms to verify accounts, using APIs to verify geotags, examining the Wayback Machine to see if an account's followers have grown at a relatively normal rate, and checking the times of posts to verify that accounts are taking normal breaks (for instance, to sleep) and aren't posting at nearly identical times. There is no foolproof method of verification in the digital age. But using these tools alongside a healthy dose of skepticism can help reduce the likelihood that disinformation will find its way into your stories.

## 7. DON'T EMBED OR LINK TO PROBLEMATIC CONTENT, ESPECIALLY VISUALS

While disinformation agents are driven by different ideological, political or financial motivations, many share a common goal: to see the problematic narratives they seed reach the professional media. Embedding or linking to disinformation, therefore—even if the purpose is to refute it—helps the purveyors of that content in their mission. Links from professional media outlets allow for problematic content to reach the widest possible audience. Between the beginning of 2015 and September 2017, tweets from Russia's troll farm were embedded in 32 major American news outlets, according to research conducted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. That included institutions with longstanding reputations, such as The Washington Post, NPR and The Detroit Free Press, as well as popular digital outlets like BuzzFeed. This coverage only furthered Russia's goal of sowing chaos and confusion among the American electorate.

## 8. AVOID USING THE LANGUAGE OF MANIPULATORS

Media manipulators use obscure and confusing language to deflect attention from their harmful actions and goals. White supremacists, for example, have claimed they're "just trolling" as a way to shirk responsibility for spreading hate. Another popular tactic among adversarial groups is to encourage people to run searches on strategically obscure terms. This is called a "data void" and it becomes a vulnerability when media manipulators and disinformation agents co-opt relatively unpopular search terms—like "black on white crimes," "crisis actors" or "social justice warrior"—and create inaccurate or hateful content for the search engine to surface. When you use the language of manipulators—especially if it's not already popular—you risk mainstreaming dangerous, misleading ideas, while also driving curious readers to search for and, ultimately, stumble upon problematic content.

## 9. RETHINK DEBUNKS AND FACT CHECKS

As previously mentioned, disinformation agents yearn for media coverage of any kind, even if it's a debunk. In 2017, for example, when far-right manipulators spread hoaxes about then-French Presidential Candidate Emmanuel Macron, BuzzFeed reporter Ryan

Broderick documented 4chan users celebrating stories debunking the information. It's not that traditional fact-checking is bad; it's that it's insufficient, especially for readers who don't trust the organizations doing the fact-checking. One way to reimagine debunking in an era of sophisticated media manipulation is to cover the manipulators' techniques—e.g. sockpuppetry, keyword squatting, and other forms of source hacking—but not their message, as CUNY Journalism Professor Jeff Jarvis has recommended. Another is to abandon the "myth vs. fact" approach, which presents disinformation and facts side by side. Instead you can draw on the lessons of "inoculation theory," which calls for previewing the motivations behind a disinformation campaign and then presenting the facts. This is important because research shows that with "myth vs. fact" messaging, people are more likely to remember the myth. Lastly, it's a good idea to make sure that any debunking includes metadata and other SEO signals that will ensure search engines surface your content over the content of manipulators.

## 10. CONTEXTUALIZE

Disinformation campaigns don't happen in a vacuum; they are rooted in the history, culture, and politics of both perpetrators and targets. When you make the decision to report on problematic content, it's important to include context about the behaviors and ideologies of the adversarial actors who are spreading it, as well as the impact those ideologies have on the communities they're seeking to harm. Additionally, it's crucial to include contextual details about where the disinformation originated and how it spread. And if the context of the content isn't clear enough to report confidently, that is a good indicator that the "tipping point" hasn't yet been reached.